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Chapter Fourteen – To the Cemetery

Dawn slashed redly across the eastern sky. Thursday morning had arrived for the residents of the shtetl.

Down in the Horse Market, Moshe Sonenson’s plan to rescue Zipporah and Shaul played itself out. He had asked Jaska and Zoszka Aliszkewicz to go there and make an 11th-hour effort to persuade Zipporah to leave. She was ready to at last, and begged her mother Alte Katz, as well now as her sister Shoshana, to go with her. But the old woman still believed the Germans were a civilized people, despite all evidence to the contrary. And her sister would not go unless their mother did.

But this time Zipporah was moved more by her desire to protect her baby son and to be reunited with her husband and other children. So she donned a kerchief the Aliszkewiczes brought, to look like a peasant Pole; and tried to slip through the crowd at the entrance to the Market. But a Lithuanian shaulisti was suspicious of her. To buy his silence, Zipporah had to part with the beautiful embroidered sheepskin jacket she wore. Then she climbed aboard the Aliszkewicz carriage with Shaul.

But as they rode away, a local Pole recognized Mrs. Sonenson beneath her kerchief and informed the Lithuanian police. Jaska Aliszkewicz realized they were being followed minutes later. Stopping alongside a field, he found a haystack where Zipporah and the baby could hide. It was well that he did so; for their pursuers caught up with them, searched the carriage thoroughly, hidden in a stack far out in the field. So the Lithuanian policeman and the Pole were disappointed and returned to the Horse Market, while the Aliszkewiczes rode away. But later that evening, Jaska retraced his passage back to find Zipporah with baby Shaul sleeping in her arms.

Their next stop was the village of Radun, where Moshe had arranged for them to be sheltered by the Rogowski family. But when the carriage arrived, they discovered that Moshe and the children had already departed for Vasilishok.

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But the other Jews in the Horse Market were not so fortunate.

For now, German and Lithuanian soldiers surrounded the market and called the men outside by the hundreds. They ordered them to march up the Vilna Road to Juryzdyki, and under their guns the men had no choice but to comply. Meanwhile, the Lithuanian officer Ostraukas stood by the entrance and loudly declaimed that the Jews of Eishyshok were being moved ‘for their own safety’ to the other town; on the outskirts of which the rough outline of a ghetto was even now being constructed. The men were called upon to finish this task.

But after the last group of men had been taken out, in the course of a few hours, horse-drawn carriages were brought, ‘for their comfort,' to take the women and children away. They were quickly emptied out of the Horse Market and their own shtetl, catching up to the marching men who were directed west toward the Christian Cemetery of Juryzdyki. They heard the sound of the bulldozer still operating there as they approached.

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As for the Sonenson family, they would eventually reunite, but with more tragedy. For later, as they hid from the Germans in the Radun ghetto, along with other Jews including an old man named Shmaye-Mendel, baby Shaul began crying and would not stop. So the old man covered him with a coat and smothered him to silence him. After this, Zipporah went mad. As the Germans liquidated the ghetto, Moshe got his family out once more and they returned to Eishyshok; thinking that, by now, it might be safe to hide there, since the Jews has presumably ‘all been killed.'

But it was not safe. Because by this time the shtetl was overrun by the Armia Krajowa or AK, the underground army of the Polish government-in-exile in London; the so-called “White Poles” who murdered both Jews and Poles who aided Jews alike.

Zipporah had become pregnant again and had another baby boy while, in hiding, they named Hayyim. In a long house on the southwest side of the market square, the AK found Zipporah and Hayyim coming out from a closet, one in which Moshe still hid with Yitzhak and Yaffa. Although the AK members were shtetl residents well-known to Zipporah, including the pharmacist’s son and some former Sonenson employees, they showed her and her baby no mercy. Baby Hayyim was killed first in his mother’s arms, and Zipporah was cut down by a hail of bullets.

Only Moshe Sonenson and his two remaining children, Yitzhak and Yaffa, survived the war.

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At the cemetery, kneeling on the ground behind some pine trees, Dinah was trembling as Nathan and Avigdor held her arms. They stared at the big, angry-looking yellow and silver machine that had torn open the earth and scooped it into piles dropped from its hungry steel maw. They had never seen anything so amazing or scary.

“See, they have dug one massive grave for the Jews!” whispered Avi to the others. He had to whisper; for there were dozens of soldiers observing the pit’s construction from the cemetery and the road. And now that the ‘dozer had completed its excavation, the silence began to be broken by the sound of marching feet; a rumble in the ground becoming increasingly strong. The children also heard the sounds of German voices, barking orders or responding to them, as the sky grew brighter and the rising sun dissipated the rain clouds.

Very soon, Nathan nudged the others to peer up the road to the cemetery. Now they could see the glint of light on metal as soldiers in gray uniforms turned a bend and led what was left of the male population of Jews from Eishyshok down toward them.

“Oh, the poor men!” Dinah whispered with tears in her eyes.

“And the poor women. Look!” Nathan pointed to a spot where they could observe the first carriages heading in their direction as well.

Avigdor clenched his fists. “I know we can’t do anything about this. About their deaths. But God! If only He would give me one of the German weapons, how I would bring His wrath down on them!”

It was in the fields west of the cemetery that the enormous pit had been dug, and it was to the edges of this hole that the men were led and arranged in rows. German officers, proficient in Yiddish, ordered the men to completely disrobe and cast their clothing into the pit, where it would afterwards be burnt. They were promised that new, clean, disease-free clothes were on their way there by truck,

When the women arrived they were shocked and embarrassed to see the naked and nearly-nude men standing there, too dispirited to cover their loins. And to add to their dismay, the women and children were now forced at gunpoint to strip and cast their clothes away as well. When an elderly woman refused, a guard struck her on the head with his rifle butt. She fell hard and was dazed, but a younger woman standing beside her, already standing proudly without clothes to hide her own muscular body, helped her stand and peeled her clothes off. Immediately the older women’s hands moved to partly cover her wrinkled breasts and groin.

And then, all the Jews formerly from Eishyshok were massed and milling around their open communal grave. Someone began the Vidduy prayer and soon everybody joined in; even the children hiding in the trees.

They watched, appalled, as some of the younger and prettier girls and women were dragged off into the bushes and repeatedly raped by the soldiers. One man flung a poor girl to the ground right at the feet of Avigdor and the Rosens. As they gaped and gasped, the soldier came and unzipped his fly, and then, noticing the three onlookers, shouted in German and Lithuanian: “Hey! You kids! Get over there with the others by the pit! And throw your clothing in it or I’ll tear it from you and do so!”

This was it, then. For other soldiers with rifles had spotted the youngsters and prodded them away from the drooling soldier and his screaming victim. Avi and Di exchanged a brief kiss they believed to be their last.

Nate and Avi clung fiercely to Di to keep her from also being raped. But it was the arrival of two soldiers, dragging forward the poor Rabbi Szymen Rozowski, and a shout from an officer that truly saved her. For the officer had bound the rabbi’s hands behind him and held him, as he spoke mockingly to him.

“See, Jew priest! Your precious congregation! All of them, and you, about to meet your ‘god!’”

Rozowski’s face was badly bruised. One eye had closed shut from blows, and one ear pulped into cauliflower. Various cuts and bloody scars lay across his features. Yet he was still dressed in his best Sabbath suit and hat.

Tears ran unashamedly down his cheeks as he took in the horrible scene. Suddenly he spied with his one good eye his own wife, Miriam, far away on one side of the grave, naked and red-faced, supported by a couple of other women. He started but could do nothing.

And then his vision shifted and he focused upon the three visitors from an earlier time: Nathan and Dinah Rosen, brother and sister; and their companion Avigdor Vishniver.

They saw him looking their way. All they could do was sadly look back. A soldier shook them roughly and demanded they strip. As another forced the boys at gunpoint, the first soldier himself roughly tore Dinah’s dress and underwear away, laughing at her shy embarrassment, and chortling at the frustration of the boys as they were helpless to prevent him from slowly running his hands over the pretty girl’s body. She was bawling now with eyes closed.

But this was interrupted by the officer holding the rabbi, shouting orders. All the soldiers stepped back from the Jews at a distance of about 25 yards. They levelled their machine guns, rifles, and pistols at their backs, making them face the pit. Their fingers were upon their triggers, just waiting for the order to fire.

“You will witness your fellow Jews be killed, and then we will bury you alive with them!” the officer rasped into the rabbi’s ear. He held in one hand a shovel and said that he personally would do the burying. Then he turned to face his men and started to raise his arm for the signal.

Suddenly, an unexpected commotion broke out. Szymen Rozowski, working himself up with emotion, with unexpected strength burst his bonds and grabbed the shovel right out of the startled officer’s hands. Before the man could move or speak, the rabbi swung his arms up over his head, gripping the shovel tightly – just as he had in Dinah’s vision – and with it, he struck the German officer in the neck, nearly decapitating him; as he shouted: “Jews! Fight to the death!”

Immediately, a number of guns chattered, and the hail of bullets appeared to shred Szymen Rozowski to pieces. Now shots were also fired at the massed Jews, even as they turned and unsuccessfully tried to wrest the weapons from their murderers. Women had their breasts shot off. Both men and women were wounded in their genitals, abdomens, and heads. Many were killed outright, while others fell wounded into the pit, only to be crushed by bodies falling atop them. The three travelers in time saw all this, but still more, Nathan, Avigdor, and Dinah saw Sparks of light, like miniature flames, rising from each fallen body!

Suddenly Dinah slipped free and ran toward where the rabbi had been, crying out to her brother and friend: “Look! Look! The light! Run toward the light!”

Being on the periphery of the crowded victims, the boys ducked and wriggled away from the others and raced toward Dinah. The soldier who had fondled Dinah went after them and was about to shoot when he suddenly dropped his weapon and brought his hands to his eyes, screaming: “Blinde! Ich bin blind! “

Dinah reached the spot where the body of the rabbi should have fallen, but now, sitting there upon the ground, was the most miraculous sight! What seemed to be an enormous, broken piece of eggshell, perfectly white and glowing from within. As bright as it was, the girl found she could look at it without losing her sight. As she stared down into the shell, she felt Nathan’s hand upon hers, and then Avigdor’s. All else – the slaughter of the Jews, the continuous firing by the Nazis – all faded away.

Inside the shell was something like a living, dancing flame. Dinah touched the shell with one hand and reached her other toward the flame. It appeared to jump through the space onto her palm yet did not burn her; in fact it was rather cold. She felt warmth inside her, though, such as she had never before felt; and smiling, turned to look at the two boys who grasped her shoulder and waist.

“Isn’t it beautiful? “She whispered to them.

And then, each one felt their feet lift from the ground, even as the shell fragment did so. “Hold on to each other, tightly! “ Dinah cried, as they moved upwards and simultaneously were drawn within the shell. It accelerated up toward the heavens, accompanying the Sparks from the murdered Eishyskians; while from below all that could be seen (if any were looking up) was a star come down to earth and now returning to the firmament.

But to the three inside the shell, they saw a hole open in the sky above them. No, not a hole; but a tunnel of clear blue radiance, similar to the one Isaac Luria had opened through the synagogue wall and through which they had travelled forward in time. Now the shell, the Kelipah, entered the tunnel and the dancing flame flew out of Dinah’s hand and sped on ahead of them. And then they started to spin, and spin; and spin; until...

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