

I

New York City, 12 January 2009

After a blizzard, snow glistened under a brilliantly blue sky. New York was magical in the first snow, muted and utterly transformed. Despite the snow, or rather because of it, Mika insisted on walking the few blocks from the subway to the museum. *Snow takes the edge off everything. Like a disappearing act.*

Even after a sleepless night and with pain nagging his left knee the old man hummed: the fresh snow held promise and Sunday with his grandson brought a welcome change to his insular existence. Daniel had arrived early to make the most of the short winter's day and after an ample breakfast Mika had suggested they mingle with the dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum. So wrapped in thick scarves and hats to shield them from the cutting wind, they took the subway exit on 72nd Street and headed north towards Central Park.

Daniel was tall for his thirteen years, lanky and agile with delicate features that radiated curiosity and a pinch of cheekiness. Mika had always been fond of his grandson's unashamed laughter and his black unruly curls. Like Hannah. So like Ruth. Every so often the pair broke into a foolish little dance, kicking the powdery snow into

caster-sugar clouds, Daniel with his shoes, Mika swinging his stick. They giggled with delight.

It happened as they walked down 72nd Street towards Columbus. They passed a small theatre – from the outside not much more than a large, shabby red door with a printed sign. Mika noticed out of the corner of his eye a colourful poster, proclaiming in bold letters: *'The Puppet Boy of Warsaw – a Puppet Play'*.

Mika slowed down but didn't stop, despite the cold sweat gathering on his forehead and between his shoulder blades.

The poster's words were printed over a picture of an old black coat lying spread out as if it were about to dance or fly away, a Star of David armband stitched on to the right sleeve. A blue star, he noticed, a Polish one, not yellow like the ones the Jews were forced to wear in other places. And there were puppets, lots of different puppets, sticking their brightly coloured heads out of the coat's many pockets: a crocodile, a fool, a princess, a monkey.

Mika's heart pounded, quick, deep beats like those of a crazy drum. He reached inside his coat, first the left, then the right pocket, fumbling, searching for something. Nothing there but an old crumpled handkerchief, a pencil stub, another pair of gloves. Suddenly vertigo and a strong wave of nausea washed over him and with it a sense of helplessness and rage he feared would devour him like a lion gorging on his insides. His chest tightened and he gasped for air. As he clasped Daniel's arm, his voice sounded thin and strained.

'Danny, please, let's go home. I need to show you something.'

'What is it? Are you OK?'

'Yes, I just need to go back. I'm sorry, Danny.' Mika swayed, clutching his stick, but the images were already flooding in: a small figure, stumbling over an endless

field of smouldering rubble; a huge black shape above him flapping like a massive crow; a coat, inhabited by a screaming troupe of puppets, chasing after him, trying to catch him once and for all.

As he leaned against the wall the images began to fade but his knees buckled and he felt himself sliding to the ground, a deep ringing in his ears and then blackness.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but then he felt Danny's hand, patting his cheek.

'Wake up, Grandpa.'

A figure from across the street called out. He couldn't hear what the man was saying. *He shouldn't be on the sidewalk if he's a Jew like me. Hasn't he heard? It's forbidden to walk on the sidewalk. Or maybe he's German?*

The stranger crossed the road.

'Here, Pops, take a swig, that might help.' Danny pressed a small silver flask to his mouth. It stuck to his lips.

'Everything OK?' The man from across the road bent over him, friendly, concerned, his forehead all furrows. He wasn't wearing a uniform after all, but a woolly hat and scarf.

Still, never trust a stranger's smile. Must get up. Can't die here.

Danny held the flask to his lips again. Mika took a large swig then coughed.

'You want to kill me? What's that?'

The man laughed.

'Stroh rum, seventy-five per cent Austrian. Perfect for emergencies. Can even bring back the dead sometimes. You're feeling better?'

'Thanks, yes.' Mika shook himself like a dog coming out of water.

'Can you get up?' Danny was right by his side. 'I could call an ambulance.'

‘No, I’m fine. Really. Just help me up.’

Daniel and the man grabbed one arm each and lifted him up. Mika’s legs felt alien, and somehow far away, as if he were looking through binoculars the wrong way. He stomped his feet a few times on the icy ground.

‘That’s better, thank you. I need to go home.’ His head hurt.

‘You’re sure you can walk, Pops? Get a cab at least?’

Mika smiled. They had not seen a single car since they stepped out of the subway. Carelessness was part of the magic of the first snowfall.

‘No, let’s just go. And thank you, sir, for the rum – that should do the trick!’

Danny handed him his stick. They didn’t speak but Daniel linked his arm through Mika’s, supporting him as they made their way through the snowy cityscape. Mika allowed him, and more than that, he was grateful.

They took the subway and after another short walk they finally reached Mika’s apartment block. The elevator took them to the fifth floor. After opening the door Mika quickly unwrapped his coat and scarf and became animated.

‘Danny, please go to the wardrobe in the bedroom and bring me that big brown parcel behind the clothes.’

The box had been sitting there for many years. Mika had carefully sealed it up the day before he asked his wife to marry him. He was twenty-eight then and had only opened it once since then, last October, when he had added one last item.

Daniel reached far into the wardrobe and pulled out the package. For a moment he swayed under its weight.

‘Have you got bricks in there?’

‘No, just bring it over here.’ Mika’s hands trembled as Daniel carefully placed the box in front of him. His fingers slid over the crumpled brown paper, tenderly

exploring every side. Then, with a sudden jolt, he sliced through the cord with a sharp kitchen knife. No need to carefully untie the parcel now – he would never do it up again. He grabbed the box and slowly lifted the lid. The smell was overwhelming, sharp and pungent.

‘What is it, Grandpa?’

‘I want to tell you about what happened in the ghetto. I want to tell you before I die. I want to tell the truth – to you and to my own heart, to your mother and maybe the world.’ With both hands he pulled out a huge coat. Heavy and black. It reminded him of the large black dog he had found the previous week, lying dead at the entrance to Madison Park as if struck down by lightning. But his old coat had life in it still.

He lifted it out and slipped his arms into its dark sleeves. Now, as when he was a boy, it looked too big, and yet at the same time it fitted him like a second skin. And like a shaman’s coat, it was easy for him to conjure up spirits and memories of his past in its embrace. He took Daniel’s hand and drew a deep breath.

‘Did you notice the poster at the little theatre we passed – “*The Puppet Boy of Warsaw*”?’

Daniel shook his head and gazed at his grandfather, whose eyes shimmered with a wild glow.

‘Well, they used to call me “the Puppet Boy” in our neighbourhood in the ghetto, but they could just as well have called me “the Pocket Boy”.’

‘Is that what gave you such a shock?’ Daniel asked.

Mika nodded. ‘Danny, the soldiers never found the secret world inside my coat, never noticed the pockets within the pockets. You see, this coat has its own magic. But let me start at the beginning. Let me tell you exactly how it happened.’

2

Warsaw, 1938

I was twelve when the coat was made. Nathan, our tailor and dear friend, cut it for Grandfather in the first week of March 1938. It was the last year of freedom for Warsaw and for us.

Nathan lived in a small corner shop at the end of Piwna Street in the old quarter, close to our apartment. He was known for his great craftsmanship, and people from all over the city flocked to him. He never tired of his needles and threads, sewing like an industrious spider, as if the threads emerged directly from his hands. Those threads, a huge collection of shades and colours he kept neatly stacked on a shelf, held together shirts, trousers, coats and jackets and, as it turned out, could not only alter lengths and sizes, but also change lives.

I remember the shop from the many visits I made with Grandpa before the occupation; the muffled light, the stuffy smell of fabric stored without enough air. Cottons of all qualities and colours, wools and even cashmere, the sad, dusty rubber plants in the window which survived even though nobody ever seemed to water them, and the tinkling of the small bell above the door when we entered. Most of all I remember Nathan's bright green eyes, which

were a surprise in the dullness of his shop, sitting like emerald jewels in his wrinkly face, and his bony fingers and fidgety hands, always moving, never still. Did he sew even in his dreams?

This was where it all began, in this small, dusty tailor's shop. My grandfather being measured, then running his hands over the many different materials that were laid out before him like a banquet, letting his fingertips choose exactly the right fabric. He had been promoted to professor the previous month and the tailored coat was his way of celebrating.

Grandpa called me Mika, short for Mikhael, gift of God. Did the shortening of my name make me a smaller gift? I was skinny and not tall for my twelve years but I was quick on my feet and eager to learn. Books lay scattered all around my room, even nestled under my pillow.

I adored Grandpa more than anyone in the world. He had become my best friend after my father died. I called him Tatus or Daddy, and sometimes Grandpa. We were a different kind of family: I had no siblings to fight or plan mischief with, it was only my mama, the old man and me – a triangle of three generations.

When we returned to Nathan's shop a week later, Grandpa couldn't wait to try on his greatcoat. It was like moving into a new house, an exciting and grander place to live.

'What do you think, Mika?' His face lit up in the broadest smile as he moved from side to side in front of the large mirror. He didn't wait for my answer.

'Well done, Nathan, my brother. What fine work! Ah, what is algebra compared to such skill?'

He clapped the tailor on the shoulder, paid and we were off. As we headed home, taking the long route, Grandfather strutted along the cobbled streets of Warsaw, his hands buried in the coat's big pockets.

In 1938 we still walked freely in the city, a place where Jewish culture thrived. It was a beautiful city, our city. All that would soon come to a brutal end.

A professor of mathematics at the University of Warsaw, Grandfather was a clever and proud man and his students adored him. His round glasses and calm low voice made him seem the very picture of a professor, while his tall physique, angular features and thick, black hair, streaked with a flash of white over his left temple, commanded respect. He loved the clarity of numbers, how everything made sense when one spent enough time and attention on them. 'Numbers always work out,' he used to say. But a few months after our stroll home from the tailor, I would discover a different side to him, far removed from algebra, logic and abstract numbers. And then I would learn that numbers could not save us.

The spectre of war had been hovering over us for a long time. Then, on 1 September 1939, the bombing started. Schools had already been suspended so I stayed home with Mother and Grandpa, curled up in the old armchair in our sitting room, my physics books spread around me. I heard the first explosion from the direction of the city centre: a deep thud, then a noise as though something huge had smashed into a thousand pieces, splinters ripping into stone.

I ran to the window. All hell broke loose: a swarm of Messerschmitts droned like locusts over our beautiful city, dropping bomb after bomb, lighting up the sky in sinister orange and phosphorescent yellow. I stood pointing, gasping, until Mother grabbed my arm and pulled me away. We hardly slept that night. Nor any of the nights to come.

After that first attack, bombings followed day and night, relentlessly crashing down on the city. Some

attacks lasted minutes, others hours. I couldn't help but watch the deadly fireworks, especially at night. Even after we had blacked out the windows with curtains, bed-sheets and newspapers, I still found tiny cracks to peep through. But we were trapped like rabbits, waiting to be slaughtered.

'Come away from the window, you'll get us all killed!'

Mama worried we would draw the planes to us with our spying, while I thought that if I could keep an eye on the planes, the bombs wouldn't fall on us. It was a foolish thought but on many nights Tatus joined me. What else could we do? After days locked in our apartment, our limbs and eyes ached, and we were raw with sleeplessness.

And the hellish noise! I feared our eardrums would burst. Then, when the planes disappeared, the strange emptiness of silence scared us even more. But this was only the beginning. A few days later the 'Stukas' arrived – Germany's fiercest fighter planes, fitted with ear-splitting sirens designed to break our nerve and drive us into submission. I heard them from a long way off before I spotted the first one, circling above us like a sinister bird of prey. Suddenly it dropped out of the sky, nose-diving with breathtaking speed and a high-pitched scream, sliding down in a diabolical crescendo.

'We took one down.' I cupped my hands over my ears and shouted.

'Tatus, come, look!' I was hopping up and down but my elation quickly burst like a soap bubble. A second before impact the plane dropped its bombs. Our sky lit up in flames, followed by thick black clouds of smoke while the plane began to climb again. The bastards had hit us and escaped. This was bad, very bad. If they could pull a stunt like that, what else did they have in store for us? That night I did not return to the window.

Our small family pulled together tight as glue. Mama still managed to cook a soup or a simple stew most days, while Grandpa entertained me with algebra and geometry. Sometimes we spent a few hours with our neighbours, but mostly we just held our breath, peeping from behind our blacked-out windows, listening to the crackle of the radio. There were fewer announcements now, only Chopin's polonaises and waltzes floated through the ether, reminding us of our Polish heritage and pride. Sometimes the music stopped in mid-phrase, interrupted by a broadcast, but they were never heartening.

We were the first to experience Germany's newest tactic, their 'Blitzkrieg', taking us by surprise with intense, overpowering might and forcing Poland to her knees. Our cavalry had fought so bravely, but what were horses and guns against roaring planes, armoured tanks and mortars? People fell like flies in the fierce onslaught, ripped apart by the explosions, buried under the rubble of their own homes, mowed down by machine-gun fire from planes, when all they had done was go out to fetch some water or barter for food.

On 29 September, after a month of bombing which left the city in smouldering ruins and with no more water to extinguish the fires, Warsaw surrendered. Stepping outside, I emerged into a different world. At 46 Pawia Street, where the Chrotowskis had once lived, only an ugly, burnt-out façade remained. The Karsinskis had lost two of their children and my friend Jacob's house was a smoking shell, his father buried under the debris. The old Rosenzweig couple next door had survived but Steynberg's bakery opposite Nathan's shop had burnt to the ground. There would be no more of Steynberg's fluffy white bread. The cobbled streets were littered with rubble and mangled belongings. And the horses. Their bloated

carcasses lay everywhere, black clouds of flies lifting as we passed.

That evening we saw a long line of our brave, wretched soldiers being marched out of town. To see them trudge like beaten dogs, barely held together by their dirty, ripped uniforms, made me cringe. What would happen to them? To us?

The next day the German Wehrmacht moved in. And I tell you, they did not do so quietly. Even their Führer, Hitler himself, arrived to inspect his troops and his new, conquered city. The tanks that had so brutally overrun our country now rolled into our city, their treads clattering over our old cobbled streets. And the marching of their troops, endless squares of helmeted soldiers, goose-stepping rigidly as if one body. They reached the Führer's tribune and all heads turned sharply as they passed the man with the moustache, pounding the ground even harder with their black leather boots. The whole city trembled from their force.

The flags went up next, as if the prevalence of the hooked cross should remind us of this new 'Herrenrasse', the blonde, blue-eyed master race that would stamp on everything they deemed low and unworthy. It wouldn't be long before they began to squash us like vermin, like insects, like dirt.

Soon the first directives appeared. Then they continued to emerge, week after week, month after month, never all at once, but drip-fed to us, erasing one piece after another of our freedom, our dignity. First they banished entertainment: from one day to the next those of Jewish blood were forbidden to enter local parks, cafés or museums. Our Krasinski Park was out of bounds, outings to the zoo and Lazienki Park were not allowed any more. Benches and trams were suspended and '*nicht für Juden*' – not for Jews – signs sprang up everywhere.

One day as I walked home from school along Freta Street, a German soldier appeared around the corner.

‘Mach daß Du wegstommst. Runter hier,’ he shouted. Before I could even try to decipher what he had barked, he grabbed my shirt and threw me into the street as if I were an old sack. I fell to the ground and could feel blood trickling down my knees. My heart hung in shreds by the time I reached home. That night, Grandfather read the newest directives to me: Jews are forbidden to use public trams, visit restaurants in non-Jewish districts and must not walk on pavements but share the street with cars and horses.

In May, Tatus lost his job at the university. Out of the blue one day they told him to pack his things, and said that his presence was no longer welcome. It wouldn't be long before I was hit too.

It happened during a chemistry lesson. Siemaski, our teacher, had just pointed to the element beryllium on the periodic table, when there were three loud knocks, the classroom door opened and our headteacher Gorski stood there looking all flustered, squeezed between two German soldiers. The soldier on the left was carrying a list and he pushed it into Gorski's hands. 'Read.'

'Abram Tober, Jacob Kaplan and Mika Hernsteyn,' Gorski's voice trembled, 'pack your books, you are dismissed. Go home.'

For a moment I couldn't move.

‘Schnell, macht schon,’ the German shouted. I got up and left the classroom, not looking at anyone. I never saw Abram and Jacob again, nor my friends Bolek and Henryk, who stayed behind.

When I got home, I threw myself into Grandpa's arms.

‘Tatus, they kicked me out, just like that. It's not fair.' Grandpa hugged me and Mama joined in.

‘I know. It’s in the papers today: “Jewish children are to be withdrawn from public schools immediately.” I’m so sorry, Mika.’

I slumped into a chair.

I considered myself to be both a Jew and a Pole, and Polish figures such as Chopin, the great composer, Copernicus and Madame Curie were heroes to me. Those daring scientists and artists had opened new frontiers, pushed into new territories, and I wanted to see myself following in their footsteps. Sitting in our old armchair, frozen with disbelief, I remembered when Grandpa had taken me to Madame Curie’s house in the old town, and although we had not entered the Holy Cross church, it filled me with pride that Chopin’s heart lay buried in our beautiful city. Having to leave school was a terrible blow. I was an excellent pupil, I loved school. Bolek and Henryk didn’t care about school half as much as I did, but they were allowed to stay. Why? We had spent many afternoons playing games in the streets, Bolek even shared the same birthday with me.

Grandfather tried to comfort me and we spent long days together bent over his old books as he shared his love of mathematics with me. I soaked up his gentle voice, his knowledge and kindness. And algebra was indeed a soothing activity. Yet part of me couldn’t accept his attitude of surrender – why did he not fight? He had been at the university for decades and was respected by all. So where were his colleagues now? Why was no one willing to stand up for him?

‘I am old, Mika, you mustn’t worry about me. But you, my boy, you still need to learn and your mother needs you,’ he said, shaking his head. He had no answers and could only lay his hand on my shoulder, light as a bird.

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Weeks passed after we received those directives that lay like a noose around our necks. We held our breath. But just as we began to absorb the shock of our limited world, more orders followed: the Germans wanted us clearly marked and labelled. All Jews had to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David, not less than six centimetres across, on our right sleeve. It had to be sewn on, clearly visible, and of course we had to produce the armbands ourselves. From now on it would always be like that: the Germans created laws, then forced us to make our own ropes to be hanged with. Sure enough, within days sellers waved the hateful armbands from every street corner.

Soon after that we had to register for 'Kennkarten', identity cards, stamped with a large J. J for JEW. How a single letter could change everything. We needed those cards to get our ration books, but our rations were meagre, a tiny fraction of those of the non-Jewish population. Two loaves for the German, one loaf for the Pole, a slice for the Jew. Mother's soups grew more watery by the day. We could not get milk or eggs and never any meat. Clearly the German master plan was to starve us, kilogram by kilogram.

To escape the biting hunger, many tried to get hold of Aryan Kennkarten, but if caught they would be dragged to the Pawiak prison. The rumours of torture and murder surrounding this monstrous fortress gave me such nightmares I'd wake up covered in sweat.

Just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, in October 1940 they gave us two weeks' notice to leave our flats, and most of our belongings, and move into a tiny part of the city that the Germans called the *Jüdische Wohnbezirk*, the Jewish Residential District. The word 'ghetto' was taboo, but whispers ran like wildfire through our neighbourhood and we knew it was nothing more than a huge prison.

Imagine our panic and despair. You could smell fear everywhere, creeping like fog into our homes, hanging thick and sticky over us like a thunderstorm about to break. How could we all fit into this tiny area? There were nearly four hundred thousand of us – an ocean of people trying to fit into a pond, surrounded by a ten-foot-high wall, topped by barbed wire and broken glass.

On 31 October the Germans herded us into this small segment of the Warsaw map, its northernmost corner, bordered to the west by Okopowa Street and our old Jewish cemetery. It had always been a densely populated part of the city, and although many of the houses were proud three-storey buildings adorned with iron balconies, most of the streets were narrow and dark. The Germans had forced all non-Jews to leave the area to make space for us, and as we moved into the ghetto we were greeted by an eerie quietness.

Mama took a long time to sort out what to bring with us. I can still see her in our old flat, picking up this candleholder or that book, forced to choose between a pot and a picture frame. In the end she chose the most precious and the most practical things: a photo album, some books, the silver candleholders that had been a wedding present, two pots, clothes and bedding. She bundled them together and then we joined the march. Our little unit, our tiny family: Mama, Tatus and me.

We marched in silence, carrying our remaining possessions in battered suitcases and makeshift rucksacks on our back. People pulled carts or pushed prams filled with boxes, duvets, cushions and pots, some balancing their precious things on their heads. The streets were lined with Christian Poles, watching our exodus with curiosity or pity, and some with that particular grin the Germans call *Schadenfreude*: joy at the expense of others, less fortunate souls like ourselves. We Jews had so long been made

into scapegoats, and the anti-Jewish propaganda with ugly bright posters that compared us to typhoid-bearing lice did the rest.

Most in our sad march kept their heads down. But why? I wanted to face those onlookers squarely even if my look of defiance and hatred was the only thing I could shoot at those who stood ready to take our flats and our belongings. I kept a lookout for Bolek and Henryk. They had not come to our apartment since I'd been expelled from school and now I couldn't see them anywhere. How could they turn against me, believe we were second-class citizens? Cowards. I balled my fists, but the memory of Bolek with his missing front tooth and crooked smile stabbed at my heart.

As we entered the ghetto from the eastern side at Nalewski Street I took a last look back. I was being forced not only to leave behind my friends and my school, but also memories of *chlopek*, hopscotch, *zoska* and the many other games we played, our picnics in Krasinski Park, outings to the lakes with Mama and Tatus, and our lovely apartment. As I entered the ghetto through the gate, I was stripped of my childhood and all I had held dear.

And yet, in a twisted way, we turned out to be much luckier than many. A former colleague of my grandfather was a member of the *Judenrat*, the Jewish Council, and he had found us an apartment that was halfway decent: a little flat on the first floor in Gęsia Street, the street of the goose. Number 19 – I tried to take it as a good sign as 19 May was my birthday.

While we settled into a flat with two bedrooms, many big families had only one room, or worse still, had to remain on the streets until a tiny space could be found for them. Sometimes there were nine people to a single room. We knew we were lucky, but shouldn't a big family have our space?

By 16 November the Germans had completed the wall and sealed the ghetto.

I was fourteen years old.

That's when the coat changed. Grandfather, who was not only an intelligent but also a very practical man, decided that if he were ever to be taken somewhere else – because to flee Warsaw was now out of the question – he would need his most precious belongings close to him. Pockets were a great solution: small, large, tiny, hidden in the depths of his coat. The first was a small pocket on the left side, level with his heart. A slit more than a visible pocket, but a pocket nevertheless – for his gold watch, the only thing he had left of his father's. Over time he added more and more pockets: a very deep one on the inside, over his liver, for photographs: my father as a boy and the ones of him proudly holding his baby, me, my mother's face glowing with the broadest smile. Pictures I asked to see again and again.

I missed my father badly, especially in those dark, biting winter nights during that first ghetto year. A toddler, only three years old, I didn't remember my father's death. Mama said I played with my toys while he was dying in the next room from pneumonia, falsely diagnosed.

'The doctor thought your father had a cold and a bladder infection,' she once told me when I asked her many years ago. 'He died within a few days, burnt up like cinders.'

I know she never forgave the doctor, nor herself.

'He would have lived if we'd taken him to the hospital. After he died you stopped talking and clung to your battered red toy train day and night,' she said. The train had been his last gift to me.

By now memories of my father had faded and all that remained were traces of smells and sound: a sharp-smelling soap, sweat, tobacco and what I later recognised

as a whiff of alcohol mixed with a deep, gentle voice that quieted me to sleep, 'my good boy, sleep now', a faint memory hidden in my body that I tried to visit as often as I could. I longed for my father's presence, the safety of those embracing smells. By the time I inherited the coat, nothing felt safe any more.

Grandfather added pocket after pocket to his grand coat and one day he thought of creating tiny pockets within the pockets. Then, even if one pocket was searched, they wouldn't find those extra layers. Slowly his coat became a huge labyrinth: this pocket connected to that, but not this one; here was a dead end and this one led from left to right.

While people risked their lives for false passports or dug tunnels between the ghetto and other parts of the city, Grandfather found increasingly clever ways to put more pockets in his coat, until only he knew his way around. He selected his favourite books and added them to the seams. An extra pair of underwear tucked underneath the right side. A second pair of glasses, cufflinks and handkerchiefs on the left.

He wore his coat with pride, and as time passed and the situation grew worse around us, when the weight dropped off us because of our meagre diet, I sometimes thought the coat was the only thing that still held him together.

He spent more and more time in his little workshop, which he kept private from Mother and me. It was really only the apartment's walk-in larder and not much bigger than a large cupboard, but he called it his 'refuge'. I asked him many times what he was up to in there, but he simply smiled, and said nothing.

The coat and Grandfather were inseparable, a hand and a glove. Then in July 1941, two days before his seventy-third birthday, everything changed.

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When I arrived on the street outside our house he was still alive. A neighbour had run up the stairs to fetch us, breathless and pale, her voice full of panic.

‘They shot him, come, quick, quick!’ Fear grabbed me like a steel vice. I remember a pause, a lingering nothingness in which I couldn’t move. The neighbour could hardly get the words out, her chest heaving.

‘He couldn’t keep his mouth shut, it was that girl again. He couldn’t take it, come quick.’

As gentle and private as he was, Grandfather couldn’t remain quiet in the face of all the brutality surrounding us: people being kicked and spat at, hit, taunted, or worse – shot like dogs on the spot, as if it were a game. He refused to get used to the occupiers, to the daily unpredictable violence. That morning soldiers had again tormented the young woman in the house opposite ours. They had dragged her outside, held her at gunpoint and told her to strip. Grandfather was walking up to her, opening his coat, ready to wrap it around her to protect her, when they shot him. Just like that, at close range. My Tatus, the kindest man I knew.

The girl was gone by the time I arrived. Only later did I hear that she had screamed, scrambled for her clothes and then ran off. When I reached Grandfather and bent down his eyes opened slightly.

‘Take care of the coat, Mika, my boy . . .’ Barely a whisper. His eyelids sagged and his head fell sideways into my lap.

‘Take him away,’ one of the soldiers barked. He took another look at Grandfather and hesitated.

‘Wait, that’s a good coat, get that man out of his coat. Give it to me, boy.’

Then Mother moved. She had stood next to me, frozen like Lot’s wife, a pillar of salt, holding my hand tightly. Suddenly she let go and started to wail and scream,

throwing her hands up in the air and pounding them on her chest again and again. And as she did so, she inched away from Grandfather towards the other houses.

'Halt's Maul. Shut up, woman. *Quiet,*' the soldier shouted. She knocked at the first door.

'Stop that, you whore, or we'll shoot you!' She did not turn.

In the confusion and with help from the neighbours we eased Grandfather out of his coat. More people gathered. A group of men picked Tatus up and carried him towards the house, and then through the crowd I saw Nathan. I had no idea where he had appeared from, but the old tailor's bony hands quickly helped take the coat and put it on me. I felt stiff and lifeless, like one of Nathan's wooden dummies as I let him drape the coat around me.

It was the first time I had put on that coat. I had asked Grandfather before, but he had refused, saying, 'It brings bad luck, Mika, it is not your time yet.'

The coat's weight was incredible; I could hardly breathe with the weight of my grandfather's possessions around me, the weight of his life. But I needed to hurry, to run – to honour his last wish. The coat engulfed me like a warm, heavy being, and as if the coat had given me a surge of energy, I stumbled out of the soldier's sight and ran upstairs to our small apartment.

I collapsed among our brave neighbours, who risked everything by sheltering me. I was terrified for Mama and for a long time sat frozen and quiet in the kitchen, listening for shouts and heavy boots pounding up the stairs, for the dreaded gunshots, but there was only silence.

Mother came home much later, white as a sheet, dishevelled, supported by Anna, our neighbour. I ran up to her and hugged her fiercely, but her face didn't change. She stared at me from behind an empty, expressionless mask, gently pushing me away. She did not speak, but sat

at the kitchen table for the rest of the afternoon, gazing at her trembling hands as if she wondered to whom they belonged. Anna sat with her and encouraged her to drink some tea; hot water with just a few tea leaves, already brewed for a second time. I had seen Mother out there in the street, heard the soldiers call her names, but to me she was a heroine.

Only later would I understand the nature of shame, the terrible things it can do to you. I left Mother sitting at the table and buried my fierce love for her and my grandfather deep inside the coat. I spread it out on the bed and lay down on top, searching for my grandfather's smell, for any trace of his life. But all I could feel were my tears and the rough wool against my cheeks.

That night I felt like a child and, at the same time, an old man.

We couldn't give Grandfather a funeral as we would have in the past, but I suppose we were lucky as Grandfather still got a small grave. Despite the fear that grabbed us when we gathered in public in the Jewish cemetery, quite a few people turned up to bid him farewell. I carried the simple coffin with Nathan the tailor, a neighbour and two of Grandfather's former colleagues from the university who had also been sent to the ghetto. The sun burnt down on us on that July day but I insisted on wearing Grandfather's coat and sweat ran down my neck as we carried the coffin to the old cemetery on Okopowa Street. The men from Hevra Kadisha, the burial society, had wrapped Grandfather in a white shroud and he was buried with his old prayer shawl.

It all happened so quickly – forty-eight hours is so little time to say goodbye. As the rabbi said prayers I stood stock still like the knotted trees in the cemetery, looking at the open grave as if through a veil or a sheet of smoky glass. A few people threw a shovelful of earth

on my dearest Tatus's coffin, but when it was my turn it broke me. Mama put her arms around me but I trembled and sobbed, inconsolable.

Months later no proper graves remained: instead the dead were left outside at night on the streets and collected each day, carried away on overflowing carts then thrown into a deep hole. There they would lie, nameless, in a mass grave, tangled up with everyone who had died on that same day.