

**Excerpt of the Novel *Along the Tracks* by Nevena Mitropolitska, in translation by  
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21

*Rebekah, March 1943*

It was the morning of March sixth – two days after the news that we would be expatriated to the north – when my father said there are times when nothing depends on us, and we have to submit to fate. I asked him if the present was such a time.

“I don’t know, Bekah,” he answered and caressed my head. “I’d like to tell you that we have a choice even now. I’d like to tell you that we always have a choice. It’s just that I can’t tell you anything.”

“You’ve taught me that we should never lose heart, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And that it’s always worth trying one more time.”

He nodded.

“But now? Why isn’t it worth it this time, papa? Exactly now!”

“I don’t see what could be done.”

“We could run away.”

“Where should we run, should we hide in the mountains? Winter isn’t even over.”

“We’ll ask someone to hide us in their house. Uncle Mitko and Aunt – ”

“We can’t put them in danger. And what’s more, there’s no way we wouldn’t be discovered.”

“Then think of something else, aren’t you a grownup? If even one tenth of what Aron read is true...”

“I know, Bekah.”

“No, papa, you don’t know!” I stomped my foot, and the iced-over puddle in front of me shattered. “You don’t know a thing!”

And I really did believe that.

Six days before that marked a month since Leon had played Schubert’s “Serenade” in front of me. We weren’t thinking about what the date marked, but we had no doubt it was important. We instinctively protected it from words, as if they would have made it less ethereal. We would walk to our schools together, and we’d come home together

every chance we got. Sometimes, when we didn't see anyone around, we would hold hands. We didn't even always do that – we would bring our fingers together as we walked, intertwine them for a moment, as if by accident, and exchange glances. We also exchanged books. It was because of him that I came to like Edgar Allan Poe. And he discovered Émile Zola because of me. He took me to Mrs. Stancheva's two more times, and both times, the last thing he played was the "Serenade." After that, we strolled back and forth past the little shops, now closed for the evening, between the Kapiya quarter and Adzhundar Street, and didn't speak. The feeling that washed over us from this music was so strong that we needed to walk a bit to calm down. At other times we would talk – he, about music; I, about literature; and both of us, about our families. Then I wrote my first poem and read it only to him. I had begun to think in verse – and my most banal observations flowed through my head in rhymes. We knew they were gossiping about us, that we were wading through mud, that a war was raging, that we were surrounded by suffering and injustice. We knew it, but we let it pass by us, we let it flow into the gutters. We had built our own world – colorful and beautiful.

But papa remained outside of this. He had become so immersed in his thoughts of the adult world, in the news of the war, in the tone that others set for him, that I saw no point in explaining to him. "I don't see what can be done," he had told me, just like that, without realizing how cruel it was. I hated him at that moment; I wanted him to hurt so he would understand me. I helplessly trampled the ice beneath my feet. My father was not fifteen years old. He and mama had already lived out their love, they had shared the important moments, stashed away their bright memories. No one could take that away from them.

"When we go to Poland, if we don't live near each other, I'll save money for a bicycle and I'll come see you every day after work," Leon had said that same morning.

I didn't tell him that I did not believe in any of this – my father insisted I keep silent. I just turned my head away.

The rumors of the deportation were already getting around. On the evening of the fourth, a lawyer – my father's former schoolmate – had dropped by our house unexpectedly.

"What do you say we have a smoke in the yard?" he suggested to my father.

"In this cold?" was his stunned answer.

But our guest's expression was eloquent. I watched them out the window – they were standing behind the plum tree, and the man was talking to him seriously. He lay a

hand on his shoulder, and my father fiercely ground his cigarette butt underfoot. He came back in pale.

“They’re going to deport us. Soon,” he said from the doorway.

A clatter sounded – the pot my mother was carrying to the stove crashed to the floor, and pieces of beet spattered her legs.

“Where?”

“Far away, my dears.” Papa’s face was lifeless; only his lips were moving, as if separate from him. “Where there’s no return.”

From that moment on, the rumors – uncertain and frightening – began inundating us. Papa’s former schoolmate was responsible for the Kyustendil properties requisitioned by the state. Several days before this, an official from the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs – known by its Bulgarian acronym, the KEV – had visited him and asked him to hand over the Fernandes Tobacco warehouse by the train station. He refused to do so without being told the reason. The official reluctantly agreed, under the condition that he swear to keep it a secret – it was a matter of exceptional importance to the state. There was said to be an agreement signed with Germany for the immediate deportation of Jews to what was formerly Poland, and their warehouse was needed to collect us before loading us onto the trains. The date of the extradition: March tenth, shortly after midnight.

Three of us were at home. Mama was slumped in her chair, staring at her lap; papa was pacing the kitchen with his hands clasped behind his back; and I, without giving it any thought, was picking up the beet pieces and spilling them again. Papa left, and grandpa arrived immediately afterwards. He also brought news – and no less disturbing. A Bulgarian friend of his neighbor had sent him a note from Radomir, through a relative, saying that a train had been prepared there with twenty-nine railroad cars for transporting Jews. Where to – no one knew. Later that night, grandpa stopped by a second time – a new note had arrived: they had readied the schools in Radomir to receive the Jews from Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, and Gorna Dzhumaya.

The next evening, March fifth, papa came home with more bad news: the mayor asked the Jewish community to immediately secure three hundred buckets, three hundred ladles, cauldrons, and other household items, without specifying what for. I hadn’t gone to school that day, and my parents hadn’t objected; they didn’t go to work, either. They hurried here and there, Aron hardly appeared, people were constantly coming to the house – friends, relatives, neighbors – and they recited the latest rumors in hushed voices. The news of the deportation was confirmed from different places. The

Jews of Dupnitsa had been put under house arrest. Temporary transit camps had been set up all over the country. The district governor, Miltenov, had asked a Jew we knew for three hundred thousand leva – to see what he might be able to do. They had decided to give it to him, but they were not expecting much.

That same day – on the fifth, it was a Friday – mama began packing our bags. She examined the suitcases, but said they weren't comfortable, and she decided to sew knapsacks. She looked for a suitable pattern, asking neighbors and friends; she needed fabric – so she cut up the bed covers. The sewing machine started clacking once more. As she sewed, she would remember something, dart off somewhere, and return a little later with a confused look; she met other panicked women. She patched socks, knitted gloves, looked for canteens, baked rusks. Once she appeared with scissors to cut off my braids. It was said that they were separating children from their mothers, and it would be hard for me with long hair. I refused; she did not insist and went back to her frantic clacking at the sewing machine.

But the children were happy. The little Jewish children were happy. “We're taking a train and going abroad!” exclaimed six-year-old Haim from my neighborhood when he saw me on the street. Other boys were also showing off. They would be getting on the biggest train, they said, and going far, far away, all the way to the sea. Further down our street I saw a train drawn in the mud with a stick. I started to scold the young artists, to explain to them this was nothing to be happy about, but I gazed into their little eyes, all lit up, and held my tongue.

When I went to Leon's house that same Friday, he wasn't home, but Blanca met me at the door.

“I asked my father for face balm, and he made some for me,” she boasted, grabbed it from the table, and thrust it into my face. “They say we'll be working in the fields in Poland, and we have to protect our faces from sunburn. Do you want me to order some for you, too?” I looked at her – so delicate, her eyes shining, her hands waving enthusiastically. I hugged her and left. I walked down the street, crossing paths with anxiously hurrying people, and I was bewildered: most of the adults believed they were taking us to Poland to work. Not that they expected anything nice – they envisioned misery, hunger, sickness, and harsh winters in a foreign land. But unlike me, they pictured themselves alive.

“Papa, why don't you tell them what's written in that newspaper?” I asked him as we were going to our neighbors' house.

“I'm not sure it's true.”

“But what if it is? Isn't it better for them to know?”

“And if they know, what then?”

“They’ll decide what to do.”

“There’s nothing they can do, my girl. If there were any point, I would tell them. I’m sorry myself that I heard it. A person can’t go on without hope.”

I glanced over at his thin figure in a gray coat. I hurried ahead, and his footsteps faded behind me. I was sorry I had grown up. Sorry my father had grown smaller.

“I’m afraid I’ll disappear. And no one will know. And no one will miss me.”

That’s what I had said to papa a few years earlier, on Tu BiShvat, when the children had gone out without me. Then, he had reassured me, but now, my fear had returned even stronger. I looked at the humble bedroom with the two beds for me and Aron, the little writing table, the inkpot with the broken penholder; I looked at the shelves with my favorite books and the cupboard with its cracked door. In this room I had played, had cried, had laughed, had hidden, I had dreamed and daydreamed, and my brother and I had chattered until late into the night. I looked out the window and caught sight of Hisarlak hill – still somber, the trees not yet in leaf, but solid and reliable at its post. I could look at it for hours, and I always discovered something new. I loved this house. I loved this town – my friends, the mountain, the orchards drenched in blossoms, the colorful market, the dusty little shops, the dignified buildings. I loved this land – here, where I was born, where my parents were born, and their parents, and their parents before them. The only one I knew.

And I saw that the love was not mutual. This land was part of me, but I was not part of it. For it, I was superfluous, even harmful. They would scrape me out like a dirty stain on the pavement, load me on a train, throw me onto the rubbish heap. And before long, other people would be walking around in this room, another girl would be dreaming in this bed – someone with more Aryan blood; different books would sit on the shelf, and the penholder with the broken tip would be changed; someone else would contemplate Hisarlak, or not pay it any attention; someone else would go to school instead of me. People are easily replaced. Or maybe not people, but Jews. You load them on a train, they disappear, the end – they’re already forgotten. And life goes on. It goes on without me.

“How beautiful you are, Bekah!” Mama had raised her head from her sewing machine – she was sewing the third knapsack and her foot had come to a halt on the pedal. The silence that followed her words hung heavy. She was staring into my face as

if seeing me for the first time. Finally, her gaze passed through me and clouded over. I shivered.

In the midst of the preparations for our departure, in the midst of the whole panic, mama had discovered I was beautiful. She had never told me this before now. Not that I hadn't sensed that she liked my appearance – by her satisfied nod when she looked at me as she was braiding my hair and by the enthusiastic air with which she presented me to her friends.

“Is everything all right, mama?”

She focused her gaze on me, stood up, and approached me.

“You're so beautiful!” She ran a finger across my forehead, cheek, chin. In her eyes were both pride and fear. “You remind me of my mother when she was young – she was a beauty, too. You're even prettier than her, Bekah.”

My apprehension was growing; I wanted to hide from this intense gaze. I pulled away and her hand was left hanging in the air. As if she didn't notice, she continued staring.

“And you're so young.”

“Why did you just now notice this?”

“You know you must take care of yourself, don't you? They'll hardly allow me to always be by your side.”

“We all have to take care of ourselves. But what good does that do us if we're just going to die anyway?”

“Death is not the most frightening thing, my darling.”

She caressed me with trembling fingers.

“I'm going out,” she said, breaking away from me. “I'm going to Rivka's. I'll be back soon.”

The weather grew milder around noon; the mud melted and stuck to the soles of my shoes, weighing down my steps. I walked down our street, past Leon's house, and I resisted the impulse to peek in the window. In that house was the boy to whom everything bright in my future was connected. A little earlier, my mother had come out of there with a small packet of white powder in her hand. It was for me, it contained cyanide, and mama planned to sew it into the hem of my coat. Just in case. She said this as if she were handing me a handkerchief.

“Give it to me,” I told her.

She didn't move. Her face was rigid and pale. My father started toward us, looking at her in astonishment.

“Give me it,” I repeated.

Instead of opening her hand, she squeezed it in her fist. I remember that fist as if it’s still before my eyes – the rough, dry skin, the bulging veins, the white knuckles – trembling as if electrified. I wondered if she’d find the strength to go through with it. I hoped that she would not. The fist opened up and the packet passed into my hand.

“Did you prepare enough for all of us?”

“I can’t ask Bohor for more. You need it the most.”

“Why?”

“Only if they maltreat you.”

“They could maltreat any of us.”

Mama’s face contorted; she tried to caress me, but I pulled back. I looked away from her because I couldn’t stand seeing her pain.

“You, they can also mistreat as a woman. You’re so pretty, my darling.”

Papa pressed one hand to his eyes, and with the other, he hugged mama. And I, squeezing the packet, ran outside.

I walked down our street, layers of mud sticking to the soles of my shoes and making my steps increasingly heavy. I had left Leon’s house behind, and I had probably also left behind my love, my dreams, my life. My whole life was behind me, all fifteen years of it. I had imagined these were only the beginning. Spreading out before me now was only mud – sticky and disgusting, and devouring, and it was my fate to sink into it – either more painfully or less so. More or less painfully – that was my only choice.

I plodded through the mud of my street on that March day; the sun had pierced the clouds, caressed the earth, melted the ice. I plodded along and wondered if it was worth continuing. Was it worth the struggle? Against what? Against whom? Against those unknown people who wanted to deport us? Against Hitler in Germany? Where were they? Or against my loving mother, who had offered me poison so she could give me a merciful death? Against my father, who didn’t object? I didn’t know. But I did not want to stop. I preferred to plod ahead until the mud swallowed me up. And in sinking, to feel the joy of movement, of hope. That maybe, just this once, a miracle would happen. That this time, I would be spared. Or in the moment before I sank, I would glimpse a glimmer of sunshine or the reflection of a tree. Isn’t that worth struggling for?

I took out the packet, tore it open, and emptied into the mud. Then I turned around and set off toward my house.

The same day, that sixth of March, I entered my house together with Dr. Kalitski. I was happy to see him – he would visit us often while papa was getting back on his feet, and he always found something nice to say to me – to encourage me to study, to ask me about my favorite subject, to reassure me that the bad things would come to an end. My initial joy, however, was replaced by sorrow – he had come to say goodbye.

“Mr. Nisim, I wouldn’t want to worry you unnecessarily, but I assume that you’ve heard as well,” he said after papa had seated him at the table.

“Are you talking about the deportations?”

“Yes. There’s no official announcement, but the secret has leaked out.”

“Yes, doctor. I’ve also heard it from different places, not one of them official. And since it’s assumed that they’ll load us on the ninth, we’ve started getting ready.” He nodded in the direction of mama, who had grown quiet behind her sewing machine.

“Unfortunately, the rumors have turned out to be true. Today my paramedic and his friend Buko Beracha paid a visit to the mayor, Dr. Efremov. My medic used to work with Efremov, and they’re close. Efremov told Beracha, “They’re planning bad things for you.”

“Yes, doctor, hard times are coming for us. And your support means a lot to me.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Nisim. I’m so ashamed.”

“You, of all people, ashamed? I’ll be eternally grateful to you.”

“I’ve brought you some medical supplies. I hope they’ll provide you with medical care there, but just in case.”

He opened his bag and started arranging little bottles and bandages on the table.

“There, I’ve brought quinine and atebirin for malaria, iodine for disinfection, and for your heart – ”

“Doctor, please, don’t incur any expenses.” My father raised his hand to stop him.

He pondered a moment and turned to me with a smile, his first smile in a long time.

“You see, Bekah? This is our Bulgaria. This is the homeland we love. I’ll take it to Poland with me in my heart.”

His voice quivered and stopped.

Since the rumors of the deportation had begun spreading, the stream of Bulgarian friends and neighbors coming to our house was unending. Uncle Mitko brought papa wonderful winter shoes made of calfskin, with oxhide soles – he had just bought them for himself and had never even put them on. *Baba Slavka* had found some thick wool and hurried to knit me a sweater. Auntie Maria brought us bread for rusks – bread was

rationed, so she'd gotten it on the black market. Some friends of Uncle Robert and *Tanti* Franka had offered to look after their children for them, but they'd refused: "Wherever we are, that's where they'll be." Uncle Mitko offered to empty the premises and store our household things. But they had piqued the interest of some people. Our neighbor Yovka had shown up at our place that very same morning. Mama invited her to sit down, and there was an awkward silence as our guest looked the kitchen over.

"You've surely got a lot of things you don't need," Yovka said.

"Excuse me?"

"They'll hardly let you take all of this." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand.

"Do you," mama said, her face reddening, "wish to take something in particular?"

"If it's convenient. Maybe the iron." Her gaze skipped from object to object, then she stood up and touched the sideboard, the same one the figurine stood on. "This sideboard is fine workmanship."

"It was my mother's!" mama exclaimed, jumping up as if to hide it, but then she lowered her head and nodded. "When we leave, take them."

"Before I leave, I wanted to tell you one more thing," said Dr. Kalitski, after he had stood to leave and papa was holding his coat. "If I were in your shoes, I would make some noise. The news has gotten around, but a lot of people still don't know. And even those who have heard it can't be sure it's not just gossip. Listen, Nisim, it's not by chance that the authorities are keeping it a secret. They're acting like bandits in the dark and hoping that that way, they'll get away with it. Don't let them get away with it, make some noise. Drive them out into the light, so everyone can see them for the villains they are."

"There have been attempts, Dr. Kalitski, and all of them unsuccessful. We have a lawyer in Sofia with connections in political circles – Yako Baruch. He makes the rounds, talks to them, implores, and nothing. Here, Miltenov supposedly promised to step in, he himself warned our man about the deportation. He asked for money, but he's hardly likely to achieve anything. What can I do – a poor tinsmith and former teacher."

"I don't know, friend," the doctor said before saying farewell. "I'm sorry I don't have more authority."

"Make some noise, us." Papa had settled into the place where the doctor had been sitting; his chin was propped on his hands and he was muttering under his breath.

“Where do I make this noise? I don’t even have the right to leave Kyustendil, and he wants me to make some noise to abolish a government decree.”

“I don’t know, papa.”

“I am maybe the tsar’s advisor? Maybe I am the prime minister’s cousin? Tell me, huh?” He turned to me as if I were planning to refute him.

“I don’t know, papa. I don’t know anything.”

“You don’t know, do you? What exactly do you not know? Isn’t it obvious to you that nothing depends on me?”

“Fine, nothing depends on you,” I replied and started to stand.

“Stop,” he said, pressing my hand. “Sit, sit back down.”

I obeyed with annoyance.

“We should make some noise. That’s what Dr. Kalitski says. Before whom do we make this noise? And how?”

He was staring at me, as if looking for the answer in my eyes. I shrugged my shoulders indifferently. I wanted him to leave me alone so I could enjoy my last hours at home. Better he had asked the wall.

“Attention, attention!” my father cried out in a low voice. “An important message.” He curled his hand like a trumpet and put it in front of his mouth.

“Are you pretending to be a town crier?”

“A town crier... Not a bad idea.”

“Can’t you see I’m kidding?”

“We can spread the message with a town crier. Only that...”

“Only that what?”

“Only that to us, the Jews, they won’t pay any attention.”

“In that case,” I said as I stood up, “I’m going to my room.”

“However,” he forced me back down again, “however, we have Bulgarian friends! And we can ask them to make some noise instead of us. Right?” He stood up, looked at me with shining eyes, eyes shining with hope, the hope that I thought had been doused. The spark passed from him into me, my blood began to stir, and hope started flowing in my veins, too.

“You know that nothing might come of this, don’t you?” papa said. “That it’s too late.”

“I know. But it’s always worth making one more attempt, isn’t it? Do I need to be teaching you, papa?”

That same day, on the sixth, papa went to the synagogue. There he found some thirty frightened and confused men. He conveyed what he knew, and they each shared what worrying news they had. Panic was gripping them more and more; they felt like cattle to the slaughter. “Let’s make some noise!” papa proposed. “Let’s send a delegation of Bulgarians to Sofia!”

Organizing a delegation took time, but the noise was generated that very day: a town crier announced throughout the Jewish quarter that they would hold an assembly the next day. The meeting place: the synagogue.

The next day – March seventh, a Sunday – they officially informed us of the deportation for the first time, and through the Jewish community, at that. We were allowed by the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs – when it was already too late for us – to buy two meters of canvas cloth for knapsacks. On that day, the temple was full of men with a last hope of averting the irreparable. They spoke heatedly over one another: who had learned what, what had been prepared, what was being proposed. They discussed different plans of action; everything was so chaotic. Should they bribe members of the KEV, should they count on Miltenov, was there someone else they should talk to? Papa repeated his appeal: “Let’s send a delegation of Bulgarians to Sofia!”

They liked the idea and set to talking about whom they should appeal to. But they did not give up on the other strategies, either: they collected 900 thousand leva, set aside a sum for Miltenov, determined one for the Macedonian activist Kurtev to bribe someone from the KEV, and decided also to try their luck with the KEV representative in Kyustendil, Tasev. That same day, they got in touch with Bulgarian friends. Some of them, including the member of parliament Petar Mihalev, had no idea about the deportation – he went to Miltenov’s office to verify it, and there, Tasev himself confirmed it. Around forty people agreed to leave for Sofia to save their Jews: merchants, lawyers, military officers. All of them – respected people. They decided to set out at five in the afternoon the following day, the eighth of March. At the agreed upon hour, only four of them showed up: the member of parliament Mihalev, the merchant Asen Suichmezov, the lawyer Ivan Momchilov, and the Macedonian activist Vladimir Kurtev. If the authorities had failed to keep their dirty secret, they had succeeded brilliantly in frightening the future delegates. But the four men did not waver – they boarded the train and set off for Sofia.

It was Sunday, the seventh, when it became known that the train to take us away had arrived. A Bulgarian had nosed around the station a bit to make inquiries. “What kind of train cars are these?” he had asked the railway men. “For the Jews,” they

answered him. We waited for dusk to fall before Leon, Blanca, and I went there. A livestock car – that’s what we saw. So long that it obscured the view. The wagons – boarded up with planks, with grated-over openings at the top, and the white letters БДЖ – Bulgarian State Railways – on the side. Cattle cars – that’s what they called them. Without compartments, without seats, without steps for boarding. Intended for animals. I approached one – stale air wafted out, a stench of rot and manure. The wheels and the buffers glinted ominously, and the darkness behind the bars of the grates surged toward me. We went back home in silence.

And in the meantime, the next frightening piece of news had come, this time from the town of Dupnitsa. They had transported hundreds of Greek Jews from the station to the tobacco warehouse, shuffling dirty and exhausted, carrying suitcases and cloth bundles, in lines of four: mothers with infants in their arms, the decrepit elderly, pregnant women, children, emaciated men. They wept and begged for help. The people of Dupnitsa gathered around them in horror, watched them, and could not help. “We are next,” I told myself; I looked at papa and realized he was thinking the same thing. Our hope was disappearing. The delegation would not succeed.

The four of us were clustered in front of our little house – deserted and locked, and we were waiting for the neighboring family so we could leave together. Nine in the evening – this was the agreed upon hour. The place: the Fernandes warehouse – conveniently located next to the station. We were holding hands, dressed in our warmest clothes, with our new knapsacks on our backs and canteens attached to them. Mama was sobbing, and papa was imploring Aron to go into hiding, not to leave with us.

“No, papa, I’m not going to escape without all of you. Whatever happens, we’ll face it together.” His chin trembled, but his eyes remained clear. I squeezed mama and papa’s hands and took a deep breath. My last gulps of my native air – I wanted to hold on to them forever.

“Go home, the deportation has been called off!” a voice cried out from behind the fence. The words resounded in my head for some time before I grasped their meaning. I first thought it was a trick – some Nazi sympathizer had come to have fun with us one last time. Then I decided I was hearing things – what a thirst for life won’t do to you, what illusions it’s capable of. And when I turned to my father and met his teary eyes, only then did I believe it. I believed that miracles were possible, even for me. That I still had the right to hope. And that, just maybe, these fifteen years of mine were only the beginning, and not the whole journey. I dragged myself exhausted to the door of our house, threw my knapsack down, and sat on the stoop. I was once again in front of my

own home, and I felt like it was receiving me. I was again in my native town, and here I would meet the dawn. For me, there was a tomorrow in Kyustendil; I was still a part of it. I knew I would remember this moment: the ninth of March, nineteen forty-three, a little before six in the evening. The first minutes of my second life.

Much later I learned what had happened in Sofia. The delegation had met with Dimitar Peshev, the vice-president of the National Assembly, and together they had visited the minister of the interior, Petar Gabrovski, in parliament. He denied it to the last – there was no such thing, he had never even heard about the deportation. “Call Kyustendil, ask them!” the delegates had insisted. He called. He cancelled the command. The train departed empty.

After this, I would go to the station from time to time to look at the tracks – more often in the beginning, and only from time to time as I grew older. The last time – a month before I left for Canada. I would look at the metal ribbons stretching out like snakes and wonder – why me? How did it happen, how did I end up among the nearly fifty-thousand Bulgarian Jews whose lives were saved? Why was I, of all people, spared that route? The government’s plans for Rebekah Nisim had been different: for her to be driven off to Radomir, crammed into a camp with Jews from several cities, loaded back onto the train and taken off to Lom. In Lom, to crowd her onto a ship on the blue Danube and deliver her to Vienna – the capital of the waltz, the heart of civilization. Right into the hands of the Germans. From there – onto another train, to the final destination. Last stop – the crematorium in Treblinka. With *Tanti* Roza, Itzhak, little Sami and monsieur Marcel – the Jews deprived of citizenship in the newly acquired Bulgarian lands – everything went according to plan. During the night of March 10, Bulgarian police and soldiers arrested them, along with nearly three thousand five hundred Jews from Skopje, and led them to the Monopol tobacco warehouse. Jews from Bitola and Štip joined them. They were held in wretched conditions: starving, raped, beaten. The Bulgarian authorities loaded them onto trains and handed them over to the Germans. Seven thousand one hundred and twenty-two Macedonian Jews were transported to the Treblinka concentration camp. They were gassed in their first hours there.

Instead of this happening to me, the train tracks transported me, several years later, through Shishkovtsi, Zemen, and Pernik, taking me to Sofia. To study at the university, to become a teacher, to get married, to have a child, to enjoy my grandchild. When I

would visit Kyustendil, I sometimes went to the train station and stepped onto the train tracks – as long as my age allowed – and I would start walking on them. I would hold out my arms like a tightrope walker and try not to stagger. “Step on the gravel,” I said to myself, “and you go to the ovens.” And I would imagine this really was what awaited me, and I really tried, but in the end I could never keep it up and would jump down. And nothing would happen to me – no one took me anywhere, I didn’t see any crematorium and, happy that I had gotten away again, I would take a deep breath of that enchanting Kyustendil air, turn around, and head for home. I sometimes wonder if I deserved it. Did I have a mission in this world that my life was spared for? Have I fulfilled it? I still don’t have an answer. But I haven’t stopped looking for it.

*Maya, February 2015*

I'm one of the last ones to leave school because I was waiting in the bathroom for the crowd to thin out. I exhale the stale school air and inhale the fresh and cold outside. Just a while ago it was snowing, but now the sky's cleared up. The snow sparkles and crunches under my boots, and the sun reflects off the windows opposite. I walk down the alley, reach Côte-Saint-Luc Road, and see that the sidewalks haven't been cleared. I can take the bus home, but I prefer to walk through the snowdrifts. One more school day behind me. One more date on the calendar scratched off. Now I just have to get home, shut myself in my room, slip into my robe, stuff my uniform deep in the closet, snuggle into bed, and listen to jazz. That's when my part of the day begins – the temporary ceasefire.

For a few days now I've been thinking of my life as a war. After everything I've read and watched about the Second World War, a comparison like that would never have occurred to me if a school principal hadn't suggested it. Not the principal of my school, but of the École Pierre-Laporte. My mom had mentioned the idea of me transferring there. *You don't talk to me about your problems, Maya, but I can see you're suffering*, she said to me last week. *You didn't want to change schools before, but maybe now you've changed your mind?* And I agreed. I didn't accept her offer to come along with me – I felt like I was old enough to enroll myself. When I got there, the principal was interested in my reasons, and I started being evasive.

“Are you having a problem with your grades?” she interrupted me.

“No, not at all.”

“Then you're probably being bullied.”

And with this, she really got me.

I hadn't thought of what was happening to me that way. They had explained it to us in school, showed us documentaries, and sometimes the media would blow up when a victim committed suicide. But to connect this with my insignificant life? Me, experiencing something they dedicated films to? It wouldn't have crossed my mind. But nonetheless, when the principal uttered this word, she hit her target. *Bullying, bullying, bullying* – I repeated it in my head, and I already knew that this was the name for my problem. But this thought didn't make me feel any better – on the contrary, it was humiliating, I was ashamed to even look at the woman in front of me. I nodded and stared at my hands.

“I don't mind admitting you, but it would hardly be appropriate at this stage. If I were you, I would seek professional support to manage your conflict. It would be good

to come out of this war with dignity, do you understand? If you surrender now, the feeling of defeat will always be with you, and even if you move, the same thing will happen again. With your battered self-esteem, you'll give off signals that you're a suitable victim."

The principal, a young woman with dark, expressive eyes, looked at me inquisitively and, without waiting for an answer, she added, "My words probably seem cruel to you."

I shrugged my shoulders – I had come with the idea that everything would soon be behind me.

"I would be happy to admit you at the beginning of next school year. But until then... Would you like me to call your principal?"

"No, I'll manage on my own."

"Do you think you can?"

"Yeah."

"There's nothing embarrassing about asking for help, is there?"

Yes, I already knew that, but then she didn't know that no one would believe me. That there wasn't a student in that school who would say a word against Catherine. I nodded – I didn't see any point in explaining it to her.

"Remember what I said," she repeated, seeing me to the door, "you leave the battle with your head held high. And let everyone see your weapon. Let them sense that you're not helpless."

With that conversation, my hope of starting fresh tomorrow died. And I started thinking about my life as a war.

Life as a war – that's exactly how it feels. I wouldn't tell grandma that. *You young people, you don't know a thing, all you do is complain*, she's said to me so many times, and I can't argue with her. She doesn't like to tell me about those years, but I've read, I've watched movies. I know it was horrible, and I can hardly imagine it. Grandma's right: I have no right to be unhappy – me of all people, the granddaughter of a Jew who survived the Holocaust, living with a caring mother in a safe country. But they're inside me, these feelings of mine, as wrong as they might be. I'm ashamed of them, but I can't hide them from myself. And it's true that no one's threatening my life, but sometimes it occurs to me to threaten it myself. What good to me is a life at war? What good is a life without joy? And right then I think of my grandmother again, about her difficult youth, her younger cousin who died in Treblinka, and I'm sorry, and I start over from the

beginning. At eight a.m. I cross the doorstep of the school and go into battle; at three p.m., I leave the battlefield for a temporary lull. The next day – all over again.

I'm ploughing a path for myself down the sidewalk through the untrodden snow; my legs feel heavy, but it's a pleasant fatigue. Someone is following me and seems to be in a hurry; they've almost reached me – I can hear them panting, out of breath. I move to let them pass, but they stop beside me. I look in disbelief: Emma.

"Hi, how are you?" she says in a voice as if we'd been chatting like friends just a little while ago.

My first reflex is to look away – after all, lately we've been pretending like we don't know each other. But she's not only looking at me, she's even curled her lips into a smile.

"I'm fine," I answer, struggling to hide my astonishment.

She asks if I'm going home, and when I nod affirmatively, she responds that she's going in my direction. I set off hesitantly and she joins me, walking along beside me.

"How's your mom?" she asks me.

"Fine."

*She misses you*, I could add, but naturally, I keep that to myself. My mom thinks that Emma's my best friend, considers her mother a close friend, and loves them both. Sometimes it seems to me that she likes Emma more than me. That she's sorry I'm not like her.

Emma keeps walking on my right side and forging a path in the snow. She's out of breath, but she neither asks me to slow down nor falls behind. She walks beside me as if we're together, but not quite: if we were, she wouldn't hesitate to tell me not to rush. She's acting like she feels... guilty? My hope, barely envisioned, blazes up. I try to extinguish it, but it's too late. My mind is ringing with explanations for her behavior – from satisfying to more satisfying, all of them flattering me. Her new friends have betrayed her the same way she betrayed me. She's realized how disgusting they are and that they've failed her. She's figured out that I'm cool, and she's realized she won't find a better friend. I've daydreamed about all of this. And I've imagined it – in technicolor, like a movie. Emma comes to me in tears, she tells me how much they hurt her, how sorry she is that she abandoned me, and she begs me for forgiveness. First I pull away, unapproachable and severe, but then I forgive her. We hug, and as a finale, we sing "We Are the Champions." This is what I had fantasized, but only in the beginning. After that I started wondering how I had not realized what kind of person she was. Different instances would come back to me of when she had treated other people badly, and I had just closed my eyes.

Emma and I walk through the snow and don't speak. It glistens in the sun, clean and untouched, and we trample it. I imagine the tiny sparkling crystals in front of us – how they're shimmering now, but in a second they'll be crushed beneath our soles, and their tender beauty will turn to mush. I walk beside Emma and think about how much easier my life would become if we made up. If they saw us back together, they'd leave me alone. And even if they excluded us, we'd be fine, she and I would be enough for each other. They'd find themselves a new victim, or they'd go back to Marc-André. I'm advancing, beating a path through the snowdrifts, but I'm horribly tired. I want to lounge in the snow with her, to listen to music from one set of headphones, to not wage war, not have enemies, to have a best friend, to be an ordinary girl. With Emma beside me, all that would be possible. I glance over at her: her profile seems sharp and foreign to me, and her figure looks dark against the whiteness all around. Is this the girl I used to love? Could I forget what she did to me? Would I be able to bear watching them humiliate Marc-André now, when I know what it feels like? And will the trodden snow turn back into sparkling crystals?

“Maya, I wanna ask a favor.”

“Go ahead,” I tell her, but I'm not ready. I don't know if I can forgive her.

“I've told you some things that... I hope you won't tell anyone. Especially not my parents.”

The sun is blinding me, the snow is shining in my eyes, my vision darkens, dizzying, and Emma's face is looming before me.

“Maya, did you hear me?” Her voice is muffled as if through a snowdrift, but I pick up on how it's quivering with uncertainty. “This is really personal, you don't have the right to tell anyone.”

I stare in the direction of the voice and struggle to focus on her face. Is Emma assuming I'd betray her? That I would intentionally go to her parents, those dear people, that I'd spill her secrets and sow panic in them just to get back at her? I look at her with wide-open eyes; they're stinging from staring, but I can barely see her. We were inseparable for two years, we thought of ourselves as sisters, we overcame obstacles, I told her everything – she spent two years getting to know me, and she hadn't understood a thing about me.

“Maya, promise me! Swear you won't say anything about the drugs, 'cause otherwise...”

Uncontrollable laughter bubbles up from my throat. I drop to my knees in the snow, and my chest is shaking with convulsions.

“Listen, you little bitch,” she says, kneeling in front of me, her face still vague but her voice cutting like a knife. “You think it's funny, huh? You better think twice before

you say a single word to my parents. You'll be sorry from now on, and soon no one'll believe you."

She disappears from my view, her footsteps crunching in the snow, growing softer.

I'm alone once again.

***Rebekah, April 1944***

“I’m just a poor tailor, how can I ask for your hand?” exclaimed Leon – that is, Motel.

“Even a poor tailor is entitled to some happiness!” I replied with ardor, perhaps excessive, in the role of Tzeitel. And I threw a quick, but eloquent, glance at my father. My father – both in life and in the play *Tevye the Dairyman* – had slipped off to the side and was waiting his turn.

The scene ended, a new one began, and finally, the Jews of the village of Boyberik in tsarist Russia were exiled from their native place. Tzeitel and Motel, however, in defiance of everyone, fought for their right to be happy – they got married and had children. I wanted the same for myself and Leon, and I was ready to fight to achieve it. “Even a poor tailor is entitled to some happiness!” I yelled at him, arguing with the whole world. “Even I, a despicable little Jewess, am entitled to happiness with Leon!” I wanted everyone to hear it and accept it. Mama had refused to come and my message wouldn’t reach her, but papa was there. He was there and he was listening intently.

“This is selfish, Bekah,” mama had told me not long ago, when she saw Leon come into view out the window. “It is not possible for your family to be in danger, for the world to be so cruel, and for you to be thinking about love.”

I didn’t answer her; I couldn’t find anything to say to her. My family really was in trouble, and my friendship with Leon brought me happiness. Misfortune and happiness, against a backdrop of war. In the middle of funerals, a wedding – that’s how mama saw it. And I, of course, felt guilty. But also – offended. My mother was right, to some extent. To exactly what extent, I didn’t know. Up to the day of the performance – nine days already – I could not accept her words. My own happiness, either. And I was always arguing in my mind – mostly with her, but also with myself. I so wanted her to understand me, for her to smile at me and Leon again, to feel her support. She, however, did not notice me. And papa – he simply stayed silent.

But mama had been right about one thing – the world was cruel. The war was omnipresent; blood was spilling everywhere. The bombardments of Sofia, Budapest, Romania, Germany, Vienna, Italy, Estonia. Ships and submarines sank in one ocean or sea or another – the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Indian and the Arctic, in the Mediterranean

Sea, the Norwegian, the Baltic, the Barents. The Red Army invaded Romania, Germany had just occupied Hungary, and in Italy, the Americans were advancing toward Rome. At home, in Kyustendil, we had our own, supposedly trivial problems. They must have looked trivial on the world map. For us, they were everything.

Grandpa Bito's soul had dried up – that's what *Gramama* Mazal said. We were happy that our deportation had been called off, but he stood grimly aside. "And Roza?" That was the first thing he said to us as soon as we visited them to congratulate them. Papa also grew somber. As Jews, we had no right to a telephone, and so my father had sent her a letter back on the tenth of March. My grandfather, however, couldn't wait, and he sent her a telegram the next day. No answer came. We knew about the transport trains of Jews from the newly acquired lands, but we had heard they were from the Greek areas. My grandfather had gotten in touch with a friend who was close to the mayor, and they went together to ask him. However, he had not been informed. Then grandpa appeared at the police station for a travel permit to leave for Skopje. They refused him and cursed at him: "It's not enough for you that we didn't load you, but now you also want to take a vacation." He contained himself in front of them, but back home, he fumed long and hard. He took to snarling at everyone, and only *gramama* could subdue him. She would put up with him for some time, but if he started yelling a lot, she would grab her rolling pin and chase him around the house. Grandpa did not give up. He got in touch with a merchant traveling to Skopje who promised to check for him. The merchant did this at the beginning of April. He had found the address, but the Jewish houses were sealed. He said he spoke to their neighbor, who told him that one night in March, soldiers and the police had surrounded the city, barricaded the Jewish quarter, moved out the Jews, and taken them away in trucks. They later heard they had been imprisoned in a tobacco warehouse in Skopje, guarded by machine-gunners. The neighbors saw police officers and soldiers appearing from the Jewish houses – one carrying a tablecloth, another, a set of dishes, someone else, a carpet. Soon the houses had been sealed, and at the end of March, the detainees were loaded onto trains and taken away. Where – no one knew.

"I'm going to the police station, let them arrest me, let them send me to Poland!" grandpa shouted after the merchant had left. He grabbed his cane and headed for the door.

"Where are you going, old man!" shrieked *gramama* and clung to him. Grandpa angrily pushed her away, and she squealed, but didn't let go. *Tanti* Franka and the cousins came running from upstairs, and they joined the people who were trying to pull him back. Grandpa Bito finally gave up, but he banged his head against the wall. When we came running, summoned by a cousin, the worst of it had passed. Grandpa was lying

on the floor with a swollen, blue and red forehead and was whimpering, while *gramama* had laid his head in her lap and was wiping his tears, stroking his head, and singing “*Durme, durme.*” She had put four children and seven grandchildren to sleep with this song. With this song she also put to sleep her stricken husband.

From then on grandpa stopped shouting, but he also stopped talking to us and smiling. “His soul dried up,” *gramama* would say, and she would touch the ends of her brazenly colorful apron to her eyes. I would often see him scribbling something, his bony body folded on the three-legged stool and leaning over the coffee table – according to *gramama*, he was writing letters to *Tanti* Roza and accumulating them in a box. He continued working in the store – he had quit, but she reminded him that two of their sons were in labour camps, a third was in poor health, and they had grandchildren and daughters-in-law they needed to help. It did not take long for her to convince him. The same merchant visited them again later and said that the government in Skopje had opened the Jewish houses, removed the furnishings, and sold them at market. Grandpa went out that day and came home in the middle of the night. My brother and I replaced him in the shop, and *gramama* searched the town for him all day long. When he would come home from work, as long as the weather permitted, Grandpa Bito sat beside his wife in front of their gate – she, knitting socks, and he, holding onto a handkerchief with a crooked *S* and *N*. The same handkerchief on which a four-year-old Roza had embroidered her father’s initials to give him as a gift. Only that the Sabetay Nisim for whom she had fashioned it was a different one than this one who sat before us clutching it – one who still believed his daughter would outlive him. Still with his entire soul.

If the Jews in Skopje had disappeared, those in Kyustendil had increased in number. At the end of May – beginning of June, 1943, more than nineteen thousand Sofia Jews had received notice that they were being relocated to the provinces. The deadline for leaving: three days. Written on the notices distributed to them were the town they had to travel to, the number of the train, the hour of departure, the kilograms of luggage to which they had the right. A few small details remained vague. Where would they sleep? What would they eat? How would they survive without a house and work?

They reopened the Jewish school and the Jewish community center – both in the same building – and they accommodated the new arrivals there. In the Third Middle School as well. They slept on the floor, family to family, the elderly along with the infants. Some of them marked out the territory with chalk so the luggage wouldn’t get mixed up. In the courtyard of the synagogue – shared with that of the Jewish school – the Jewish community placed a cauldron and cooked soup, and the Sofians lined up with

mess tins in hand. Gradually people settled into houses, some – renting rooms among Bulgarians. My cousins from Sofia, Rachel and Itzhak, and their mother, *Tanti* Regina, moved in with *gramama* and grandpa. At *Tanti* Franka's, on the second floor of the same house, her cousin came with her mother-in-law and her two children. The men were in labour camps.

One Sunday at the beginning of June, mama returned from the market with a stranger, a woman with a pointy nose, yellowish skin, and dark shadows under her eyes, followed by three girls. She introduced her to us: her name was Malka Aroyo. Her husband had been a teacher, but he died three years ago. Mama had met them by chance beside the synagogue – they looked confused, so she said hello and started talking to them. They had no place to live, and they were almost without money. Papa invited them to sit, offered them tea, and told them that we would be happy to share our modest home with them. A bit later, he and Aron accompanied them to the school and returned with their bags. They built wooden plank beds in our room. I and the girls – fourteen-year-old Inez, nine-year-old Linda, and seven-year-old Malvina – as well as Mrs. Aroyo, would sleep there, while Aron would move to the built-in bench in the kitchen. These changes had significant consequences. One was that I gained my best friend – Inez. The other was that our house ended up with four more mouths to feed.

When the new family came to our house, the women like mama who processed the tobacco harvest had just finished their work for the summer. She went to each of the neighbors again, offering to sew for them. Malka also started looking for someone to hire her, and occasionally she would find something – sometimes by the day, sometimes by the hour. Laundering, cleaning, or helping out in a workshop that repaired ladders, where they kept her a little longer. We, the younger ones, did farm work during the summer. We often stopped off at the Agricultural School – they were kind to us there and would find some minor task even for the children, Linda and Malvina. They would feed them and give them each a little something to take home. And we, the bigger kids, would do anything – we gathered crops, weeded, picked fruit – anywhere they would hire us.

The new 1943-1944 school year came, but because of the restrictions on Jews, they refused to enroll me. Leon also dropped out. "I'll work and I'll help the family," I announced at home, trying to hide my desolation. Mama and papa looked at each other and simultaneously cried out, "No!" They decided that I would sit the exams as a private pupil. They bought me used textbooks and I began reading. For the Russian that was being taught then, Leon's father made a deal with a Russian, a White Russian émigré, to instruct us. I was thankful for every lesson I read, for every minute spent with a book. I

had not appreciated it before, but at that time, I felt blessed. And so came that autumn, in sorrow and joy. The fall of forty-three.

A revival – that’s what I connect that autumn with in my memories. Life for the Jews in Kyustendil was difficult, but our spirits had risen above daily life. In spite of the poverty and humiliation, the old and newly arrived Jews united. We, the young, formed groups of common friends – Aron found members of the Workers Youth League, and Leon, Blanca, Inez, and I, along with some other girls and boys, established our own little company. Back in the summer we had worked together in the fields and orchards, and we would stroll through the town at dusk; when it started getting cold and there was no work, we would gather in different houses. Someone would take out an accordion, and it would begin – songs, comic verses, recitations, book discussions, joking, and laughter. We had fun in spite of the air raid alarms, the fear, and the poverty. We knew we may not have many days left, and we intended to fill them up. To make them beautiful and meaningful.

And it wasn’t just we young people who were like that, but our entire increased community. The activities of our community center were forbidden, but this didn’t stop us – our cultural life moved into the synagogue. The place where the rabbi would conduct the service was elevated by three steps, and we turned it into a stage. That’s where we held talks, literary evenings, and concerts. We had two choirs and a small orchestra, and they regularly performed musical compositions. Once, at the insistence of Leon and together with other poets, I recited my poem. I did it because of him and I never repeated it – they applauded, but the exposure was hard for me to bear. Leon also joined in – they found a piano and he gave two chamber concerts. The finale of both was the “Serenade.”

The last initiative came from my father – to put on a play. It would not be his first – he had also done this in the Jewish community center, but during happier times – when he was a school teacher, he had free time, and he was healthy. That winter, though, he worked all day tinning troughs, ovens, funnels, stoves, and stove pipes; his hands were lacerated, and he would come home exhausted, sometimes clutching his heart and unable to catch his breath. I didn’t believe he could find the strength for anything else, and I was astonished when I saw how, returning home from work, he would wash up, have a frenzied bite to eat, and leave for rehearsals. He directed the cast with passion, and also acted in the main role, that of Tevye the Dairyman, sparing nothing there, either. As I acted, I watched him sidelong – I feared for his health, but I was also proud. There was no one else like my papa – artistic, sensitive, charismatic. His presence could

be felt like a flame. And when, nine days before I called out Tzeitel's words from the stage, our family was shaken up again, it was precisely this dedication and responsibility of his toward people that kept him from going under.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" I asked Aron.

I had finally gotten the rare chance to be alone with him. We were in the kitchen. He had just eaten his breakfast and was getting ready to go out; as always, he was in a hurry. He gave me a startled look, opened the door, listened intently in the foyer, and peered out the window. Slowly, he turned toward me.

For three days now I had looked for an occasion to ask him this question. Our house was teeming with people, and I couldn't find an excuse to get him outside. Three days before, I had gone down to the cellar to get the old textbooks, and among all the junk, in the most out-of-the-way spot, I found a suspiciously clean bundle. I untied it and saw new men's clothing: a sweater, a windbreaker, hunting trousers, and military boots. On the very top – a revolver. My legs grew weak and I sat down on the chest. I tied the bundle again and hid it in its original place. Unlike other times, I didn't confide in Leon or my father. I wanted this to be just our secret – my brother's and mine.

"I was in the cellar..."

He nodded. He was staring at me defiantly; his brows were furrowed, and it was as if all their hairs were bristling. I was used to this look: quarrelsome, often sarcastic, disdainful. The look of a big brother. I usually tried – unsuccessfully, of course – to respond to him with the same. But not this time. I looked at my brother and I wondered how I would live without him. What would Rebekah be without Aron? What would the world be without directions? I ransacked my memory for the last time we'd had a friendly chat. I couldn't recall. And only then did it occur to me what good fortune it was to have had a brother like him. And that while I was struggling to catch up with him, my time with him had run out. We looked at each other that morning, my brother and I, and told each other with our eyes what had not been spoken over the years. I didn't notice when exactly his brash gaze softened.

"Yes, Bekah. I'm leaving."

*Where will you sleep?* I wanted to ask him, but I was afraid of irritating him. Did they dig themselves trenches in the earth, or did they lie down on the leaves under the sky? Was there still snow in the mountains? Did they come across wild beasts? And I thought of our room, before Malka and her children had come – our two identical beds with thick quilts, the little writing table piled high with books, the roaring stove. How we had set out in life from the very same place, what different choices we had made, and

how these were sending us in different directions. Him – into the cold in the mountains, among the beasts and the bullets, and me – to the shelter of home, with mama and papa.

“I should go with you.”

“No, you’re needed here. You know how delicate mama is, and papa’s health is shaky. When they find out at the police station that I’m not here, they’ll call all of you in for questioning, they could arrest you and send you to a camp. I’m counting on you to support them. It will be difficult for you.”

“Not as difficult as for you. They’ll hardly be shooting at me.”

“I’ll manage, no matter that I’m young.”

“Do you know how to shoot?”

“I do, my aim is even accurate.”

“But have you...”

To my shame, my palms flew up and covered my mouth.

“Have I tried it out on people?” He smiled at me. “No, so far, only on trees. But when I aim, I imagine the tree’s a fascist.”

*A fascist without a mother, a wife, or children*, I dared not utter.

“I want to give you my brown wool cardigan,” I said. “It’s big on me and it’ll fit you.”

“I have what I need. I’m carrying a lot of baggage, not just for myself.”

“Will you be able to send word from time to time?”

“It’s difficult, and risky – don’t count on it. I’m not going to a resort to send postcards.”

“Will you tell mama and papa?”

“No, I’m entrusting that to you. Here’s my identification card” – he pulled it out of his pocket and gave it to me. “I’m not going to mention a thing to them because mama will get upset and Malka might guess. If I don’t come home tomorrow, then the following morning, give my card to papa and tell him. He’ll decide how to present it to mama. Try to be near her, she’ll be worried – for me and for you. When the police realize I’m gone, they’ll call papa in for questioning. Maybe not just him. You’ll say that you don’t know anything. I’ve disappeared without warning.”

“They won’t believe it.”

“That’s true. I feel terrible that you all will pay for my actions, but that can’t stop me. This will be your share in the struggle.”

I nodded. The thought that I would have my own modest contribution consoled me to some extent. And at the same time, the future stood ever more frightening before me – interrogations, maybe a camp, torture, without my home, my friends, my books. A future without Leon, it occurred to me, and alongside the pain, shame cut through me as well –

I was probably seeing my brother for the last time, and I was worrying about my own petty happiness.

“And remember, sis, this will end.” Aron stepped toward me, and I was grateful to him that he interrupted my thoughts. “The more decisively we act, the sooner the end will come. Difficult times lie ahead of us, but think about the day when I’ll come back. Just imagine how we’ll celebrate together.”

I was still clutching his identification card and I brought it to my eyes: Aron Mois Nisim. The name sounded both close to me – my brother I’d played ball with, and like a stranger’s – a man with a revolver. I looked at his photo and saw not the young man who’d grown up before his time, talking about a struggle, but a skinny boy gazing absentmindedly off to the side of the camera lens, staring into a future in which he was not shooting, but sketching buildings, erecting cities.

“Fine,” I said and cleared my throat. My voice was betraying me, my emotions threatened to burst out, and he was the last person in front of whom I could allow that to happen. “I’ll do it.”

I stuck the card in my pocket and headed for the door.

“I’ll miss you, sis.”

I turned, took a stiff step toward him, and started to reply, but no sound came out. He smiled, opened his arms, and I sank into his embrace.

The play ended and the packed synagogue burst into applause. We, the actors, gathered in the center, bowed dozens of times, but the clapping did not subside. I met my father’s gaze, and he smiled and nodded at me. This filled me with joy, but something remained incomplete: mama. I knew she wasn’t there, but I searched for her in the audience anyway. While I was acting, while Tzeitel was leaving the place of her birth and her home created with love, I was gripped by panic – I had no time! I had not been granted the luxury to grow up with my beloved, for us to swear our love to each other, to fight for it, to create a family and build a nest before our happiness was swept away. I was barely sixteen, we Jews were the enemy of our homeland, my brother had become a partisan, and my father had been interrogated twice in nine days. He would come home and collapse into bed – I was afraid he might die; mama cried, and everything might fall apart. Everything I loved could be destroyed at any moment. When Leon had kissed me the previous evening, I told myself that it might be for the last time. I might be seeing him for the last time. This might be our last performance, I told myself, walking out onto the stage. I had no time to live out my life, I had no time to

taste love. And even I – a despicable little Jewess in wartime, with an outlawed brother – was entitled to some happiness. And this evening, papa had accepted that.