

PRAISE FOR *LEAVING TOMORROW*

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Israël Magazine

*“Whoever listens to a witness,
becomes a witness,”*

Elie Wiesel

LEAVING TOMORROW

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

A Novel

FRANÇOISE OUZAN

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Leaving Tomorrow is based on a true story. The name of individual characters have been changed, however the events, places, and incidents described within the story are real.

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*In Memory of Hadar Goldin, who fought
bravely, and gave his life for Israel.*

CHAPTER 1

IS IT STILL NIGHT?

Spring 1945. I was twenty-six years old, with a stolen youth, sunken blue eyes, and an unsmiling mouth. All a reflection of my soul. My legs, thin and weak, struggled to keep my body upright; nevertheless, I desperately needed to go home. I felt the urgent need to love, not hate. I feared that if I did not choose love, I would hate all of mankind forever.

A month later, all too impatient to repatriate us, Allied soldiers packed us onto trains bound for Poland. Cattle cars, yet I didn't care. I just needed to get home. Returning home was my only hope of finding a living member of my family. With a bundle of meager possessions on my shoulders, I entered Warsaw alone. Poland looked like a massive traffic jam: horse-drawn carriages, carts, and herds of exhausted displaced people dragging their belongings. Beyond the grayness of the horizon, the sun was gradually growing faint in the sky; a fading Polish sun could only warm skin deep. The mood of uncertainty stifled the afternoon air. None of us knew anything about our families, only rumors muffled by the silence. Such a deafening silence buried my hopes and increased my despair. The long, lonely day was coming to an end.

Suddenly, I recognized the church and the well where I drew water as a child. Then I saw our house, its shutters half-closed, its façade covered with rust-colored ivy. There it was, expecting me, expecting us, as if to shelter our grief and grant us the rest we dreamt of throughout the war, but there was no us, only me.

With trepidation, I walked upon the gravel path toward the backside of our house. Cautiously, I approached the light oak wooden door. Just inside, I saw all the gardening tools carefully hung on nails hammered into the cemented wall. Every day, my father and I, with a hoe in his hand, locked the back door together after our rounds of the garden. Staring at the back door recaptured that sense of security, the feeling of invulnerability reinforced by the knowledge that my

father never let anyone disturb the intimacy of our home, the space of confinement where conflicts broke out more often than not. I tried to prolong this rush of memory, even though I dreaded the destructive direction of my thoughts. I feared what was throbbing within me.

The sudden barking of a neighbor's dog brought me back to reality. Despite the numbness in my limbs, I managed to stand in front of the old oak door. It was as if my mind was disconnected from my body and the hand knocking at the door did not belong to me. During these long minutes, my soul was suspended above my body. The assault on my memory, the power of the place, obliterated all rational thoughts. The hinges of the door started to grate, and a man appeared. He stared at me from head to toe.

"I...I've come back..."

"Have Jews risen from their graves?"

Without waiting for a reply, he slammed the door of our home in my face.

I stood there, still as a statue, summoning forces I didn't know I possessed for what seemed like an eternity. Then I began to run, my heart pressed against my chest.

Under a glowing red sky, the city grew distant. I ran with all my heart along a small path with a fragrant smell of resin until I saw a small inn echoing joyful voices. As I drew near, the innkeeper smiled. I heard myself asking for his help. This compassionate man directed me to a community house south of Warsaw, in the small town of Kielce, where refugees could find a shelter.

It was now the summer of 1946. One evening, there was a knock at my door. Through the peephole, I saw a man in a black jacket with a tattered collar and worn shoes leaning against the wall.

"Avigdor? Thank God!" His appearance was thin, and his cheekbones protruded from his emaciated face. His eager eyes reflected a childish look despite his twenty-two years, and his thin lips exposed healthy teeth, something very unusual in these postwar years. I noticed a large scar on his right cheek.

"What did they do to you?"

"It's nothing. Did your family survive?"

"I wish I knew. Yours?"

"In 1941, my mother and my little brothers were loaded onto a cattle car and sent to the gas chamber. My father died on a death march."

He tried to avoid meeting my eyes.

"Oh, Avigdor, please sit down..."

He whispered, "I grapple every day with a past that refuses to stay where it belongs." Without looking at me, he asked:

"Where were you arrested?"

Now it was my turn to face a past that would not stay put.

"In Paris. I was a student there. It was the summer of 1942...July 17, 1942. French policemen knocked at my door and arrested me. They took me to a transit camp. It was crowded. Thousands of men, women, crying children... I was then deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, a scary killing factory. Toward the end of the war, the Nazis transferred me to Bergen-Belsen. You... How did you...?"

He interrupted me as if to come to my aid.

"I escaped from the Slonim Ghetto in 1941 and hid in the nearby forest. There, I saw hundreds of Jews murdered and dumped into grave pits that the Nazis forced them to dig. I was lucky. I managed to join the Jewish resistance in Vilna and the partisans in the forest of Narocz."

He took a deep breath and stared at me with a look of defeat. We sat next to each other on a low bed, where I found refuge in his warmth.

"You said they were dumped into pits?"

"And a lot worse than that."

"I don't want to know."

"Rebecca, we should leave this building soon for the transit camps of the Allies in Germany. I found out that the American occupation zone is the best place to emigrate quickly."

I could not argue with that. I was grateful for his guidance. Avigdor remained with me in the apartment building on Planty Street. He explained that we needed an American sponsor who would guarantee we would not become a public

charge. As an “orphaned refugee,” I needed the support of my uncle whose address in New York I could not yet find.

Avigdor dreamt of starting a new life in America to make his fortune there. He also explored moving to Canada, where they needed manpower to work the land. The “selection teams” searched for young, strong men in the displaced persons camps. Regardless of his dreams, he decided to stick with me.

“Rebecca, leave the window alone and play with me.” He took out a box of cards. “Can you play Poker?”

“Yes! as a matter of fact, not only can I play, but I can also win!”

“Should I be scared?”

“Only if you don’t like losing,”

“Then show me what you’ve got!”

A cigarette between his lips, he flaunted a premature victory smile. Coils of blue smoke concealed his mischievous eyes while a blinding light streamed into our room. The emotional strength derived from our being together muted our misfortune. High in the sky, the sun serenaded his red hair, giving his face a guileless look that I admired. He was winning the game, but I didn’t care—we were together. All of a sudden, he tightened his grip on his cards. From the street arose an explosion of voices. Avigdor leaped.

Dozens of people gathered in front of the Singer home, one of our neighbors. As the crowd started to swell, soldiers arrived. A woman, pointing toward the house, shouted, “Those Jews have locked up a Christian child in their basement!” Avigdor’s eyes took on a hypnotic trance while his face turned pale. I shivered as if poison was coursing through my veins. Avigdor arose and departed down the stairs, saying, “Quick, use the back door; go to the parish priest; he will hide you. I know him.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be back soon,” he assured me.

But I was not assured. I was terrified. “I want to stay with you!” I shouted.

“It’s too dangerous; go, now! Through the back door!” he shouted without turning around.

Stones pelted the Singer windows. Screams...shots...the front door gave way. Soldiers and police rushed inside while the mob outside shouted, "they drank the blood of Christian children!"

I witnessed the horrific scene, terrified; my forehead riveted to a slit of the closed shutters, where the maid of a neighboring house hid me. The police grabbed the Singer family and adjacent occupants. They threw men, women, and children into the mob. Hundreds of workers from a nearby steel plant, inflamed by the rumor, rushed into the building where so many of my Jewish friends were trapped. I watched as the workers threw my friends through their upper-floor windows to the pavement. Their lifeless bodies were greeted with the hurrah of a delirious crowd armed with iron bars, knives, and rocks. "The army is on our side," they chanted.

And then, they grabbed Avigdor.

Men started striking him with whatever was at their disposal. I watched him fall to the ground as one of the assailants yelled,

"That's one less!"

Another added,

"Down with the murderers of Christ!"

I lost consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a priest standing next to me. Forcing myself to speak, I uttered a single word:

"Avigdor?"

"May God rest his soul," the priest replied. "I'm sorry, but you cannot stay here."

Frightened and alone, I tearfully asked, "Where can I go?"

"I heard Jews are heading back to Germany, Austria, and Italy, to the refugee camps of the Allies.

"I will never go back to a camp," I cried.

"Allied soldiers take care of refugees like you... Jewish organizations will supply what their brothers need. And from there, you'll have a chance to

resettle,” the priest explained.

“Do you think it’s my only way to get to America?”

“I believe it is.”

Eventually, I learned that on the 4th of July, a mob led other Jews to the river. They drowned. Later that night, they butchered forty-two people, all victims of a “blood libel.” They claimed that Jews used the blood of Christian children to bake unleavened bread eaten on Passover.

I learned later that the pogrom started because of a nine-year-old child who ran away from home. His fear of being punished caused him to accuse his Jewish neighbor of hiding the bodies of a dozen children in his cellar, locking him up, and threatening to kill him too.

The bloodbath of the Kielce pogrom became a sign to us all that we had to flee immediately. The remaining survivors contacted Jewish emissaries from Palestine through the underground network of immigration. Anticipating the mass departure of refugees via the Mediterranean, these courageous men followed the liberating armies or joined them, constructing an entire network. For many of the survivors, Palestine was their only hope.

They embarked on a very long journey. Night and day, they made their way to the Italian ports by foot and by train from Lodz to Cracow through Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Austria.

My father never shared the dream of returning to the Jewish homeland of Palestine. He was attracted to New York. The letters his brother wrote to him were imbued with a breath of fresh air from the New World. During the war, I heard that only a handful of exiled Jews reached its shores. However, I repressed these thoughts and followed my father's heart. I still believed in the “generous America” my uncle wrote about. With the hope of obtaining a visa for the United States, I made my way to the Allies refugee camps in Germany.

A coarse linen scarf concealed my shaven head. Finally, my hair could grow. Oh, to be a woman again! But the allied army opposed this metamorphosis. The soldiers, ignorant of the humiliations heaped upon us in the camps, did not see the crushed human beings we had become. Instead, they saw a herd of rebels

opposed to the repatriation of what they called “the DPs.” Two offensive letters pronounced “Dee-Peez”—meaning, Displaced Persons.

“Displaced” was who I was.

We had to accept the obvious; no country was ready to take us. We were far from being the highly valued workers of the “selection teams” from the host countries. No, we were the liberated displaced persons exposed to new horrors and humiliations. Our only recourse was to flee but to where? Like Abraham, we had to go without knowing where. Sometimes, I doubted that such a promised land, such a refuge existed. All I possessed were my memories, Warsaw before the war...the time I spent in Paris...the bitter-sweet reminders of the family, my friendship with Avigdor—yet deep inside, I understood that something had been uprooted forever.

As uncertain as my future was, I dreamed of becoming a journalist. I saw myself writing on behalf of all the displaced persons of the world: those who were denied access to a place, a tiny piece of land where a family takes root. I envisioned writing the stories of the unwanted through the lens of my experience—the need to bury painful memories, the requirement of resilience, never to dwell on one’s past but on a future home, a new place to rebuild one’s life. I heard myself giving voice to the long odyssey of hope that inspired us to forge our destiny. In the backdrop of my dream loomed America. The promised land that provided ‘the tempest tossed’ a haven to start from scratch, far from the smoke and fury of embattled and disgraced Europe.

CHAPTER 2

AN “INFILTREE”

I am not ashamed to admit that in July 1946, the British soldiers called me an “infiltree.” I belonged to the unwanted group of displaced persons. My crime? I refused repatriation to my native Poland—the country that spewed out my family, stole our house, murdered our neighbors, and took from me, my only friend, Avigdor.

There was no respite after the harrowing journey back to German soil. It was just one nightmare after another. The postwar days were truly absurd. On the one hand, they flew by as if on a colossal sled cascading down a snowy hill. On the other hand, I felt as if all the DPs and I were on trial. We were the accused because we were alive, not dead. These were the days following the liberation of the concentration camps.

The allied soldiers punished us as soon as we reached the gathering camp. They reduced our food rations and denied us the status of displaced persons. They made it very clear that our place was in Poland. And to enforce this assumption, the soldiers gladly doubled the rations of those who agreed to return to their homeland.

In late 1945 and in the summer of 1946, more than twenty pogroms took place in Poland. Poles murdered over three hundred Jews. They were either thrown from moving trains, beaten to death, or hanged. The Poles confiscated our homes, fields, and stores, never expecting us to return alive.

After liberation, General Patton ordered the repatriation of men, women, and children to Poland—by force. No matter how terrifying the thought of returning to this death-ridden country was to its displaced persons. And to add insult to injury, in obeying the orders of this great general, soldiers beat the reluctant. The military transformed us into mere cattle. My imagination did not get the best of me. Later, I heard that Patton considered us even less than that. To

him, the Jewish refugees were “inferior to animals”—the world’s vermin. The general hated the odor of homeless humanity.

I was interned in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1942, then transferred to the Majdanek concentration camp, near Lublin a year later. There, Nazi physicians injected us with malaria to observe our reactions. After the experiment, I was transferred back to Birkenau. In early 1945, the Nazis transferred those who had survived to Bergen-Belsen. I was literally transported to hell. A death camp where people had no choice but to die because the Nazis cut off the food supply.

After its liberation on April 15 and our later transport to Warsaw, I never imagined the remote possibility of returning to Germany. Yet, by the end of the following summer, I lived three kilometers from the burnt-out Bergen-Belsen camp.

Allied troops called this transit camp an “assembly camp,” or a “DP camp,” depending on their mood. But the confinement went on and on until some inmates were on the verge of madness. We could no longer tolerate knowing that our former torturers were free and rebuilding their lives. The Allied military confined the refugees like caged animals in transit camps while the Germans lived in better conditions than us, which was more than we could bare). Allied soldiers tried to calm us down with these reassuring words, “This wire fence will protect you from attacks by German civilians.”

It was pointless to complain because nearby, at the camp of Celle, Jewish refugees remained in horse stables. They were told it was due to overcrowding in the centers and poor sanitary conditions. However, our hope was now in relief organizations. We lived out each day hoping that a country would open its gates to us. Every day, apathy and aversion to life were gaining ground, except for those among us who put their hopes in the Jewish homeland of Palestine, which they called in Hebrew Eretz Yisrael. They were in contact with the men of the underground organization Bricha, a large spontaneous and illegal migration initiated by Jewish survivors.

In the DP centers, future kibbutzniks were looking for a piece of land to work, some plants to nurse, and some bushes to trim. Gazing at nature flooded with light helped me to enjoy life again. I would often stare at the nonchalant

flight of the butterflies, fluttering around before they landed on lavender sprigs, from which bumblebees would tirelessly oust them. My soul was invigorated by the myriad of flowers growing all around.

While wandering among the barracks one Friday night, I heard someone calling my name.

“Rebecca!”

A tall man stood before me; his face was emaciated, but his look was gentle. For a second, I lost myself in his eyes. I thought I would never be able to blush again after all these years of forced indecency. He seemed embarrassed that I did not recognize him.

Intently, I stared at him. He had a brown beard, aquiline nose, and red lips. I awkwardly rearranged my scarf.

“Excuse me, but I’m not sure...have we met?” I stammered.

“We met at the library in Warsaw,” he said, giving a faint smile.

“That was ages ago. Before I went to study in Paris, I must have changed,” I added uncomfortably.

“We’ve all changed.”

I blushed awkwardly when he said, “Well, I’ll try not to feel offended, but will you remember me next time?”

I couldn’t suppress a smile and said: “I’ll do my best.”

He spoke to me in Yiddish, the most common language in the camp. I, too, clung to it as to a drifting tree trunk.

CHAPTER 3

JONATHAN

The next day I saw Jonathan in the dining room. He wore short pants and an undershirt highlighting his thin but sturdy shoulders. Seeing me, he smiled and turned back to pile food onto his plate. I sat at an empty table and began to eat awkwardly. Jonathan snuck up on me from behind and said, “Do you remember me this time?”

“You're funny, Jonathan.”

“I'm flattered!” His energy was enchanting, and a big smile spread across my face.

“How can you have so much energy all the time?”

“Because I'm finally leaving this place!”

“To where?”

“To our homeland, Rebecca.”

“Oh...”

“Will you come too?”

“I have other plans”

“Come on. There is just one country we can turn into our home, and it's waiting for us. Don't you want to live where you can feel safe?”

“Well... I have an uncle in the United States....”

“Listen, I want you to come to a meeting tonight, will you?”

I drifted toward the dimples on each of his cheeks as he spoke. They were a sign that he had retained something from his childhood. Perhaps I succumbed to his charisma a bit too quickly, but I was glad I did, and I heard myself say:

“You won.”

That evening I attended the debate he was leading, sitting nonchalantly atop a desk Nazi officers had used to plan their dirty deeds. The refugees were impressed by his lean but forceful figure. He knew how to talk to them. His arms punctuated almost every word. A blue sea loomed before their eyes as he guided those feverish passengers on the twinkling waters from Europe to Palestine. It was then that his charisma and his beauty overwhelmed me. Jonathan's hands, crossed with violet veins, expressed the passion within him. A new Moses, he inspired the wretched souls that we were to rediscover what it meant to be a people and belong to a soil— some two thousand years later.

I often saw Jonathan Herzberg. He did not miss any occasion to give me a cigarette or a piece of chocolate obtained on the black market. But I couldn't share his dream. How could I face a new trial on a raft that might not reach its destination? Jonathan sensed my reluctance. When we were together in the camp library, he would speak reassuringly about clandestine immigration. He believed I was young and strong enough to meet the last of our postwar trials.

As time passed, I despaired of ever getting a visa for America. I still hadn't been able to reach my uncle. The social workers from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, active in our DP camp, required an affidavit of support before I could leave. To keep my hope alive, a young woman from the Joint described life in New York and how I could start over in Washington Heights. She was sure such a supportive Jewish neighborhood would adopt an orphan like me.

I did not want to ask Jonathan for help with my visa application. How could he understand my yearning for America? At night I would dream of him at my side while I slept. He pulled me out of bed in one dream, and we embarked from the Italian coast together, heading for the Promised Land.

That morning, the quietness of dawn calmed me. No nightmare had disturbed my sleep. I felt the softness of the sheets on my skin for the first time. As light filled the room, I awoke to a day unmolested by the terrifying shouts of our guards and capos. How could I stave off the anguish trying to stiffen my body? The recurring thought that I was not entitled to turn a new page in my life haunted me with overpowering memories of my parents and siblings.

Later in the afternoon, Jonathan visited and handed me a book. It was entitled *Der Judenstaat*.

"I want to give you this. It's an inspiring book, and I want you to have it. It's about our need to return to our roots in the Jewish homeland of Palestine and continue the work of the pioneers."

"I'll read it. It sounds interesting."

"It's more than that. It's inspiring!" He had a spark in his eyes. It moved me to see someone so passionate. I wanted to feel this passion as well.

"I'll read it tonight."

"Good."

"By the way... what keeps you busy all day?"

"I work the communal lands in the camp. We call them 'kibbutzim.' They are pioneer training collectives."

"You're working German lands?" I was stunned.

"Yes, it's our way of preparing ourselves for our new challenges. We have to teach our hands to work the soil. And since we have time until we receive our emigration certificates, we train here. You see, the new Jew is a farmer who is close to the soil. You should join us; working the land will help you recover. It helped me."

How could I tell Jonathan—the farmer and future pioneer—that I dreamt of being a journalist in a New York skyscraper?

In the Belsen DP camp, local leaders of different political parties—secular and religious, Zionist, and socialist—were doing their best to give new meaning to those who had lost everything. In those socialist structures, married couples were allotted private barracks. The birth rate was highest among these barracks. Who could have foreseen that these women whose menses ceased during the war would bear children again? The desire to defeat Hitler by bringing new life into the world motivated many to get married. The Ketubah, ceremoniously signed by the more religious, endowed them with an extra measure of respect.

What changed my mind were the baby strollers in the alleys of the kibbutzim in the huge Belsen DP camp. I joined Jonathan in the pioneer training collective

and started tilling the soil. I wouldn't say I liked the job that blistered my hands, but the choice was not an option. I needed to belong.

In the large communal dining room, I gladly participated in the cleaning tasks assigned to me. It broke down the monotony of camp life that otherwise was reduced to a waiting room for emigration. The head of the camp, Menahem Rosensaft, reminded us that hope meant the Jewish homeland of Palestine. And that even after the war's end, most countries did not want refugees. The allied armies still complained that the more they repatriated the Jewish displaced persons, the more the Jews flooded the DP camps in Germany. Postwar pogroms were responsible for that new influx of destitute populations from Eastern Europe. They preferred to lose their homes—or what remained of them—rather than their lives. The emissaries from Palestine helped orphaned children picture the Jewish homeland as a family. I started teaching English in the camp school. While I was teaching, a young child with large, velvety brown eyes and thick dark hair turned to me and asked:

“Do you have parents?”

“I do, but they are not here,” I replied as calmly as I could.

“Where are they?”

“Far away...” I swallowed hard.

“Where?” he pressed on.

I did not want to deceive either him or myself. A buried image from my childhood suddenly surfaced:

“They are in a beautiful place, deep in the sky, where they sleep on clouds...”

“Are my parents in the sky too? When will I see them again? I miss my mom. Do you miss your mom?” I feared he would burst into tears, but he didn't. A short while ago, tears would have condemned him to death—coming from a Jewish child who passed as a Christian.

“I do miss them,” I answered him softly.

“Will mommy come and take me with her?” the boy asked.

I wondered if he saw me as the good fairy, an image I would have loved to give these orphans.

“I think so... one day,” I replied, emotionally drained.

I was relieved when the class ended.

At times, I, too, felt utterly lost like these orphans.

Why had I alone survived? Why were my nights populated by those who perished? Then, I saw the displaced persons camp as a place of constriction. Ten thousand survivors, ten thousand destinies coexisted, walled in by memories. In our narrow space, I hardly registered the presence of my roommates. They were so incapacitated by their thoughts that I screamed to break the silence.

CHAPTER 4

THE STRENGTH TO LIVE

I left the room as often as possible to wander around the settlement city. The Belsen displaced persons camp comprised wide streets, a hospital, professional schools, athletic fields, a theater, small shops, and dining rooms. How many years could we go on living this make-believe life? No longer could I work the German land, even if I belonged to Jonathan's kibbutz. All I sought was genuine liberation: emigration.

What lay outside these communal structures was worse. Prolonged internment in the concentration camps made a return to everyday life impossible. Women compulsively washed their clothes to purge themselves of the homelessness that now defined them. After years without a proper bed, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provided us with a set of white sheets, which some turned into beautifully cut dresses. Regaining dignity was an everyday challenge, especially for women. We lacked underwear in the Nazi camps. Our scarce, tattered clothing smelled of uprooted humanity and chafed our skin. Our shoes, if not too big, passed as too small. After being assigned to work at the quarry, I was handed shoes with heels. In Auschwitz, I lived like Sisyphus, doomed to lift a boulder, again and again, only to have it roll back down the mountain. In the concentration camp, I learned the concepts of absurdity and arbitrariness. Understanding these would serve me well if I ever resumed my philosophy studies in Paris. The Nazi cruelty was carried out by obedient, scrupulous civil servants who knew that we were our worst enemies. They knew that humiliation and shame would kill our souls. They made us look despicable to one another.

To engage my mind, I watched the cogs engage within the vast machinery meant to destroy us. I pretended to be indifferent toward the cruelty surrounding me; the better option was to observe, understand, and defy. It was an insignificant form of resistance, but it kept my brain alive. And, like the sun

when it peaked its head out from behind the clouds, I found myself thankful to the Creator for preserving me—every single day. It was my grandparents who lived in a shtetl near Demblin that instilled within me a reverence for the Master of the universe. Yet, after watching so many being murdered, it was hard to conceptualize my feelings of gratitude for being alive.

It was neither typhus nor dysentery that killed my best friend, Deborah, who dared to look the Nazis and their collaborators in the eye. It was the perverse torture of the Ukrainian guard, a harsh, stout blond woman who beat us arbitrarily. Did she merely carry out the instructions of her S.S. supervisors? In any case, her merciless acts wrecked my friend's soul and body.

CHAPTER 5

FRANK

Jonathan was busy organizing clandestine immigration and seemed not to notice my reluctance to make such a move. Despite my lack of stamina, I needed to appear strong. As a member of one of the youth movements formed by pioneers dreaming of a return to Zion, Jonathan looked like a handsome hero these days. I loved how he casually swept back his hair before talking as if it endowed him with more strength.

I went to the camp hospital to see if I could get medicine for my bronchitis.

After three hours, I asked the nurse where the doctor was.

“He’s delivering babies!” She cried happily. “One after another, thank God.”

“Don’t they go to a maternity ward in Munich?”

“Not anymore... One of the German midwives—a Nazi sympathizer—was caught killing newborn babies by injecting them with poison...” Bitterness and pain were written on her wrinkled face.

“I can’t believe it. When will they stop with this hatred?”

“I pray for that day,” she said, almost mechanically, while heading to another room.

After waiting for ages, I was greeted by a dignified man in a white gown. Was he the Hungarian doctor Jonathan told me about?

With a warm smile, he addressed me in Yiddish.

“What can I do for you?”

“My chest burns when I walk fast,” I said, recalling the sentence rehearsed while waiting for my turn.

“Sit down. Please, lift your blouse.”

As he applied his cold stethoscope to my skin, I observed his impervious forehead, dark eyes, and thick eyelashes. A stifled sensuality quickened his breath. There were rumors in the camp that he had survived Auschwitz as the personal doctor of Nazi officers and that his young pregnant wife had perished in the gas chambers.

“Can you cough?”

“Like that?”

“Yes.”

In his eyes, I tried to discern a verdict.

He headed towards a drawer, rummaged through it, and proffered a small packet of pills like a jewel.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Antibiotics from the black market. Take one tablet every morning and evening, and you should make a complete recovery.”

Removing a small honey biscuit from the pocket of my grey dress, I held it out to him. I knew it was silly, but I wanted him to accept something from me. With a smile, he took the biscuit.

“A social worker from the JDC gave it to me. To make up for the lack of fresh produce.”

I added this detail to delay our parting.

“Is fruit still hard to come by?” he asked, frowning.

“Yes. At least I don’t get any. But I don’t have DP status. I am a refugee, an “infiltrate.” That’s what British soldiers call us to make us feel even more foreign. We mostly subsist on bread and potatoes, but from time to time, we get packages of sardines, cheese, or meat from the JDC. I barter cigarettes for milk and cocoa with the German women who hang around outside the camp.”

“The American president just ordered an increase in your rations.”

“My friend, Jonathan Hertzberg, showed me a directive issued by General Eisenhower...”

“You have reliable contacts, it seems.”

“Well...that document required the DP camp heads not to use German food supplies to conserve food for the winter,” I said, happy to be a source of information.

“You have to understand...What's your name?”

“Rebecca.”

“Rebecca, you must understand that the occupation armies want to ingratiate themselves with German civilians. They will need to tolerate each other for God knows how long...”

“They say the German Frauleins have more sex appeal than we do.”

The doctor smiled.

“That, I can't confirm,” he said.

“How can our former torturers be free while we languish in a transit camp?”

The doctor's forehead bore the marks of self-restraint.

“My friend reported German civilians sneaking into our kitchens here in Belsen. They were immediately sent away by the DP police,” I said, trying to keep the conversation going. “It seems that some are even worse off than us,” I continued.

I immediately regretted my remark.

“Do you think the United Nations will vote in favor of the Jewish homeland of Palestine?”

I was flattered that my opinion mattered to him. “I hope that the moving demonstrations of our homeless people here in Belsen and other DP camps won't be in vain,” I said. “Some think President Truman will support a Jewish state just to keep us out of America,” I added, proud of my knowledge but unsure what to think about it.

“Do you believe these rumors, Rebecca?” With this question, the doctor placed an arm around my shoulder, and I launched into a coughing fit.

Offering me a glass of water, he scooted his chair closer to mine.

“As an orphan, you are entitled to apply for a visa, and having a sponsor makes the process even easier.”

“I have an uncle in America I have never met...in New York, I think.”

“You can apply at the American consulate in Hamburg...if you receive a clean bill of health. Don’t forget to take a tablet every morning and evening with food. Here is your prescription. I hope that by next week the clinic will have your medicine. Rebecca, don’t hesitate to come back earlier if you feel the need.”

I nodded but said nothing, afraid that the emotions our conversation triggered would get the better of me.

CHAPTER 6

WHICH REFUGE?

That night, Jonathan appeared in my dreams as both a savior and a lover who would take me away from the refugee camp and take me to a sandy beach. We would wake up to the rhythmic swishing of waves and swim together.

I went to the children's home in the DP camp early in the morning. The walls of my classroom embraced twenty orphaned teenagers from every country. They had decorated the walls with posters of life in Palestine that lit up their eyes. Using pictures of the Jewish homeland, they learned English.

"What do you see in this picture? Who can tell me?"

"A big tree," answered a thin boy whose body was very frail.

"Good! What sort of tree?" I felt ridiculous asking these naïve questions to kids who had gone through such gruesome experiences.

"A palm tree," answered a teenage girl with a sad and mature expression.

"Good! What else?"

"Many white homes," answered almost half the class in unison.

"Yes," I replied, "those are houses. They are homes too. Can you tell me what a home is?"

"Home is a shelter," replied the same girl with a strong Polish accent.

"Home is where you feel safe," answered a voice at the back of the classroom.

"It's the place you want to go back to," shouted the oldest boy.

Fortunately, the bell rang. I saw a couple of children crying silently. As I approached, they left the classroom.

After lunch, some children returned with bread hidden in their pockets—a habit they had acquired during the war. After my class, they rushed outside to

enjoy the summer air. It was heartwarming to see them splashing in a small swimming pool built in the corner of the camp. Today, I accompanied a group of them to the camp pharmacy for ointments and bandages. However, it was the loving attention that they were looking for.

In our temporary living quarters, many adult displaced persons remained “apathetic”, as British soldiers described them. Their strength had been depleted by years of forced labor and humiliation. Several psychologists and psychiatrists in the camp conducted surveys of their behavior. What purpose did they serve? Could they not see that those who dwelt in the shadows of their wartime experiences lived with the added insult of barbed wire encircling the camp? When I arrived after the Kielce pogrom, Belsen was already sheltering some eleven thousand refugees. Apart from those in the kibbutzim, who formed a quarter of the camp’s population, the remainder of us were grouped by nationality. Our scars set us on edge. I was even aggressive with Jonathan when he assured me we could live peacefully in British Mandate Palestine. And a little later, I erupted into an angry diatribe reproaching him for being too optimistic.

Despite the harsh conditions, Jonathan, together with almost 3,000 members of the various kibbutzim, created a lifestyle that gave meaning to life. They formed football teams, boxing matches, ping-pong tournaments, and other sports activities to keep the youth engaged. It was a marvel. One that lingered when I thought of Jonathan.

CHAPTER 7

THE LIGHTS OF CHANUKAH

My fingers slowly turned the pages as I perused through the poetry of Robert Frost, trying to escape my memories when a kiss on my neck startled me. Jonathan stood behind me, smiling. He glanced down upon the page I was reading and said:

“The road not taken”—interesting! I knew it! You haven’t made up your mind! Why do American social workers donate such books to our library? Haven’t they heard of Herzl?”

We both laughed, and he hugged me. I felt awkward. The formidable rules of modesty I was raised with and a proneness to blush had always kept spontaneity at arm’s length. I tried to sound philosophical to mask my feelings, but my heart was pounding.

“I guess whatever road we take in life, we regret the one not taken,” I said, sounding quite serious.

Jonathan laughed.

“The road I am taking is the only possible one after the Nazi genocide of the Jews. I sound like a professor now. Is that enough to seduce you?”

I would have liked to laugh then.

“Please, Jonathan, let's not talk about clandestine immigration!”

He stroked my hair as if I was a child.

“Kids all over the place are getting excited about Chanukah. And I'm sure you're like them, baby face.”

The quickness of his lips fascinated me; they were like the wings of a butterfly.

“Does that holiday mean something to you? Oh, I forgot, you're against religion, aren't you?”

“Unlike my comrades from *Hashomer Haza'ir*, The Young Guard, I have a spiritual side... but am allergic to religiosity. I know that eight candles are supposed to be lit. That's all.” He grinned.

“A chaplain in the camp spoke to us about Chanukah, and I felt ashamed for being so cut off from my grandparents' roots. They wanted me to stay connected to Jewish tradition, explaining that Judaism was about passing things down. Yet, I didn't understand. Inheriting a taste for gefilte fish, strudel, or matzo ball soup was the closest I could get to their sermons.”

“My taste buds also have a better memory than my brain.”

“Do you want to hear the story?” I asked.

“You're a great storyteller, I know.” He whispered in my ear.

“Our British chaplain told us what happened almost two thousand years ago: When Antiochus, a Greek king, ruled over the people of Israel, he forbade the study of the Torah under penalty of death. Still, children wanted to learn (maybe because it was forbidden), so they did. And when they felt they were in danger, they scrambled to hide their books and bring out their spinning tops to play with.”

“I will never understand this passion for studying sacred texts.”

“I wish I could gain a deeper knowledge of our sacred Torah. I'm almost ready to decipher the four levels of understanding of our Old Testament... if I can find the proper guidance, of course! The Chaplain also said that performing good deeds can eventually help understand the unfathomable.”

“The question is when...”

“I know all this sounds boring and irrelevant to you! But it was comforting to listen to him. He explained that human understanding is limited in this world and that we must believe in the “world to come.” Now, I know you will joke about how to get there! The answer is that you may get there by continuing to be a righteous man who performs good deeds.”

“I'm flattered. But Becky! You studied philosophy at the best university in Paris, and you don't question the existence of God?” Jonathan rolled up his

sleeves, revealing his muscular forearms.

“I was not observant when I was a student in France. But since the age of ten, I’ve sensed that there is a God Almighty. And today, after the miracle of my survival, the Creator is the only one I can address.”

“I envy you. I have no one left to turn to.”

“What about me?” I surprised myself with my reply.

Jonathan hugged me softly, and our words slipped away. Under his hands, the back of my neck, chest, and lower back assumed a feminine shape I had not been aware of. I blushed as he reached for my hips and resumed talking about the chaplain's teachings.

“Our texts, the chaplain told me, say that the most important thing is to love our Creator through men. I mean mankind.”

“Men? You can love men, but one at a time.”

I laughed heartily. He continued:

“Be careful. A serious woman attracts men like a dusty book attracts its readers.”

I could not respond. His blue unbuttoned shirt—the kind favored by the pioneers on the kibbutzim—exposed the strength of his neck. I feared the transparency of my feelings for him.

“I can read everything in your eyes,” my friend Deborah used to say.

“Your friend was right, for sure!”

“I’m sorry, Jonathan, I’m getting a migraine,” I apologized. “Let’s meet in the dining room this evening.”

I needed to distance myself from him now so I could draw closer to him later. And I left abruptly.

The following day, Jonathan was sitting in the kibbutz dining room when I walked. That evening, he invited me to join him with a welcoming gesture.

“You see, my father taught me everything. I owe my passion for creating to him.”

“Creating?”

“Yes. Sewing is creating. My father was not just a Polish tailor. His job was his lifeblood.”

“I understand.”

I felt blessed to be Jonathan's confidant. Over a pleasant clinking of cutlery, he spoke to me as if I was a worthy human being again.

“I understood the importance of a good fabric, the beauty of a simple, perfectly cut piece of cloth.”

“I don't even know what to do with a needle.”

“I learned how to stitch and make jackets in my teens. It saved my life when I worked for the Nazis. I remained among the few who were useful to them. After a group of Jews was gassed, I was given their clothing to make wearable again. Even in the “Kanada” section, where I later worked, sorting the possessions that Jews brought with them, and which the Nazis confiscated, I would sculpt small figurines for the Nazi guards to take home. They wanted to please the children. Their children.”

“So, you did not starve.”

“They would throw us pieces of bread or cheese when satisfied with the job.”

“Oh, cheese... Before falling asleep, I would dream of my grandmothers' cheesecake.”

“You see, the best transmission of a culture is through its food...”

“We shouldn't need to starve to receive it.”

“In their eyes, we weren't human,” Jonathan said sadly.

“I know. They called the children who crawled into the sewers in search of a scrap of food ‘rats.’”

“Getting rid of those rats was considered a good deed. Evil had become Good for them.”

“You're right, Jonathan...unfortunately. By inverting Good and Evil, they believed they were innocent of killing. It reminds me of a philosophy class I once took. The professor explained that the perversion of language was the first stage of annihilating a people.”

"I bet you didn't understand what it meant, then."

His voice softened. I stroked his hand and placed it on the table, studying his large blue veins marked with the memory of harsh labor. He caressed my neck as if to alleviate an untold burden.

"In our block, we always managed to keep a little bread for the sick, but once, I lost control..."

"Don't feel guilty! We are only humans."

"It's hard to live with that memory."

"I could have saved my father if I had helped him with his work. The Gestapo murdered him in his workshop because he refused to leave."

"He would have been proud to see what kind of a leader you've become."

My father firmly believed we had no other choice; even in the early thirties, he wanted to be a pioneer in Palestine, but my mother was afraid to go."

"Were you closer to him or your mother?"

"My father. My mother couldn't hide her preference for my younger brother Nathaniel. They both..."

"Don't say it!" I shouted, clutching his shoulder as a mother would have done. "Some of us still commit suicide."

"Not in the Jewish homeland. We will be too busy drying the swamps and tilling the rocky land."

I wanted him to press himself against me. Instead, I heard myself ask:

"Jonathan, why does the world still hate us?"

"Victims must remain victims. In the world's eyes, victims can't claim sovereignty to their ancestral lands."

He quickly stood up, took his tray, and placed it on a rack. I did the same.

Outside the army barracks, the sun was shining, and the birds were chirping. Jonathan's eyes were wet. I yearned to comfort him, hugging the child I saw before me and placing my hand on his chest under his unbuttoned shirt. At that moment, my lungs lurched, and I broke into a coughing fit.

CHAPTER 8

REKINDLING THE FLAME

Nightfall was approaching. A group of refugee actors rushed through a tent flap for rehearsal in the Theatre as if obeying an instinct. With nearly a thousand seats located in a large square known as the center of the DP camp, the tent bore the emblem of the DP theatre in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English letters. When I first arrived in Belsen (also called Hohme), I was told to look for “Liberty Square,” where the theater had been erected. I attended a play called “The Partisans.” It boosted my morale to see the resistance fighters who had taken to the woods, saving their lives and those of their people while sabotaging Nazi schemes. It was in the summer of 1946 after I had lost Avigdor in the Kielce pogrom.

As I approached, I saw Frank putting up posters for the upcoming performance. I was struck by the French title: “Les Misérables.” Victor Hugo's immense work would indeed be interpreted in light of the tragedy that befell the refugees. Frank did not see me, so I walked by as if oblivious to the Hungarian doctor who had shown me such compassion. In the library, I ran into Chaplain Elie Lipshitz, the British rabbi who tried to restore meaning to our lives. The absence of books and writing paper in the concentration camp was another attempt by the Nazis to deprive us of our inner selves. I made out a familiar figure among the historical works at the other end of the room. I rushed towards Jonathan. The chaplain followed me to greet him.

“Why don’t you join us tonight for the first candle-lighting?” I asked confidently, knowing he could not refuse.

“I see...two against one?”

“Chag Sameach,” said the chaplain, wishing Jonathan a happy holiday.

“I’ll be frank with you. I don’t even know what these candles mean. We should save them in case of a power outage.”

"Where shall I start," the rabbi began. "The founder of Hassidism, Baal Shem Tov, wondered where the Creator had hidden the light."

"I hope there's some suspense," interrupted Jonathan.

"The light was concentrated in the Torah. In our Bible."

"What exactly do you mean by 'light'?"

"You ask the right questions. Are you sure you don't want to study with me?"

"Pretty busy these days," Jonathan joked.

The chaplain changed his tone of voice.

"I will tell you what light is not. It is neither the moon nor the sun nor the stars. The light that appeared at the beginning of the world was spiritual."

"The light that emanates from the righteous in this world?" I inquired.

"Yes, in some ways, Rivka."

I loved how the rabbi called me by my Hebrew name Rivka, linking me to our four-thousand-year-old past. Neither Jonathan nor I knew how to ask the right questions. I thought the first chapter of the Torah, "Bereshit," heralded new beginnings for those who saw religion as a stepladder toward spiritual rehabilitation.

"There's so much to learn," I added naively.

"Just remember that doing a good deed is as important as pursuing knowledge," the chaplain said. "We call it a mitzvah, and each mitzvah is a light that draws us nearer to the final redemption."

"Redemption? Only intellectuals like Rebecca can understand such words," complained Jonathan, showing a growing interest in the conversation.

Drawing an endless white handkerchief from his army pants, the chaplain wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. He was doing his best to present us with the crutch of Judaism at a time when a number of our beliefs had collapsed.

"When we make an effort to study the Torah, the Creator listens to us. Why do you think the Nazis rushed to burn our Torah scrolls, prayer books, prayer shawls, and synagogues? They tried to rob us of our strength—our nourishing water—by taking away our Torah.

The British chaplain smiled softly, raising an eyebrow as if to suggest that my friend had to meditate on his findings.

Without uttering another word, he stood up and left.

CHAPTER 9

SEEING OTHERS

The whole camp knew there would be entertainment after the candle-lighting. Crowds were already running to the “concert barracks.” Posters appeared everywhere as if life was back to normal. The American Joint Distribution Committee had invited a representative of the Yiddish Artist Union in America, Herman Yablokoff, known as “The Clown.” The program featured musical and theatrical creations as well as Yiddish folklore. The famous musician, Solomon Arzhevski, was scheduled to perform on the theater’s out-of-tune piano. All these artists came from America to show us that the Yiddish world was still alive. After we were liberated, there was a silence of unspoken aloneness; many believed no one was left from our communities. It was the hope of these high-profile artists like violinist Yehudi Menuhin and composer Leonard Bernstein to lift the refugees’ spirits. Molly Picon, the famous American actress, was among the first to visit us with her husband to offer “a Yiddish word,” as she put it. As there was not yet any regular commercial transportation across the Atlantic, she appealed to President Truman personally, and thanks to him, she found a makeshift berth on a freighter. Before singing “God bless America,” she told us that the song had been written in 1918 by a Jewish immigrant, Irving Berlin. This gave me goosebumps. America was still the most generous place on earth, even if xenophobes in Congress had only admitted a trickle of refugees during the war. Somehow, America appealed to my imagination as a good-hearted old man, like the legendary “Uncle Sam.” Why did I need these naïve thoughts to recover? We all dreamt of a new home and passports leading us to a better place.

As night fell, a giant menorah with eight branches was erected on a stage in the makeshift synagogue not far from the kibbutzim. Most of us were not religious or had broken with religious observance. But the celebration of that festival reminded us that a small group of Jews dared to defy the idol-worshipping Greeks and their armies. We celebrated the Maccabean victory.

Jonathan was addressing a crowd that had gathered around him.

“Tonight, we aren't sad. Tonight, we celebrate life. We celebrate hope and our restored dignity.”

The crowd applauded, and the British chaplain came towards him and gave him a hardy pat on his back.

Lighting one candle after the other, Chaplain Elie chanted the traditional Chanukah blessings. All eyes were glued to the Menorah and the light that could not be snuffed out. While the children sang along with the chaplain, Jonathan elbowed his way through the crowd toward me.

“I have a Chanukah present for my favorite mystical friend,” he said, hiding his arm behind his back.

How long has it been since I received a present? Jonathan held out a clasped hand for me to open. Peeling open his fingers, I spied a tiny bottle of perfume.

“Perfume is a staple of French culture, right?”

With a nod, I unscrewed the bottle and inhaled its Jasmine essence. The scent gave me the courage to kiss Jonathan's cheek, followed by a barrage of coughs.

“Are you sick?” Jonathan asked.

“It will soon pass.”

Suddenly, what I feared would happen one day happened.

“Rebecca, I have to leave.”

“But I'm not contagious...”

Jonathan smiled and clasped my hand.

“Not because of your cough, silly!”

“Then why?” I suppressed a cough to allow him to take back what he had said, but he only held onto my hand more tightly.

“Clandestine immigration.”

“But...”

“We cannot afford to make any mistakes. If the British catch up with us, they'll put us behind barbed wire in a Cyprus camp— if they don't sink our ship first.”

I was stunned. Jonathan kissed my lips quickly, with the lightness of a butterfly, and left.

The next day, Frank, Jonathan, and I sat in the kibbutz dining room. Frank had come to visit one of his patients, and I invited him to join us. Dinner that evening was a Chanukah treat: potato latkes. Sadly, I could not eat potatoes in any form. Frank talked about his part in a play called 'concentration camp inmates,' directed by the famous Samy Feder, manager of the Katzet theatre. He needed more time to learn his parts. Lacking scripts, the actors improvised scenes based on their wartime experiences, transforming pain into art. Recently, Frank spent his free time rehearsing and singing ghetto and partisan songs. Jonathan tried to prevent him from clinging to the past by urging him to turn to the future. "Our future resides in our past," Frank insisted. "I agree," Jonathan said. But he was too distracted to develop his thoughts. He had been staring at a table where eight people were sitting, and one man stood out, intently eating his food. He had a light complexion, short hair, and sunken grey eyes.

Suddenly, Jonathan stood up, walked in his direction, and spoke to him in German:

"I'm looking for two guys, Mode Ani and Lecha Dodi, two kibbutz leaders. You know them, don't you?"

"Of course," the man replied in German, without the slightest accent.

"Can you come with me?" Jonathan asked, hardly controlling his anger.

A few comrades had risen from their seats to encircle the man.

"He's a collaborator! A Nazi sympathizer!"

Mode Ani and *Lecha Dodi*, Hebrew words of prayer, enabled the capture of a German who took advantage of the aid given to displaced persons by Jewish organizations and UNRRA, the United States Relief and Rehabilitation Agency. Jonathan was outraged to learn, from soldiers of the Jewish Brigade, about the lack of screening of Nazi collaborators in refugee camps. From New York, telegrams had been sent to the Allied armies in charge of DPs, warning them about the presence of traitors in the camps and the need to screen them. But those armies cared more about the existence of communists than they did about Nazi sympathizers. As refugees from Eastern Europe, we feared accusations of harboring communist sympathies; it meant that the United States would be off-

limits to us. To convince me that America's doors were shut, Jonathan showed me newspaper headlines referring to DP camps as "hotbeds of communism" and European refugees as "the scum of the earth." The Americans viewed us, the victims, as spies or a fifth column, while the native collaborators sat beside us, feasting on our food....

It was difficult to convince the British of the absurdity of Jews mingling with non-Jewish DPs who still harbored hostile feelings. After November 1945, they authorized the segregation of Jews in Belsen, making it the only Jewish DP population in the British zone, a few miles away from the burnt-out concentration camp. The camp leader, Josef Rosensaft, had established the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Belsen only a few days after the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The Committee of Liberated Jews in Belsen gradually grew into an organization that defended the right of Jewish DPs to emigrate to British mandate Palestine. Jonathan, who was part of that committee, constantly complained about the visa restrictions imposed on refugees.

The night's humidity was palpable when Jonathan met me outside the theater. He took me to his small room, where I sat on a broken chair while he perched himself atop his desk, swinging his legs. I attributed his self-confidence to the uniform of the Jewish Brigade that he was wearing.

"I tell you, there's no other way to get out of this lousy camp. Jews have never stopped living in the Jewish homeland of Palestine. They have tilled its soil and worked the dry stony land. The Arabs living there weren't interested in drying the swamps. Many pioneers died battling malaria, as did their babies, who were stung by mosquitoes. They bought lands, sometimes twice, from rival Arab tribes just so their deeds would not be contested. You've got to read the facts! You've read the Bible. Abraham paid a pretty penny for the tomb where he buried his wife, Sarah, in *Machpelah*. You see, our future resides in our past."

What could I answer? My mind was racing, my thoughts muddled. Where was *Machpelah*? Near Hebron, the site of Joseph's tomb?

"This emigration to Palestine frightens me," I said.

"Frightens you? Yesterday, German policemen were patrolling a DP camp in Stuttgart with German Shepherds. They were in search of black-market offenders."

“And what happened?”

“They killed your former neighbor, Zalman Bronstein. He had just been reunited with his wife and one of his children. Twenty refugees were wounded.”

Speechless, I buried my face in my hands. Jonathan came closer to me without daring to make a move. I then understood why the SHAEF, the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Expeditionary Forces, had just forbidden the patrol of German police meant to help British soldiers maintain order.

“Jonathan, I can't face any more trials.”

“I prefer risking my life aboard a ship bound for freedom than to languish for years in a DP camp surrounded by barbed wire.”

“But open your eyes! Eight hundred refugees have died aboard the Struma.”

“I will show you how to be strong. But right now, I must rejoin my comrades.”

Before leaving the room, he turned a gleaming face towards me. How could he be so optimistic? Where did his patience come from? Was patience proof of love?

Jonathan had daily meetings with his friends from the Young Guard (*Hashomer Haza'ir*), the socialist and Zionist organization from Poland. All its members categorically refused to be the victims of recurrent pogroms. Jonathan pictured himself as the heir to the Polish poet Nahman Bialik, who was critical of submissive attitudes in the face of organized massacres. Bialik had emigrated to the Jewish homeland. Against all odds, Jonathan would follow in his spiritual mentor's steps.

At my friend's insistence, the Young Guard started screening the refugees. Jonathan, like his friends, was trained to unmask those who pretended to be uprooted Jews when, in reality, they had been their tormentors and torturers. But who taught him those Hebrew words? Deceiving traitors with prayer was true poetic justice.

CHAPTER 10

RESISTING STILL

A hand brushed against mine. A blond girl with braids glanced at me, then disappeared into the crowd. I had never seen her before and was not sure I would be able to recognize her again. Only her expression was stamped in my memory—a mix of candor and pain. Was she an orphan who had tried to escape child placements in Britain?

I tried to spot her amidst the people assembled around three army chaplains in one of the camp's makeshift synagogues. They were doing their best to tend to the well-being and spiritual needs of the DPs. I could not find the blond girl; however, I caught sight of Frank. Although he was some three years older than Jonathan, who was twenty-six like me, tonight the Hungarian doctor had the expression of a child. Under the candlelight, his hair appeared as silver threads, but his eyes were dull. I decided to take the initiative and talk to him.

"Celebrating *Chanukah* means being joyous. Even in the absence of happiness. We celebrate a miracle: the sacred oil found in the Temple to fuel the menorah burned for eight days while it was meant to last only one..."

"I didn't know," he replied, still moody.

"It may also be understood as celebrating our survival," I added. As always, I was awkward and chatty with the men I admired. I couldn't help filling in the blanks of silence.

"I just learned something that has me shaken."

"What happened?"

"I just found out how my friend Hannah died. She was seventeen when she left Budapest for the Jewish homeland of Palestine in 1939 and joined an agricultural school in Nahalal. After completing a two-year course there, she moved to Kibbutz Sdot Yam near Caesarea and became a member of the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the Haganah—the underground Jewish army

in Palestine. A year later, she participated in a course for paratroopers. Their mission was to rescue the Jews of Europe. It was at the end of 1943. I was in Auschwitz. Hannah was with a group of partisans in Yugoslavia shortly before the spring of 1944. In March, the German invasion of Hungary postponed their plans. She crossed the border to Budapest and within hours....”

Frank lowered his voice.

“She was arrested in Hungary?” I asked, feeling he needed to unburden himself. But he continued without addressing my question.

“Imprisoned and tortured for hours by the Hungarian authorities trying to get information on Allied wireless codes. Hanna had been trained while in Palestine. She did not speak under torture, although she lost a front tooth and was nearly blinded. They contacted her mother, who was also in prison, to put more pressure on her. Hanna was sentenced to death as a spy. She refused to wear a blindfold when the firing squad executed her. She wanted to face her murderers.”

“Such dignity. How did you hear about...?”

“I went to the Landsberg Jewish DP camp today and met Yoel, a paratrooper who survived this mission. He was one of the thirty-seven resistance fighters from Mandatory Palestine who parachuted into enemy territory to take part in the rescue of Hungarian Jews slated for extermination.”

“Did she leave behind a diary?” I asked.

“We think so,” he whispered.

I was overwhelmed and had to excuse myself from the room.

CHAPTER 11

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Ready to smile?” asked Stefan, a young kibbutznik in Belsen who had been hidden as a choir boy in a church in Cracow. He was holding an old camera, trying to find the right angle. We remained for too long without knowing what we looked like. Or maybe that was a good thing.

“Take a picture outside of girls pushing a stroller; it's much more interesting!” The blond adolescent took several pictures of me sweeping the collective dining room of our kibbutz. Even if they were unflattering, I enjoyed looking at pictures of myself. It was proof that we were still alive and somehow had found the strength to start over.

The year 1946 heralded new beginnings. Fifteen or sixteen-year-old girls proudly pushed old strollers, even in the cold. The freedom to love had won out. A wedding canopy or—*chuppah*—would offer a symbolic roof for a couple's future home. For others, the act of liberation was dampened by the indecent acts of drunken Russian soldiers.

On that day, the last of Chanukah, snow blanketed the camp's alleys. In some places, kids made snowballs as many older refugees looked on, envious of their carefree ways. After kitchen chores, I went to the library to look for Stefan to help me fill out the application I was putting off. When he wasn't taking pictures, the eighteen-year-old worked on visa applications throughout the day. For these activities, he received cigarettes to exchange on the black market.

“Shalom, Rivka, back from your chores? Still in one piece?” he joked. He was hunched over a pile of files hiding his face.

“Can you help me with my application?” I asked.

“It depends on how much you can pay...”

“Please, be serious for a second!”

"Being serious does not lead you anywhere these days," he said like a wise elder advising a young person.

"How do you know?"

"I've seen more than I can tell. The war has changed me."

"I know. I understand you more than you think. Please, will you help me now?"

He removed his glasses and looked at me in earnest.

"Perhaps. What do I need to know about you that I don't already?"

"First, I am a war orphan for the American red tape. Also, I have an uncle in New York. He can be my sponsor. What other proof do I need?"

"Were you in a displaced persons camp on December 22, 1945?"

"Well... I was looking for relatives in Warsaw before I realized I had to...."

"They don't care about those reasons." His apparent indifference disarmed me.

I knew they didn't, but I was hoping Stephan did. I held onto a chair for support.

"Don't panic. They'll probably change the cut-off date because most Jews came back to Poland to search for relatives. American Jews will surely exert some form of pressure in favor of their brethren. They can't let us down again," he added with encouragement.

"I don't know anything about all that. It's so complicated."

"If you're kind to me, I'll help you get around the laws that bar entrance to the US. In the meantime, let's get rid of all the red tape and be ready to fight!" His self-confidence did me some good. Stephan looked like a cunning mature man. The only signs he retained of his adolescence were a few pimples on his forehead and a stubborn determination.

"Thank you so much! You know, it took me months to prove my own identity.

"Don't lose strength. That's what they expect from you, refugees." He looked so mature with his hunched-back and wise words. But I felt the urge to challenge him.

“You refugees? What about you?”

“I was there when a guy named David Ben Gurion came from Mandatory Palestine to visit us right after we had been liberated. He made us understand that we would never belong anywhere. The Jewish homeland was the only place for a Jewish family to build a future—even a lonely single like me. There, we will be refugees no more.”

“Okay. I’ve heard that before. Not so far from here.”

“I bet you have.”

I kissed him on the cheek, then left the library filled with the repressed emotions Stephan had brought out in me. Near the exit, I bumped into the British chaplain.

“To where are you running, my dear philosopher?”

“Back to my room before the lighting of the last candle.”

“I’ll walk with you a little. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I love British manners.”

“I am glad you’ve found the strength to face new trials.”

“You mean immigration procedures?”

“Among others.” With that understatement, he smiled gently.

“But I fear getting an American visa will be more of a hassle than I expected,” I confessed.

“Fear is no good... It prevents you from thinking! You must regain some optimism, just as trees grow new leaves in response to the cold.”

His soft voice and the beautiful metaphor he used persuaded me that I had to make more effort to cope with the new problems ahead of me.

“I’ll try, chaplain.”

He blinked a few times.

I rushed to my room and was pleased to find nobody there.

CHAPTER 12

A VISA FOR AMERICA?

I waited three hours in a noisy corridor amidst a crowd of worried faces. Babies were crying as if expressing their mothers' fears. Each immigration candidate seemed disappointed after their interview with the American consul. Finally, my turn came. I was more confident now that my blond hair was growing back and uncovered. I was wearing an elegant black dress—it was a present from Tzippi, a social worker from South Africa who had joined the JDC as a volunteer in our camp.

When I entered the small office, a man asked me for documents I had never possessed. He appeared to be in his fifties, self-confident, with dark hair and small brown eyes. I tried to recall the words of the British chaplain and did not let my fear get the better of me. Speaking calmly, I explained that I had been arrested in Paris, deported to a concentration camp, and deprived of my belongings and identity papers. He responded, “you should not exaggerate,” and, “at any rate, you were not in a DP camp on December 22, 1945, which was the deadline.” It meant that the Truman Directive, “a Christmas present for some,” would not work out for me. He stood up and led me to a nearby room where a portly man with grey hair was seated. Throwing a scornful glance at me, he said: “You're a communist, aren't you?”

“No, not at all. I am a Polish Jew who has nothing to do with communists.”

“But where you're living, you've surely been in contact with reds. Everybody knows the DP camps are communism hotbeds.”

The man in front of me could hardly keep calm. His lack of self-control strengthened mine at the same time that my American dream was fading.

“I have had no contact with communists. The Russians murdered two of my family members in pogroms.”

“Pogroms?”

“Organized massacres triggered by a false rumor.”

“That may be so. But surely their beliefs have rubbed off on you.”

“On the contrary! I suffered as a child from Russian rule. For me, the American way of life is a blessing.”

I was almost in tears. My sincerity seemed to stir him, if only a little.

“That's enough for today,” he said.

With the Nazis, I had to survive in order to speak out later. With these American clerks, I had to speak out in order to survive. The clerk finally stamped and signed my form. Then he led me out of the room and ushered in the next person in line.

I was emotionally drained and eager to return to Belsen, my only shelter. The day was drawing to a close. From inside a jeep that pulled up alongside me, a young soldier asked me in Polish where I was going.

“Okay. We'll give you a ride,” he said, glancing at three soldiers in the back.

Realizing they were Russian; I made an effort to thank them.

“Spasiba!” I exclaimed.

Memories of my mother talking to me in Russian washed over me. Suddenly the driver took a sharp turn. As I was hurled toward one of the soldiers, I noticed a peculiar expression on his face. Before I could decipher it, I felt his hand crawl under my dress towards my hips. I shouted and slapped him in the face. Returning my blow twofold, the soldier spat out Russian curses, which I absorbed as if I were on a cloud. Then the car door opened, and I was thrown out.

“Jesus Christ Almighty!” A voice hovered above me. “She's bleeding. Let's get her to a hospital...”

“No!” I heard myself say in English. Someone wiped my face and nose. “I want to get home to the Belsen DP camp.”

“We'll take you there, not to worry, love!” said a tall British soldier with a cockney accent.

It was night when we arrived at the camp. By then, I could walk and eagerly made my way to Jonathan's barrack. Thankfully, he was there and still awoken. Despite my bruised appearance, he embraced me. He tore a piece of his bed sheet, dampened it in water, and tenderly brushed it across my face. Instead of consoling words, he kissed my swollen lips and carried me in his arms to his bed. I could not keep my heavy eyelids open anymore.

At the break of dawn, I awoke to Jonathan lying next to me, eyes fixed on the ceiling. His two roommates were behind a makeshift curtain, still sleeping.

"Did anything happen?" I whispered.

"Do you think I'm like one of those soldiers?"

"Forgive me."

"I forgive you because you looked like a sweet child while you slept."

I laughed to ease the tension.

"The girls you knew in Warsaw, what were they like?"

"Knew? What do you mean?" he said with a smile.

"You know what I mean."

"The girls I slept with?"

"I don't like this word," I said.

"They did not have bruised eyes and swollen lips."

"Come on..." I said, fumbling for the right words, as always.

"What do you really want to know, my little victim?"

"If I am just another girl in your life." My own words surprised me.

"Is that what you think?"

My cheeks became as red as my eyes. Jonathan ran his hands through my hair, then clasped my head to protect it from further harm. He whispered in my ear,

"I have known enough girls to be able to appreciate what you are worth to me."

Leaning into me, he kissed me softly. As my lips coalesced with his lips, I allowed myself to express a tenderness I had never known before—in the nest of his arms. And for the first time in my life, I felt confident.

That afternoon I met Frank at the clinic. Unlike at the camp hospital, the doctors and nurses here dealt with minor injuries and illnesses and dispensed medicine. Seeking a sympathetic ear, I told Frank about my visit to the American consulate. Instead of comfort, he firmly stated, “it’s too early to emigrate; if you were to take an X-ray today, your lung infection would show up, barring your entry into America.” I was such an idiot. He was clearly comparing me to the heroic Hungarian woman he liked or to his murdered young wife, of whom he never spoke. I felt like a nonentity in his eyes. In Belsen, my years of study could not compensate for my lack of interpersonal skills.

“Don’t you understand, Frank? America is a taste of freedom; at last.”

“I’m afraid you are the one who doesn’t understand. With a pulmonary condition, you don’t stand a chance; you should have waited to apply.”

“I resent your pessimism! Pessimists destroy our souls!” I shouted, almost in tears, and hurried toward the door.

That night, I rejoined Jonathan in my dream. Dreaming ensured my survival; it was my only comfort.

CHAPTER 13

SCULPTING

The following day, I rejoined Jonathan on the stretch of grass surrounding the dining room barracks. He was sculpting a small wooden dolphin. On tiptoes, I came closer—his long hands crossed with blue veins lent light to my eyes. Silently, he gestured to a wooden stool and, when I sat down, placed a wet kiss on my lips.

“Could you carve a doll for me?” I asked with a childish voice.

“Yes, if the light is good enough. But where is the good fairy who will animate her?”

“Right in front of you!” I pirouetted, surprised that my body had retained some steps from the ballet classes I took before the war.

With a pencil from the table, I tapped the dolphin. Jonathan took the magic wand from my hands and smiled.

“I like your muscular calves,” he said.

“Jonathan, what makes us close?” The magic wand had given me the courage to speak.

“I sculpt the toys, and you give them life with a stick that answers only to you!”

“Come on, be serious for once! Do you think it is our shared roots or the suffering we’ve endured?” I knew I risked sounding boring and brainy, but I couldn’t help it. Something pushed me to analyze everything. Still, I worried that my questions would unsettle Jonathan’s equilibrium.

“You are asking whether past sufferings can bring a man and a woman closer to one another?” I was surprised he could sum up so clearly what was so difficult for me to express.

“I can’t help it. I always ask too many questions.”

“Yes. You should relax, let go, and take life as it is now, not as it will be or as it was in the past.” He suddenly sounded aloof, and I found it difficult to answer.

“It’s hard because I...”

“I know because you’re a woman. And not only that, a philosopher. It makes it damn hard for a man like me, the son of a tailor!” His tone was different as if a gap had opened between us.

“I just wanted to know if our encounter was meaningful for you and if you think we can build on it?”

With a slight frown, he looked at me as if I was not there.

“Since you’re asking me, maybe you’d be happier with Frank.”

He threw out those words so quickly that I wasn’t sure I had understood them right. Within a second, everything was collapsing around me. I wanted to answer, but the knot inside my throat made it impossible.

“But why?”

“You and Frank have studied. I am a manual laborer. I can work a needle to make clothes or take a spade to till the soil and grow vegetables. This is how I can build our land and be fulfilled. I am not sure this will make you happy, Rebecca.”

“You don’t know what makes me happy.”

“Perhaps that’s where the problem lies: I don’t know.”

“But I need you, Jonathan.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Rebecca.”

“But we share what is essential.”

“Essential?”

“Yes, what matters most is our determination to find together the strength to start over.”

“Together, we can try.”

He took me by the waist and hugged me.

“Come to my room, and you’ll see how past suffering can help you overcome immense obstacles.”

Once we got there, he brought a book out from under his bed: *Der Judenstaat*. The author was Theodore Herzl.

I turned to the first page. Jonathan stroked my cheek, neck, and beyond as I read. A torrent of thoughts washed over me: Adam and Eve forming a single body, the desire for a baby—a promise I had made to my mother—the daily weddings in Belsen. That night, Jonathan made a woman out of me.

CHAPTER 14

JOYFUL

I thought I made out Frank's slender figure rushing towards the theatre. He never walked, only rushed. When he saw me, he shouted:

"Come along. We're rehearsing!"

I took a seat next to the stage. The whole troupe was waiting for him under a street sign that read "Ahasuerus Boulevard." Another sign announced the name of the play: Haman's Defeat. The character of Haman, the villain, dominated the stage, clearly resembling Hitler with his toothbrush mustache. The mood of the play was meant to conform to the joyous atmosphere of Purim, a holiday celebrating the freedom of the Jews of Persia who had been slated for extermination by King Ahasuerus but were saved by Esther, the young and beautiful Jewess whom the sovereign married without knowing her real identity. Frank was proud to play the king, strolling elegantly with the new queen. On stage, our pessimistic friend was transformed. I now understood why Frank weighed each word before speaking. The whole play embodied a profound sense of joy. When it was over, I was the last to stop clapping.

In the spring of 1947, Judaism had survived Hitler's determination to erase an entire people from the earth. In Belsen, we called ourselves by a Hebrew name: "She'erith Hapleita," — the surviving remnant—whose purpose was to pass on the tradition.

Those among us who remained religious attended the reading of the Book of Esther on the holiday of Purim. Wanting to belong, I went to the nearest synagogue, where Chaplain Elie led the service. Each time the name of Haman was uttered, the children and youth stomped their feet on the ground as a symbol of blotting out Haman's name and the evil it represented. After the service, the children were given prune-filled *hamantashen* to complete the catharsis. As was his custom, the British Chaplain expanded on a topic that stirred our curiosity: "The word comes from the name Haman and "*tashe*," a

German word that means “pocket.” So, *hamantashen* are triangle-shaped cookies with a hole or “pocket” in the center, filled with delicious jam. Yes, being joyful requires an effort, but only when you are joyful can the divine presence dwell in you.” Chaplain Elie had a knack for linking the taste of pastries to the sweet and mysterious expressions of the divine.

CHAPTER 15

LENA

In the concert hall, the Purim evening ended with four quartets composed by Bela Bartok. I was startled at seeing the young teenage girl who had once taken my hand before disappearing. Jonathan noticed my excitement but said nothing. As she played the violin, I thought her braided blond hair and bright, intense eyes gave her back the childish candor robbed by the Nazis. The allegro soon turned into an adagio that threw the world into chaos. The end of the piece rekindled the pain—the incongruous presence of music in the closed space of the concentration camp. The audience applauded. I rushed towards her, bumping into stools and chairs.

“That was extraordinary,” I exclaimed in Yiddish.

“Thank you.”

“What's your name?”

“Lena Bernhardt.”

“I'm Rebecca Samuelson. I'm so happy we met. Are you...alone?”

“Yes.”

“You...” I didn't dare ask her how she survived the war years, even though I was yearning to learn more about the frail young girl I instinctively wanted to protect.

“I was in Theresienstadt, in Czechoslovakia.”

“I was told that camp wasn't as terrible as the others...”

Lena grasped my shoulder.

“It's not true! Everything there was a lie. When we arrived at Theresienstadt in March 1944, there were four orchestras just for show! People were dying every day. When the Red Cross visited us, we painted the barracks ahead of the

visit. The dying were locked in, and the musicians were ordered to perform the most beautiful pieces.”

She was shivering. I took her in my arms. But she went on.

“Music did not save Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein, and the other musicians who shared their bread with me when I could no longer play.”

Silent tears were running down her cheeks.

“It's over, Lena. You're not alone anymore. Come with me. I'll show you your room.”

Without a word, she took my hand and followed me.

We saw each other every morning for breakfast. One day, she overcame her shyness and confided in me.

“I noticed you don't like Russian soldiers.”

“I like anyone who is a good person.”

“A Russian officer saved me. He heard someone breathing and picked me up from under a pile of corpses. I don't know what happened to my parents and young brothers. Their names are not on the list of survivors. I checked and checked the lists written by the American rabbi. I went through several volumes of names with the title “She'erit Hapleita” the surviving remnant. But my parents and brothers were not on it. I asked all the chaplains in Belsen.”

I added one more fact to mask my emotion.

“Chaplain Klausner, a kind-hearted American rabbi, compiled all the names.”

Lena ignored what I said. She went on to explain...

“Mummy was a pianist, and Daddy played the cello. Thanks to them, I played my first concert when I was ten. My viola was my best friend. It still is today.”

CHAPTER 16

HOPE

I brought you lipstick, Becky.”

Tzippi, my favorite social worker from South Africa, came to my room. She was a tall woman with beautiful dark eyes and a generous smile. I knew her presence was not a handout from the JDC, for which she volunteered, but her own gesture. A sensitive woman, she understood how much we struggled to regain our femininity. Something as superficial as lipstick proved essential for our rehabilitation as women.

“How can I thank you?” I said, kissing her on the cheek.

Reaching for the eyeliner she gave me on an earlier occasion, I applied it together with the lipstick in front of a small, cracked mirror. My face immediately opened up. If the absence of mirrors in the Nazi camps had accelerated my dehumanization, it had also saved me from pitying myself. As if reading my thoughts, Tzippi fetched a camera from her large handbag and took a picture of the new me.

“The children are waiting for me in the kindergarten. I have a surprise for them. I’ll be back later in the week.” With a warm smile, she rushed out.

Despite the dark blue jacket, she often wore, there was a youthful glow about the amiable slender Tzippi. Jonathan, Frank, and Lena shared a similar glow. Lena lived to play music, Frank devoted himself to treating patients, and Jonathan offered refugees the hope of a safe home. Each had a passion that impacted their relationships with others. I lacked that grace. My quest was a restless search for myself, my lost ones, and the world around me.

That evening, the rain refused to stop; nevertheless, I walked over to meet up with other inmates for the sake of sanity. Even though my dress was soaked, I welcomed the rain. It reminded me of the water we needed while packed into the cattle trains driving us to our death. Suddenly I felt a sharp pain in my chest and

couldn't breathe properly. The library was not far, and I knew Jonathan was there every day before lunch. I saw his imposing figure from a distance. He was standing on a bench, addressing the crowd that had formed around him:

"The Jewish plight implies a perpetual fight for life. It is the awareness of the uprooted. There is only one solution to survive, looking for our roots in the Jewish homeland of Palestine. Don't forget, dear comrades, our future is where our past is!"

I was freezing and felt a stab in my lungs again. His words were no less sharp. Once I started coughing, I feared I would not be able to stop. At the same time, something in me was burning. The internees amassed around Jonathan were applauding, and nobody paid me any attention. As if with a voice not my own, I heard myself address the crowd,

"How will you have the strength to dry the swamps and till the arid soil while battling malaria, a disease transmitted by mosquitoes that causes a high fever and even death? How will you have the strength to build roads under the blazing sun? Not only will the British stand in our way, but also groups of Arabs who hate us without having met us! Don't forget about the Mufti of Jerusalem and his meetings with Hitler to plan the destruction of the Jews."

I had broken out in a sweat, and my grey dress was sticking to my body. Without warning, I collapsed and immediately lost consciousness. I have no recollection of what followed. Later, Jonathan made it clear that nothing could stop those unwanted refugees from taking the risk that came with clandestine immigration and life in the Jewish homeland. I learned that Jonathan cared more about my health than my betrayal.

"I don't want you to leave me," I confessed. My hands clutched his shirt.

"I can't go on languishing in this DP camp!"

Jonathan put a reassuring arm around my shoulder, but it wasn't enough. "I don't have the strength to follow you," I said. "I didn't want to tell you before, but I can't hide it anymore." I stood up with difficulty.

"Are you pregnant, Rebecca?" Jonathan asked tenderly.

"I wasn't ready to tell you."

"But why?"

"I did not want to change the course of your destiny," I replied as gently as possible.

"What are you talking about? It's our child!" Jonathan shouted, visibly hurt.

"I'm afraid," I confessed. I was feverish, and words could not convey what was happening.

"You should never be afraid," Jonathan said. "I'll take care of you. You have to trust me, Rebecca. Do you think love can exist without trusting your partner?"

I was my own worst enemy and exhausted by my excuses.

"I don't know anything anymore. I wish it were simpler. I wish we had a country of our own for our children and our children's children. I wish we did not have to fight anymore. I wish nobody would die ever again on a battlefield!"

"I beg you to make one last effort for me, Rebecca. For the three of us. We will leave at nightfall. The Mossad LeAliyah Bet, in charge of clandestine immigration, is sending us men who will assist us until we reach our homeland. It is a branch of the Haganah. They have weapons and ammunition. We are expected on a Kibbutz near Caesarea. All our plans were conceived underground so as not to be intercepted by the heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force."

"I am not sure I have the physical strength to face all that..."

"Do you want our baby to be born in a DP camp, behind barbed wire? Do you want to languish here with your dreams of Fred Astaire at the Ziegfield Follies? Will you forever hum 'Sentimental Journey' instead of our magnificent Hatikva?" His raised voice reduced me to a scolded child. In my lungs, a constant pain pulsed, strengthening with each of his words.

Sinking onto a bench, I buried my face in my hands. Jonathan stroked my hair, comforting me like a wounded child. With his brown curls and blue kibbutz shirt, he already belonged to those intrepid people committed to the land. He whispered in my ear,

"As soon as you feel strong again, you will join me there. My friends from the Mossad will come and take you." Too exhausted to add anything, he kissed my lips softly and went away without looking back. Alone, I wept as I had never wept before. A sharp pain in my lungs paralyzed all my thoughts. I knew I had lost him.

CHAPTER 17

SISYPHUS

In my dreams, Jonathan metamorphosed into Sisyphus, a tragic hero engaged in a ceaseless struggle. He accepted his fate bearing the burden of human suffering. Did he belong to those beings in need of trials to move ahead?

On that first spring day of 1947, I felt the baby's first movements. Strangely enough, my health was improving now that I could not allow myself to be sick. Two weeks after summoning the energy to complete a U.S. immigration form, I went to the Hamburg consulate, apprehensive but prepared. Unable to keep my eyes off the sign in black letters: U.S. Immigration Office, I waited patiently. After three hours, I was dryly informed that my application was incomplete; the "Corporate Affidavit" guaranteeing that I would not be a burden was missing. I could not explain the missing document, as it should have been sent from HIAS, the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society in New York. In my best English, I assured the man at the desk that "you should receive it promptly." The man wished me good luck.

Outside, a military transport was waiting with a load of refugees from the consulate; I hitched a ride. Back at Belsen, I went to the clinic to tell Frank about the interview. Eyeing my belly, he complimented me on my plump cheeks and "full figure." For the first time, I noticed his attempt at humor. At my reddening face, he said, "Beware, the Yankees don't like reds!"

My body was indeed filling out. A life was blooming inside me like a water lily. I wished that Jonathan could witness the metamorphosis. I could feel the baby's movements when I rested my hand on my belly. A heart of four months was beating in my womb, and only that mattered now. Through this life-to-be, I was given life. Today, the sky was like a blue blanket. The air was clear to match my lungs: the antibiotics had defeated my pneumonia, granting me another

miracle. Gazing at the sky, I imagined the birds of Germany were celebrating victory over evil.

That evening, a sharp new pain in my womb made me go to the clinic, where I found Frank still working. He examined me and asked bluntly,

“Is it Jonathan’s baby?”

“Yes.” I lowered my eyes, ashamed of being unmarried and pregnant.

“But...he just left, didn’t he?” He seemed more inquisitive than usual.

This reminder burned in my chest. “He did,” I could only answer.

“In your state? I assume he insisted on taking you with him.”

“I told him I was too weak.”

“So, he just left you like this, on your own?”

I didn’t reply.

“Rebecca, you don’t deserve to be alone. Especially now.”

“I didn’t want to stop his dream from coming true,” I found the strength to say while revealing only part of the story.

“You have to think about yourself sometimes and your happiness. It’s not always about others.”

I looked him in the eye. He stroked my chin and said, “Rebecca, if I had been in his shoes, I would never have left you behind.”

I was surprised to realize that our attraction was mutual. He continued...

“You do so much in this camp; you’ve got to think about yourself first now! I admire the way you teach those children who lost everything. But you deserve a lot more than that.”

“Thank you, Frank.”

His words restored my confidence. Frank made me feel important and helpful.

He decided to monitor my pregnancy and asked if I wanted to be his assistant. The job required me to sit by his side and help him write reports for each patient. Nothing sounded more rewarding. I accepted.

A few days later, I realized how unique Frank was. He allotted equal attention to all his patients, and his reports were comprehensive, taking up to four pages, with the conclusion and diagnosis appearing clearly at the end. We spent many long days together. Those days caused me to see how kind of a person Frank was and how reassured I felt next to him.

“Rebecca, would you like to take a walk with me?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He closed his clinic, and we walked side by side.

“Let’s sit on that bench under the tree. I want to read you something.”

He opened a thin book of poetry and read with a soft voice:

Music, when soft voices die,

Vibrates in the memory.

Odors, when sweet violets sicken,

Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,

Are heap'd for the beloved's bed.

And so, thy thoughts when thou art gone,

Love itself shall slumber on.

“I like Shelley, a British poet,” he said.

“Long ago, I learned a few verses of this poem by heart. I still remember some of the words I recited to my friend Deborah to remind us that we were still dignified human beings who valued respect and love:

“To defy power, which seems omnipotent.

To love and bear; to hope till hope creates

From its own wreck, the thing it contemplates. ...’

I’m afraid that’s all I remember; I learned it in France.”

“I now understand better how Deborah and you defied the Nazis. I also understand why something about you lingers every time you leave me. I think I love you, Rebecca. I'm ready to accept your child as mine.”

Taking me in his arms as if I were a porcelain doll, he was trying not to break, he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against mine. I heard the words: “Marry me.”

I had never doubted the impact of poetry on human beings. The romantic Percy Shelley must have laughed from heaven hearing the power of his words.

CHAPTER 18

A WOUNDED BIRD

It was mid-morning. The spring sun was shining when I visited Lena, who was sulkily sweeping the dining room floor after breakfast. I stared at her from a distance; however, she did not notice my presence. Her mind was elsewhere, in a different time and place. Suddenly, I rushed towards her, snatched the broom from her hands, and positioned it like a witch, eager to fly away. She laughed.

“Lena, come to America with us!” I exclaimed.

“I will be a burden for you,” she replied without skipping a beat.

“Come on! The International Refugee Organization will soon close all the DP camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy.”

“You're leaving with Frank?”

“Yes, he discovered that one of his cousins emigrated to Kansas City in the late thirties.”

“Do you... love him?” Her hesitation gave me pause.

“I'm...going to marry him. We are both alone.”

“Does he know you're expecting Jonathan's baby?”

“How could I hide it from him?”

“Has Jonathan written to you?” Lena was trying to piece together what seemed like a betrayal for her.

“If my mother were alive, she would not approve of my choices,” I said, hoping she would understand that I, too, sometimes found myself in a different time and place.

“Will Frank accept Jonathan's baby?” Her navy-blue eyes were full of gravity.

“He told me he would. But it's so complicated.”

“Does it mean I’m unable to understand?” she whispered. Burying her freckled face in my arms, she might have closed her eyes for a few minutes to let our conversation sink in; but her rapid blinking told me she was about to cry. Keeping her tightly pressed against me, I heard myself say, “I don’t understand what’s happening to me! The war has turned everything upside down. I was half alive, and now I am going to give birth! Jonathan is the first man I have ever loved. With Avigdor, it was different. He was more of a friend to help me find myself again. He was so strong and determined... like a partisan. He was...”

“You told me we must live in the present,” she interrupted, gaining strength.

“It’s the hardest thing, almost impossible. But we must try.”

“Will you let me finish sweeping?” she smiled.

After lunch, we sat in the collective dining room, where she had been on duty. Lena explained that the psychologists who volunteered in the camp encouraged her to give voice to her terrible memories and that doing so would grant her a sense of peace. “Although I was accepted as a musician into the orchestra, they forced me to do things...it was terrible,” she confessed, hiding her face in her hands.

“Don’t say any more, Lena, or you’ll bring more pain upon yourself. I also went through a dark tunnel. Not everyone can comprehend such darkness...the total absence of light.”

Again, I knew I sounded like a textbook, but I couldn’t help it. At the same time, I could not stop myself from telling her that I was used as a guinea pig for the Nazis’ so-called medical experiments and inoculated with malaria; and that I was sent back to Auschwitz for close observation by the nurses. I wanted Lena to understand that I had no idea how I had survived. God helped me, for sure. But Lena could not accept that her mother, father, and siblings were murdered. For them, there was no divine intervention. How could I tell her I still didn’t know what my survival meant?

Over the following days, I tried to show her how much I cared for her. She would sit next to me most of the time while I graded homework. She remained there, wrapped in her silent thoughts while smiling tenderly whenever I looked at her. Sometimes she would leave unexpectedly. At other times, she would stand

up, reach for her violin, and play pieces from Bartok or Telemann. Weeks later, she confessed her guilt at being alive when all her family had vanished. Then I noticed her fingernails were bitten and bloody.

Some orphans in the camp found an occupation through the organization ORT. It enabled DPs to acquire professional skills. It helped them feel useful again after suffering years of humiliation intended to reduce them to worthless human beings psychologically. But Lena refused to learn a trade. She did not want to be a seamstress or a teacher. Other orphans excelled in the various camp schools or learned Hebrew to continue the tradition of their parents.

Eventually, Lena applied for a visa to America. A few weeks later, the three of us received the much-anticipated documents to the land of the second chance. Thanks to HIAS, we received a joint affidavit guaranteeing we would not be a burden to the American nation. Other refugees were less lucky. They languished in DP camps for the next four or five years. The last camp in Germany, Föhrenwald, closed its doors in February 1957. Many displaced persons had fled Poland and spent the war years in the Soviet Union. I could not imagine the sick and the old remaining in the hands of the Germans for so long.

Our wedding was an unforgettable moment. Under the *Chuppah*, the white and blue nuptial canopy, Frank gazed at me with loving eyes. Chaplain Elie Lipshitz pronounced the ritual prayers in front of the numerous refugees of Belsen. Neither Frank nor I had parents to stand with us under the canopy, but all our thoughts were turned toward them. The chaplain called us by our Hebrew names, Isaac, and Rivka, and said that coincidences were divine decisions. Was not Rivka the spouse chosen by Isaac, the son of Abraham?

The transparent veil I wore symbolized the trust I desired to impart to Frank. While delicately placing a ring on my forefinger, Frank pronounced ceremoniously, “With this ring, you are devoted to me, according to the law of Moses and Israel.” Then the chaplain listed the obligations of a husband towards his wife, feeding her, clothing her, and protecting her. Toward the end of the ceremony, Frank broke a glass with his foot, reminding us of the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, a loss still with us. I later learned that a lack of vigilance in married life could also lead to such rupture and that nothing could ever be taken for granted. Conjugal love appeared as a source of creation as well as mending the breaks of the past.

While cutting into a giant Apple-strudel, I caught sight of Lena, standing at a distance too far away to take in the scent of apples and cinnamon. As the guests clustered around us, throwing us a joyous “Mazel Tov!” She disappeared silently into the crowd.

CHAPTER 19

THE RIVERS OF ZION

That night, I could not express my tenderness to Frank, who sensed my frustration and admitted it would take time. Reassured by his rhythmic breathing, I finally fell asleep. At dawn, I heard rustling by the door and saw a letter sliding under it. I jumped up and tore open the envelope.

Dearest Rebecca,

By the time you find this letter, I'll be gone. Please forgive me! In the pitch of the night, three vans arrived to pick up my friends from the orchestra and other youth from our camp. Men from the Jewish Brigade told us to get ready as fast as possible, and that priority would be given to orphans. We're only allowed to take a backpack and good shoes since we must cross the border on foot. Mila, the piano teacher, tore up her visa for America when the men said she might be too old to join us. I have only one hour to get ready, but the first thing I'm doing is writing to you. I'm sure we'll meet at the kibbutz, and I'll write more later. I forgot to tell you that one of the men is a school friend from Budapest! His name is Yoram. He immigrated in 1938 to Palestine. He said he'll help me the whole way and had already put my viola in a safe place on the truck. Rivka, I know you understand me. Please show this letter to Frank. I am grateful for everything both of you did for me, but I must leave Europe as soon as possible. It is still damp with the blood of my family.

Don't cry, Rivka; I'm trying to be tough too. I must show Yoram I can work the land and rebuild myself. I have found a reason to live, and I know you will rejoice because you love me.

Be well. Affectionately,

Lena

Lena's departure came as a shock to me. If I only could have kissed her goodbye. Frank and I were still languishing in the DP camp, waiting for a warship to carry its load of legal immigrants from Bremen to New York. One week later, we left Belsen for another base, an assembly center in the American occupation zone. On April 21, 1946, the ship Marine Marlin departed from Bremen. That former war vessel carried nearly a thousand immigrants on board. Most of the refugees had benefitted from the American President's Christmas present, The Truman Directive of December 22, 1945, a directive difficult to carry out because bureaucrats couldn't agree on who was entitled to DP status. The rumor in our new transit camp was that American congressmen still feared the flood of refugees. But all that mattered to us was the legislation issued by Harry S. Truman. It enabled the admission of several thousand Jews to America. Excited relatives would welcome the luckiest among us in tears on the pier.

CHAPTER 20

ANOTHER TRIAL

Noise and excitement rippled through the crowded main deck. The crossing of the Atlantic on this warship bringing GIs home was expensive—a hundred and thirty-four dollars for men and two hundred for women. Did women take up more room? Was this the sign of other absurdities to come across the ocean? It made me feel seasick before we even set sail. A few hours later, an American officer informed us that men and women would be separated. Memories of “separation” during “selection” in the camps rocked the boat. Some women fainted, and others shouted. Frank was told that spouses were permitted to be together only at night. Priority was given to GIs. It was no use arguing.

We were lucky to be on board. The young and brave GIs who risked their lives in a bloody European war to liberate us were coming home. Boys my age seemed full of life. Some played the guitar, others the banjo. I loved their accents and bright smiles. Others were still nursing their wounds with bandages around their arms or their legs. But they didn’t seem to care now that the ship was heading home toward their loved ones. I could not help but admire their sacrifice. They left their girlfriends and parents to fight against evil in a war-dominated world. With a broad smile, a young green-eyed GI threw me a box of chewing gum. I would have heartily kissed him had Frank not been around.

Through the power of the waves, our refugee garb was left on the European shores with the last remains of our murdered families. The infinity of the sea was giving birth to immigrants, ready to start anew. Even before our arrival, sympathetic American journalists dubbed us “New Americans.” Such newspaper articles from the Survey Graphic or the Times boosted our morale in the transit camp. My baby would be an American citizen!

Three days later, the rough sea gave us a hard time. Many of us were lying on the deck, refusing all food, with a dignity that moved me. It was our final trial, and all accepted it as such. At night, Frank rejoined me. He placed his hands on

my belly, the better to soothe my pain. Although I felt sick, I moved away when I saw other passengers lying in their vomit on mattresses. Due to the rough sea, a woman who had waited more than an hour in line for breakfast could not stop her food from falling onto the dirty floor. When I saw tea and coffee being poured overboard, I addressed an American sailor:

“How can you waste drinks and food that way?”

“Running out of cups, Maam. It’s orders, Maam,” he replied nonchalantly.

“Come on, Rebecca, look at the glass as half-full and not half-empty!” said Frank reproachfully. He took me vigorously by the hand, leading me toward a table of exotic fruits.

“I’ll try,” I replied unconvincingly.

“Look at these baskets overflowing with oranges and bananas. Aren’t we in paradise?”

He addressed the sailor standing nearby:

“Could I take an orange or a banana?”

Amused by such politeness, the sailor replied:

“Man, you can eat all the goddamn oranges and bananas you want!”

“We’re so grateful!” Frank replied.

“Let’s walk to the B deck; that’ll do you some good. The sea is calmer,” Frank suggested fruit in hand. On the B deck, GIs were gathered—a bunch of young, smiling men in uniform. One of them had a banjo on his knee and had attracted a small crowd. As he played, they sang,

I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee...

“I like this song,” I told Frank.

“Me too. I feel American already! You look better, Becky. The sea is calming down.”

“Frank, how will we pay back the \$200 fare?”

“Will you stop worrying for a minute? I’ll take care of everything.”

“Are you sure? It feels good to be taken care of.”

Frank took care of the sick day and night, as no other nurses, doctors, or medicine were on board. When night fell, I saw him tending to a pretty Hungarian girl with long brown hair and dark brown eyes. She was exaggerating her condition to receive extra attention. Each strong wave took its toll on me, but Frank did not notice. His indifference left me without the strength to call on him. So, to thwart the assault of painful memories, I devised a strategy. Summoning harsh pictures from my past, I replaced them with images of my projected future—green American landscapes from Missouri, where President Truman had grown up; the baby in a perambulator that I proudly pushed... It was then that Frank reappeared to tell me that he had successfully sent a cable to the American president. It said that the Jewish refugees from the Nazi camps aboard the Marine Marlin were most grateful to the president of the United States of America and the American nation at large for enabling them to start a new life in a democratic country.

On the tenth day, a violent storm terrorized the passengers. Its winds thrashed through the withering waves, and familiar voices arose from the sea, frustrating my thoughts. Before long, the hand on my forehead informed me I had a high fever. On the last day, the sea was placated. Suddenly, a group of orphaned children cried out as the envisioned New York skyline came into view. “Gott sei Dank!” sobbed a kneeling woman in her native German. Others applauded—an immense draped silhouette amidst the glittering waters loomed before us. Serene and majestic, it welcomed us as destitute, feverish refugees. We were the survivors of the tragic odyssey that history had rejected on its burning shores. “Tempest-tossed” were the words engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty, and never had the poem of Emma Lazarus conveyed so much to me. That wondrous vision soothed my wounds like a mother consoling her newly found child—saved from the Nazi gas chambers and crematoria. Yes, we had entered the New World. We were subhuman no more. As the ship advanced on the silver waters, giant billboards on buildings in the distance offered their Wrigley chewing gum and the dream of a free and easy life unmolested by centuries of European tyranny.

A social worker with a HIAS armband approached, looking for Jewish survivors of the Nazi camps. A group of young orphans soon clustered around him. Gripping me by the arm, Frank told the worker that I was pregnant and needed immediate care. No sooner had he pronounced that magic word than a

dozen young women exclaimed, “me too!” Nearly an hour later, we looked in vain for my uncle, whom I was expecting to be holding a sign that read “Samuelson,” my maiden name. After another half hour, severe pain assailed my lower back. I have no memory of the HIAS shuttle taking us to a Broadway hostel or arriving at the hospital after that. Later, Frank said that the contractions had caused me to writhe like a worm. The image made me wince, then squirm even more.

CHAPTER 21

A TIME OF DARKNESS

When I opened my eyes, I saw Frank's pained face.

"The baby?" I asked.

"They could not save him."

Around me, two mothers were holding their babies, trying to breastfeed. They looked at me with uneasy smiles.

Frank left, whispering a sentence I did not hear.

On the second day at the hospital, the nurses seemed not to notice me as they tended to the newborn babies and their mothers. It was as if, having given birth to death and not life, I was rendered unworthy and invisible. At last, a doctor came to my bed and addressed me,

"Are you a refugee?"

"No, I'm an immigrant," I said while hiding the blue number imprinted on my forearm, reminding me that not long ago, I was less valuable than cattle.

Surprised by my response, the doctor left the room without further questions.

The door regularly opened to reveal visitors bearing flowers, presents, and warm smiles. During those moments, I sank beneath the pink sheet and stayed there.

Three days after my surgery, Frank came to take me back to the hostel. His perception of me was different, I could tell. I had lost the pregnancy glow; he probably did not like my thickened waist either. I realized that the baby had been an anchor for me. Now, on land, I was lost at sea again. I yearned to be a refugee no more.

CHAPTER 22

MY BROKEN DREAM

Frank was informed at the HIAS hostel on Broadway that my uncle had died in a car accident. Was it from the anticipation of meeting his murdered sister's daughter that he lost control of the car? Would there be no end to my postwar trials? In my uncle's files, no proof of our family link was found by the social workers of HIAS. He had lived on Hester Street on the Lower East Side, in an enclave of East European Jews who had immigrated to New York at the turn of the century. I could have imagined living in that vivid, transplanted Yiddishland.

On the other hand, Frank argued that postwar Jewish immigrants were unwanted. Not only did American citizens fear we would not assimilate, but fellow Jews also feared that the influx would encourage anti-Jewish attitudes. "They don't want ghettos," he would say in a dissonant, high-pitched voice. But his words didn't matter because our papers listed Kansas City, Missouri, as our final destination, where the American president was born. With all my trials, I was grateful to him, as if he had sent me a personal invitation to move into his childhood neighborhood in Independence, Missouri.

That afternoon, after my now daily row with Frank, we left the hotel with our small suitcases. Adjacent to our building was a dark alley into which I turned to demonstrate my newfound independence. Frank followed me, apparently unwilling to start a new row, but after a few feet, a sign on a gate stopped us dead in our tracks: NO DOGS, NO JEWS. My eyes passed over the words, but I refused to register them. Recoiling from the entrance, Frank took my hand and whispered, "Even here...."

We resolved to take the first train to Kansas City even if we had to wait hours at the railway station. Those four words on the gate cast a cloud of disgust over the New York skyline, the amazing lights on Broadway, the infinite 42nd Avenue, and all the magical opportunities this city was famed for. At that moment, New York presented itself as a decomposing mountain of trash.

While waiting for a train in Saint Louis, Frank and I sat silently. I knew that any expectation could become a source of frustration and loss. In Kansas City, too, we would be refugees or displaced persons, compelled to work twice as hard to be accepted as citizens, just as our ancestors from Eastern Europe had done. But I tried to block out Jonathan's belief that even in America, we would never integrate.

We stepped off the train. On the pier, people stared at us. We must have appeared so foreign with our old suitcases, too small to contain even the bare necessities. Suddenly, a loud voice accosted us, and an elegant young woman appeared, scrutinizing me from head to toe. I inspected her back, thick ginger hair, high cheekbones, and cold green eyes. But her wide American smile was as home-grown as they came.

"Katia!" Frank called out.

As if to compensate for his spouse's coldness, Katia's husband, a chubby man with sparkling eyes, offered us a warm embrace. In response, Katia hugged and kissed Frank heartily but to me only extended a gloved hand. After immigrating in 1937, Frank's cousin almost immediately married an American musician, Sam Bloom, whom she'd met in Budapest while playing in a band. Sam was a famous saxophonist, and Katia had been a flutist before becoming a dignified housewife who reigned like a queen. Hidden under his round spectacles, Sam agreed to his wife's suggestion to show us around in their spacious white Cadillac. They were in their early thirties and enthralled with their lives and social achievements.

We reached a green neighborhood where squirrels jumped from tree to tree, celebrating spring in full bloom. Sam and Katia's house, white and impressive, was surrounded by a well-tended garden where roses reached the windows on the second floor. In front of the house, an American flag blew in the wind.

Seated in a living room with walls painted a soft pink, Sam offered us cheese and crackers, paired with rosé wine, a snack that felt like a three-course meal—we were so hungry and exhausted by our journey. Sam leaned toward me and whispered in my ear,

"You're one of our president's groupies, I heard! He hasn't got many yet. You should found a club." The chubby man then burst into laughter, highlighting his cushioned world whose limits were lined with optical illusions.

“It’s only because of our gratitude to the American president who accepted us as Jewish refugees,” I replied as convincingly as possible.

“You’re right, Becky,” he said as if he had not just poked fun at me. “I read something exciting in the paper—during the war, Truman tried to secure asylum in Palestine for European Jews to help ‘tear away the Jews from their Nazi butchers.’”

I was stunned. “Really?”

“Yep! Today, he requested 10,000 immigration certificates from the British.” Sam removed his spectacles as if to better gauge my reaction.

“Come on, my darlings, will you stop boring me to death with all this politics? Follow me; we’re going to show you the basement flat. It’s only a basement, but I’m sure you’ll get used to it. At least it’s not a tent in a camp.” I could feel some uneasiness in her tone and how she pronounced the word “basement” twice without looking at us. At this point, we were so exhausted by our trials that we would have called any place home that offered a mattress and a roof above our heads.

Employed as a nurse at the Menorah Hospital in Kansas City, Frank vanished the whole day down its corridors. Each evening, when he came back, I refused all intimacy—the unhealthy dampness of the basement had penetrated my body and soul. My coughing fits returned. My lungs protested. Clinging to his medical interpretation, Frank diagnosed: it as a mere psychosomatic reflex.

CHAPTER 23

A LIGHT IN THE DARK

Fortunately, Sam saw how deep I had sunk. He would bring various newspapers for me to help with my acclimatization. One hot summer day, I was perusing the New York Times when a picture of a ship caught my attention. It bore big black letters in Hebrew: *Haganah Ship, Jewish State*. There was no month when a boat loaded with refugees was not intercepted by the British. Without concealing their emotions, the American journalists sent to Europe closely followed the tragic odyssey of these apatrides, “stateless refugees” begging for a place they could call home. A banner on one ship read, “The Germans have exterminated our families, don’t ruin our hopes.” Then, Jonathan’s fierce determination filled my mind, obliterating everything else. He, too, in the Jewish homeland of Palestine, must have heard about that new tragedy. Through the Mossad emissaries that were in contact with me, I learned that Jonathan had been aboard the *Haim Arlosoroff*, renamed at sea *Af Al Pi*, which in Hebrew meant “in spite of everything.” Jonathan’s ship had been violently intercepted by British soldiers and had to stay four long months in a camp in Cyprus behind barbed wire. A month later, he described his ordeal in a letter as trials that were the price he had to pay to live in the Jewish homeland. Ending with optimism, he expressed a yearning to “build the country and be built by it.”

But that day, I couldn’t find the strength to read about the tragedy of these refugees. Yet I owed it to Jonathan. It was his odyssey too. I studied the picture of the SS President Warfield, a worn-out ship that had carried over 4,500 Jewish displaced persons from France to Palestine. Another photo, dated July 20, 1947, showed British soldiers forcibly removing refugees from the “Exodus 1947,” the new name the boat was given at sea, linking it to the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. I read a description of the event aloud with an exaggerated British accent to distance myself from this painful drama, “Before reaching Haifa, five British destroyers of the Royal Navy encircled and attacked the Exodus 1947, which had hoisted the Zionist flag. A Jewish crew member and

two refugees, including a young orphan, were killed. About a hundred passengers were wounded, mothers searching desperately for their children and children crying for their mothers....” I could not continue. I longed for Jonathan’s wise and reassuring approach. I missed the way he called me by my Hebrew name and the way he looked at me.

On a rare day that Katia visited me, she brought a suitcase full of clothing.

“I have some nice things for you, Rebecca,” she said while opening the suitcase for me.

“Thank you! That’s so sweet of you.”

“They’re not the height of fashion, but I’m sure you’ll like them.”

“Of course. We had so little during the war...”

“And here in America, we did not have enough sugar,” Katia said as if speaking to herself.

“Of course,” I replied, regretting that no honest communication was possible.

“Here, I also brought you some magazines. I imagine you spend much time dreaming about our movie stars.” With that, she hurriedly left the basement for brighter spaces where the American way of life existed not only in black and white, like in my dreams—but in full color.

I enjoyed the pictures of President Truman in various newspapers and magazines. I particularly liked his photograph in the *Kansas City Star* with movie actress Lauren Bacall, who towered over him. Frank could not stand my affection for this president posing with Hollywood stars. The magazines Katia left for me helped get me through the day. I needed their lightness to relieve my conscience. How could I think about the suffering in the world and remain sane? I learned that Bacall and Bogart acted out in real life the love story seen on stage and that Lauren’s mysterious look came from the awkward position of her neck, lowered as she looked upward toward the tall Humphrey.

The thud of newspapers being dropped at my doorstep interrupted my reading. It must have been Sam, pressed for time and late for rehearsal, as usual. Yes, the *New York Times* was developing a series of articles called “The Exodus

Affair,” which was, for me, more of a tragedy than an affair, a word more suited for loving relationships like that of Bacall and Bogart.

July 19, 1947. “Those who survived the concentration camps and the children born in DP camps are forced by the British to embark on three “prisonships” sent back forcefully from Haifa—often with blows and batons—to the land they fled—Germany. There they would join three DP camps surrounded with barbed wire, where only a few would recover their meager belongings not destroyed in the battle.”

One day, I received a letter from the British mandate Palestine.

Dearest Rivka,

Don't think I have forgotten you. You are always on my mind. I even asked myself what you would have done in the unexpected situations I faced. It took time, but HIAS finally found your address in Kansas City. The British intercepted our small ship, and we were sent to a camp (another one!) in Cyprus. Apart from the burning sun, the harshest for us was having to live behind barbed wire again. But we made the most of it, and you would have been proud of me! Thanks to a team of the American Joint Distribution Committee (they are everywhere, how do they do that?) I have learned Hebrew in Cyprus and also a few techniques in agriculture! I have become a Tomboy and swear in Hebrew (you'd like that a little less). Yoram helped me with everything new to me. To tell you the truth, everything is new to me. Together with a bunch of musicians from Belsen, Yoram and I are now settling in Kibbutz Degania. I was told it is the first Kibbutz of Galilea funded by 'halutzim,' pioneers. We live near a beautiful lake that looks like a sea and bears the lovely name of Kineret. I would love it if you could come and see how we work the dry, stony, and abandoned lands. The kibbutz members grow oranges and grapefruit as big as the sun! Have you ever seen those juicy fruits? We were also in the desert, and I loved it! In a kibbutz near Beer-Sheba. I love that man's intelligence to develop the desert has no limit. Almost everyone around me seems to nurture a project to develop irrigation. Yoram too! He calls me Ilana, and I love it. And to think that I wanted to end my life in the DP camp, I feel it could not have been me. I am born again, even if I can't forget or forgive. I speak Hebrew all the time; it's strange, but it gives me confidence. It's a funny feeling I cannot describe. I feel closer to the land we cultivate. Nobody even knows where I come from now that I'm Ilana. After we arrived, the kibbutz members told us it was

preferable not to speak our native languages, which are connected to memories of loss and suffering. They said we are now new Jews with no connections to the victims of the ghettos in Europe. Here, it's a new vision, and that is true! They don't even want to hear Yiddish. "Only Hebrew," they say. And another word they repeat all the time is, "Kadima, Kadima!" It means there is no time to look back, only ahead! I work eight hours a day like all adults, and believe me, Rivka, I have no time to think. I'm so exhausted at the end of the day that I immediately fall asleep. Everyone thinks I'm seventeen, so I never tell them my age. Anyway, I feel so much older. You know why.

In the banana fields, the work is exhausting, but we are together, all the musicians. No face is livid anymore. We all have a tan that makes us look healthy, even small Jurek, whose name is now Uri. Believe me; we are like everyone else here as long as we work hard and don't complain. They don't know that we were taught the hard way never to complain. So, they think we are good workers, almost naturally. Yes, Rivka, you would not recognize us, the whole bunch from the DP camp. Even so, things can get really tough at times. It's not a joke! Mosquitoes thirsty for blood can ruin your night, and it hurts so much everywhere on my body. But nothing—not the cockroaches or the scorpions—is worse than the jackal howls at night. I can't help think of the agonizing cries of those in Terezin. Without Yoram, I would be lost. He is almost a hero in the kibbutz because he discovered a clever way not to break eggs when collecting them. At night, when we're not too tired and when he is not on guard duty, we sing together songs of hope in Hebrew. Rivka, you must come and see us!

With all my love,

Ilana

Yes, I knew I had to find a way to Palestine. I took the last issue of the New York Times Sam left me, trying to spot the headlines about The Exodus, 1947. I recognized familiar faces in a picture taken at Belsen. The man in the center was Menachem Rosensaft, the director of the camp committee. Huge banners in Hebrew summed up the political situation and state of mind of the refugees who were still there on September 8, 1947, "We are determined to build a country of our own." Some four thousand DPs still in our former camp in Belsen were demonstrating against the forced and violent return of the refugees on the Exodus to German DP camps. What a stroke of luck that Lena was spared the SS President Warfield! I admired those who undertook a hunger strike initiated by a

teenage boy who had survived the Buchenwald concentration camp. Suddenly, it was as if the world wanted us to remain victims and refugees! I had found a way to fight that injustice with my own words.

On that day, Frank came home earlier than expected. He was angry at the hospital. A nurse had expressed her fears about communists in the country while he had voiced disgust at the anticommunist hysteria surrounding them. He threw the newspaper on the table, upsetting the plates I had just laid. The day before, on November 24, the House of Un-American Activities Committee had begun questioning filmmakers over their suspected communist loyalties. How could this happen in America, the refuge for the oppressed? "Tell me it's a bad dream!" he shouted before throwing the newspaper in the trash bin.

I read that the commission had been created in 1938 to root out Americans guilty of collaborating with the USSR. It meant that actors, producers, and anyone whose liberty was necessary for creativity, were being spied on. People were blacklisted in all professional sectors, and the lists were passed on to the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Why did Americans not make better use of the liberty they enjoyed? One day, I would tackle that question in a newspaper column. But it could only be done with humor, a weapon I did not yet possess. I envied those who did.

Autumn in Kansas City began with cool, brisk air and Oak leaves changing colors. Fridays were particularly special. The Congregation, Kehilat Israel, allotted us eighteen dollars "so that Shabbat would not be a day of privation." That's what the social worker told us with an embarrassed smile. Frank and I longed for a day when we would not need any more financial help.

CHAPTER 24

DISPLACED AGAIN

Would you like a bagel and lox?" asked Katia. Her clear voice tinkled like silver cutlery.

"Lox? It looks like salmon."

"It is salmon. It's the latest craze in New York!"

"Oh," I answered, unsure of myself.

"I just love the wide-eyed innocence of the refugees when they arrive in America," she said while serving the hors d'oeuvre.

"Weren't you a refugee in 1937?" I asked.

"For me, it was quite different. With Sam's help, I integrated very quickly. After a few months at his side, everybody thought I was an American. The truth is that I was very young. It is always easier when you are young. And Sam dear, you really helped me, didn't you?"

She gazed at her husband affectionately. He merely nodded. Katia's words demoted me to the status of a second-class citizen. We would never become like Katia and Sam, even if we prayed to the same God and ate the same food.

I recalled the remark of a Baltic woman I had met at the consulate, "Even in America, you will remain refujews!" Hatred couched in a newly coined word.

"Some more gefilte fish?" The wife offered her accommodating husband.

"Yes, please...this stuffed carp is almost as tasty as my mother's used to be... another few years and you'll get the knack of it, my dear!"

After reciting the *birkat hamazon*, the blessing thanking God for the meal, Sam invited us into the living room while Katia prepared coffee. Sitting next to me on the sofa, he said,

“Truman was more sympathetic to the Jews than Roosevelt.”

“No one could have been less sympathetic than Roosevelt,” retorted Frank sharply.

“I feel as if we abandoned you, the Jews of Europe, to your terrible fate,” continued Sam, visibly pained.

“Don’t feel guilty, Sam! What could the Jewish organizations in America do when President Roosevelt himself refused to bomb the railways that led to Auschwitz?”

“Roosevelt’s priority was to win the war, even if no Jews remained at its end.”

“But Becky!” cried Katia, burying her face in her hands.

“What?” I replied, stunned.

“You would not be alive if Roosevelt had ordered the bombing!”

“You’re right, Katia, perhaps not.”

“Yes, sweetheart, you’re right,” repeated Sam, as if those words could assuage his guilt.

“And neither would I,” added Frank.

Sam continued ...

“Come, it’s high time I drive you home...A religious Jew doesn’t drive on the Sabbath, but because of the distances, we need to adapt our laws... Besides, soon we won’t have to break the commandments; a synagogue is being built around the corner...”

“Good Sabbath, Katia!” I answered hastily, joined by Frank.

“Bye-bye! Take care, folks!” she said, busily clearing the table.

On Friday night, for the first time since we had arrived in the United States, our bodies united in love, easing the ongoing tension between us. Embracing love was also a way of celebrating the Sabbath. We had not spoken about starting a family since my miscarriage.

The next day we walked to the nearest synagogue, a modern white building offering a hospitable atmosphere. It was a reform temple where men and women

sat together, the women talking loudly before the service began, the scent of their perfumes suspended in the warm air. The women's hats swayed as they leaned over to embrace a friend or share a secret. I noticed a slender, elegant woman approach Katia and me. Gently kissing my companion on her cheek, she made me out to be invisible. When I smiled in her direction, she pirouetted to the back of the room, greeting everyone with effusive compliments and a confident smile.

What had I done to become invisible? And what do I have to do for my presence to be noticed? At that moment, I decided that whatever the cost, I would become a journalist and devote my life to defending refugees, those poor souls who had become pathetic in the eyes of the American people.

CHAPTER 25

A DOOR TO OPEN

It was around 11 P.M. Frank was still studying for his state board examination. He couldn't endure working as a nurse anymore— one who was often rebuked in public. The doctor he had been in Budapest needed to find his way to Missouri. Also, it was hard to put up with people who saw a communist behind every refugee. No matter how hard he tried, he could not rid himself of his Hungarian accent. His loss of self-confidence became increasingly noticeable.

Joining Frank at the dinner table on which his books were spread out, I stroked his hair lightly.

“Making progress?”

“Do you want to help me, *mein taiere*?”

He knew I liked Yiddish terms of endearment.

“Of course.”

“Let's move to Georgia. We could settle in Atlanta, it's a big city, and they need doctors so badly that they admit physician refugees after a trial period. No State Board exam needed!” He smiled at the thought.

“But we would have to start from scratch again, right?” I did not even try to conceal my apprehension.

“Wouldn't you do that for me?”

“You speak as if you were asking me to bake a pie while depriving me of the oven and the whole kitchen in one go! Do you really think a woman's sole purpose is to make her husband happy?”

He did not answer but disappeared behind his book. He looked so helpless that I almost accepted the role. He abounded with energy, though much of it was ill-spent by staying all day at the hospital.

“But look! It took us almost a year to be accepted. The Jewish community in Kansas City has just offered to buy furniture for us. And...did you forget Sam and Katia?”

“You see only your schedule, your political science course, your English classes...the shop around the corner where you buy makeup. Is that all that counts?”

I could have replied harshly, especially when he slammed the door behind him. But it was no use. He was overworked. Trying to obtain the status of a doctor had made him nervous and aggressive. It was ironic that, once upon a time, Nazi officers sought him out for treatment.

At night we were two strangers sharing a bed. One morning, I thought up a plan and put on Katia’s unwanted clothing. I found a tight blue dress with a short matching jacket that revealed the curves of my hips. I grabbed Katia’s black stilettos that transformed my legs into shapely ones. I applied a little powder to my cheeks and nose and, for a finishing touch, added a drop of perfume to my wrists—it was strangely reminiscent of Guerlain’s *Heure Bleue* that I sampled so often in the Galeries Lafayette. Outside, the autumn morning breeze further revived me. I was just in time to catch the bus to the Menorah Hospital of Kansas City. Shopping centers, gas stations, and stately private homes ran along its route. Eventually, the red-tiled building appeared with its majestic, seven-branched Menorah gracing the entrance. At the reception desk, I asked for Professor Sherman. The young woman at the desk glanced at my outfit and smiled.

“You are lucky Professor Sherman is here this morning, but you should have made an appointment.”

“I’m sorry about that, but it’s somewhat urgent,” I said, hoping my Polish accent was not perceptible.

“What is your name? I’ll ask if he can receive you.”

“Rebecca Samuelson Gandl. I am very grateful to you.”

A few moments later, she reappeared with a smile that revealed a set of healthy white teeth, the sign of a well-nourished American.

“Professor Sherman can receive you very briefly.”

“Thank you for your help,” I said.

As I walked down the corridor, I recalled my mother’s words about good posture as a prerequisite to elegance, the advice I had dismissed for too long.

Professor Sherman was comfortably seated at his desk. A middle-aged man, he had white hair and grey spectacles. He stood up to shake my hand.

“Please sit down,” he said invitingly.

“Well...” I began, “Frank Gandl, my husband, was hired a year ago as a nurse in your hospital. You may know that he was a physician in Budapest. Before being deported in 1944, he directed a research group that studied the link between tuberculosis and mental illness. As you know, in Missouri, he has to sit for the State Board exam, which requires lengthy preparation at the end of a full workday. In the meantime, your hospital is missing out on his expertise as a doctor and researcher. If I ask you to take him onto your team as a doctor, it is because states like Georgia do not require the State Board examination to be able to practice. Only a test period is required. Frank is now very attached to your hospital. Please, Professor Sherman, consider my request.”

“Madam,” the professor replied, resting his eyes on my burning cheeks, “I admire the strength with which you defend your husband’s cause, which is yours as well. You may know that Menorah Hospital was founded when Jewish students suffered from a numerus clausus imposed upon them and when Jewish doctors were rejected from other hospitals. Believe me, Madam, that justice is present in everything we do; however, there’s a strange rumor circulating that poisons the air we breathe; how shall I call it? Paranoia. Yes, unfortunately, that’s the case. For certain people, every refugee is a potential spy.”

With a smile of gratitude, I thanked him and left the room.

CHAPTER 26

NEW BEGINNINGS

Was it a coincidence? Just after Passover, Frank received a letter of acceptance. He would be joining the hospital staff as a doctor. He only had to complete basic training and sit for a simple exam. I did not mention my visit to the hospital. Helping him without his knowing felt like an outstanding achievement—one I did not think I was capable of. Until now, I had not viewed myself as an adult, only as someone eager to be taken care of. At last, I was able to give.

I sat down at the table in the kitchen and wrote.

Dear Mother,

Today, you would have been proud of me. In fact, I have enough signs to know you can see me or feel me from where you are because those who perform good deeds, as you did, never die. Their souls dwell with us, as the British chaplain told me. Mum, there's a terrible secret I need to share with you. My best friend, Deborah, suffered from typhus, but that's not what killed her a few hours before the camp was liberated. She had hidden a potato under her thin blanket, and I stole it. She starved just hours before liberation. At night, my stomach was so empty that I had hallucinations. I robbed her of her food, thinking I would only take a bite. But I couldn't stop. The following day, when British soldiers liberated Bergen Belsen, she was dead.

Mother, I've never been able to communicate freely with you, I always felt you couldn't understand me, but now you're the only one with whom I can share this terrible secret. I wanted her to live, but I couldn't help it. I couldn't help her. Mum, you know that the right words never come to me when needed. I hope you did not need my words to understand that I loved you.

Your only daughter,

Rebecca

The following day, I told Frank I would try to get hired at the Kansas City Star. My English improved fast, and I enjoyed writing in a language free from the suffering I associated with Yiddish and Polish. Frank was proud of my decision. He commented that “finally, I had become “responsible,” a word I didn’t care for. At least he noticed my evolution. He took me to the movies for the first time since our arrival in the United States, and we saw *The Hawk*. In the film, the private detective, Humphrey Bogart, does not hesitate to condemn the woman he loves to death.

I thought Frank would comment on the power of passionate love, but he kept harping on the same subject.

“That is precisely what the House on Un-American Activities Committee is doing—condemning us to death by launching hearings that question the loyalty of America’s citizens, including many Jewish filmmakers. A few even committed suicide after their reputations were ruined.”

I kept silent. Staring at me, he said:

“You look surprised. Don’t you read the newspaper?”

His voice was high-pitched again. I would have loved to remain silent, but I had to say something!

“I believe you, Frank. But I must take a sleeping pill at night after reading the paper.”

“You take pills even when you don’t read the paper,” he said abruptly and stood up.

I followed him without saying another word.

That night we slept again as strangers.

I woke up early and hopped on a bus. Sam had arranged an interview at the Kansas City Star with his friend Irving Rosenblum. Finding the place wasn’t easy, even though I asked for directions several times. People were very nice to me, a sign that hopefully spoke of my appearance. Indeed, Rosenblum, a small, good-humored man with spectacles, looked me over from top to bottom. As the senior writer and editor, he wanted me to translate documents from French to English. He made it clear that if I did a good job, more work would follow. He

told me how lucky I was to follow in the steps of Ernest Hemingway, who was even younger than me when he first walked into the newsroom of the Kansas City Star. The recent high school graduate was a cub reporter for six months before heading to the Italian front, where he joined the Red Cross ambulance service during World War I.

“Where were you during the war? I suppose you were not yet a cub reporter,” he said while rummaging through his desk.

I was glad I was already sitting down. I was not prepared to speak about my past so lightly.

“It’s... painful.”

“Was your family...?”

“Yes.”

“Did you...?”

“I was in Auschwitz-Birkenau.”

“God Almighty!”

I pulled up my sleeve to reveal the number tattooed on my forearm.

“We were stripped of our clothes, hair, names, and belongings—but they could not destroy my soul,” I said, suddenly out of breath.

Rosenblum stood up and held onto my wrist to contain his emotion. I continued:

“I still have the strength to be a war reporter in the Middle East.”

Looking at me respectfully for the first time, he asked no more questions.

For days on end, I translated all kinds of texts, even Yiddish to English. I brought bagels or pizza for lunch, prepared tea, and coffee, kept the office neat, made myself indispensable, and practiced my hand at writing columns.

One morning, Irving Rosenblum whistled joyfully upon entering the office and asked, after shuffling some papers around his desk...

“Hey kid, how would you like to be a reporter in the Middle East?”

I was stunned. But I stood up and said,

“Do you mean it?”

“Sure. But you gotta decide on the spot.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank, thank you so much! Of course, I... accept!” I stammered.

Rosenblum extended his hand. “Kid, you got yourself a deal!” he exclaimed, American style.

We shook hands. My American dream was materializing; my quest seemed compelling enough for Rosenblum to believe in me. The newspapers were writing about President Truman’s view of the Jewish national homeland as a refuge for those who had survived “a world tragedy.” Would Independence, Missouri be the cradle of a state for the Jews?

Journalists worldwide wrote hundreds of articles on the consequences of the partition of Palestine. The best strategists had foreseen the collapse of the future nation that faced five Arab armies ready to destroy it in its embryo. The historic United Nations vote of November 29th, 1947, struck like lightning in the darkness. The big nations around the globe understood the necessity of an independent Jewish state for the survivors of the Nazi genocide. The cub journalist, which I was, tried to convey the joy of a people who had never abandoned the hope of living on their ancestral land. Of course, my thoughts were directed toward Lena and Jonathan. I had sent a letter to their kibbutz, S’dot Yam, near Caesarea, where Lena and her boyfriend Yoram had temporarily moved to rejoin Jonathan. They knew about the child I lost and offered their condolences. Jonathan sent a five-page letter shortly after the vote at the United Nations, explaining that it was not a mere political gesture. It was the nations of the world stepping up to repair the injustice committed against the Jews for centuries. “Our joy is deep,” he wrote in Yiddish. He then mentioned the threat expressed by General Hussein, speaker of the High Arab Committee of Palestine, before the vote, “The proposed partition line will be nothing but a line of fire and blood.” Arab aggressions immediately followed; they mined roads and attacked convoys. Jerusalem was under siege, with the Arabs depriving the Jews of water and basic food. Even children were erecting makeshift barricades and risking their lives—hoping to hold onto every ounce of their holy land. On

November 30th, explosions and ambushes took place everywhere, on the roads, in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

A week after the U.N. vote, five hundred Israelis had been killed. Hovering over Israel's crib, British fairies had cast a spell. What would be my objective as a cub journalist endowed with such a mission? It was clear to me "I had to expose the British duplicity." I would show that British contradictions fed violence. What was the use of the Balfour Declaration as a promise of a Jewish homeland if the British also promised the Arabs an "Arabic Kingdom" without defining its borders?

Jonathan provided a few explanations in his letter to help me with my first meaningful task. I tried digging up as many documents as possible at the local library. On May 10, 1948, I left Kansas City and took a plane bound for Tel Aviv. Surprisingly, Frank encouraged me to go. His work at the hospital kept him busy day and night while the news consumed me. On occasion, when we found ourselves in the same room, we hardly spoke to each other.

His parting words were, "Take care of Lena and Jonathan."

CHAPTER 27

S'DOT YAM THE SEA FIELDS

I arrived at Lod Airport. Bedouins crossed the runway a few meters from the plane, accompanied by their faithful camels under a burning sun. With haste, I stepped to the ground. A dream, again? With tears in their eyes, men, women, and children bent down to kiss the ground, the holy land, sand, and dust symbolizing the end of infinite wandering. The sun blinded me, and the wind whipped around my body. Under the shock of a vision where dream and reality became one, I could hardly breathe. Soon I recognized the tall figure approaching me and felt the salt on his skin when he pressed against me.

“You are here!”

“I cannot believe it myself,” I answered. His lips were dry from the wind. I could not let go of them.

“Miracles occur every day on this land,” he whispered.

Carrying my suitcase, he took me to a bus that resembled a tank and read: “Lod-Tel Aviv.” With every sharp turn, the driver propelled his passengers onto each other’s laps. Jonathan held me tightly. Suddenly, shots rang out from the road. The driver accelerated.

“What happened?” I asked, terrified.

“Nothing unusual,” Jonathan replied calmly.

“A child is wounded!” shouted a woman.

“Dov, take care of the child in the back,” said Jonathan to the man seated behind the driver.

A teenager took a first aid kit from a rack above his seat and tended to a child whose arm was bleeding.

In Tel Aviv, next to impressive palm trees, we waited for a bus to Hadera, a small town equidistant between Tel Aviv and Haifa. The first Jewish settlers to develop agriculture had died from a contagious tropical plague. Jonathan took pleasure in explaining how Hadera had become one of the first agricultural settlements in the country funded by Jewish inhabitants. After an hour, the bus finally pulled up, and Jonathan greeted the driver like an old friend.

"Eyal is our best driver. No one can handle a gun like him nor anticipate ambushes the way he does. You can only see that in American movies."

I feigned a smile.

"It's a pity he's not staying with us," I replied.

"He'll sleep tonight on the kibbutz and train us before he drives back in the morning. During the war, he prepared volunteers in the event of a German invasion of Palestine."

"I feel so much admiration for all of you."

As the bus barreled along, the luminous dunes came into view, inviting me to discover a sheltered island: the Kibbutz near the seashore. Taking me by the hand, Jonathan led me through the orange groves. In the distance were the white bungalows of the *Chaverim*, his comrades who had become his new family. Jonathan plucked a fig from a tree and put it in my mouth. Suddenly I heard a rustling of leaves behind me. I turned around.

"It's only a jackal!" he laughed.

Back at the little white village, hundreds of chickens welcomed us.

"You worry too much, Rivka. You should save your energy."

I let Jonathan's arms enfold me. "How much do you like me?" I asked.

"There's no limit," he said, stroking my hair as if trying to straighten it like my mother used to.

Together we made our way through the brood of chickens, walking along the neatly drawn alleys bordered by small, young trees I had never seen before. The light was waning, and the breeze from the sea carried with it subtle scents. Jonathan paused to show me the sun on the perfect horizontal line of the deep blue waters. In the face of such beauty, I was breathless. Even more so when the ball of fire plunged into the sea after a slight hesitation. We turned to each other.

“We’re an unlikely couple,” I said, immediately regretting my comment.

“You think too much; your brains always get the better of me. Besides, we can’t live without each other, don’t you see?” he said, throwing me a life preserver.

“*Shalom, chaver,*” a teenage boy greeted Jonathan as he walked by.

“*Shalom, chaver,*” Jonathan replied.

I spent the night in Jonathan’s bungalow. While I slept, he performed guard duty for the kibbutz, rifle in hand. In the morning, I joined his friends for work. I woke up at four in the morning, and we drove by jeep to the fields, where we picked potatoes until the earth burned under our feet. In the afternoon, Jonathan introduced me to his friend Avital Meyerson, a *Sabra* born in Jerusalem. He was wearing what looked like a green army uniform and impressed me with his physical strength. Jonathan could not hide his admiration for a man who had led clandestine immigration and risked his life to help the former prisoners of Nazi camps start new lives as Jewish pioneers.

With a casual gesture, Avital invited us to sit on the grass near the fig trees. I was proud to be part of their conversation wearing a pair of oversized work pants and a blue kibbutz shirt. To be reborn on one’s ancestral soil! I was surprised my thoughts meditated on how pleasant it would be to die here, at home, among the fruit trees I would soon help cultivate. Meyerson interrupted my thoughts...

“Our soldiers from Gush Etzion have destroyed twelve tanks, but the bombings are becoming more intense.”

“I heard we are facing 2,000 well-armed aggressors. What can we do without men and ammunition?” answered Jonathan.

“Perhaps our enemies will accept a cease-fire. Our soldiers have been defending the land for more than four months. But it may be wishful thinking,” Avital added bitterly.

“Jews all over the world are volunteering as soldiers and sending weapons,” I added my naive optimism.

No one answered.

On Friday, May 14th, 1948, just before the Sabbath, kibbutz members were glued to a single radio in the dining room. According to the Voice of Israel, fresh Arab attacks were feared. Jewish travelers on the roads leading to Jerusalem were warned of snipers and armed gangs. Suddenly, the program was interrupted, and the following words were heard, first in Hebrew and then in thirty other languages: "We proclaim the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine and name it Israel."

"It's a miracle," I whispered.

"It's our accomplishment; the foundations were laid long ago," replied one of Jonathan's friends.

"We're free, we're free!" exclaimed others.

Next to us, a man cried.

All the kibbutz members poured out of their bungalows. Some danced. Others shouted, "The British don't control Palestine anymore!"

A temporary government, hastily formed in Tel Aviv, proclaimed the birth of the Jewish state before the world's nations. Joy and anxiety tugged at everyone's hearts. A few *Chaverim* from the kibbutz I now felt a part of, began singing Hatikvah, the new country's national anthem. Standing up, they sang with emotion: *Od lo avda tikvatenu*: our hope is not lost.

Harry S. Truman was the first world leader to recognize the State of Israel. Having come to Palestine as a kind of "American ambassador," I could not hide my pride. On the radio waves, David Ben Gurion read the proclamation. Jonathan stuck his ear to the radio loudspeakers as he elbowed his way closer to the magic box. The words were moving as many attacks had occurred since my arrival. "We appeal—in the very midst of the attacks being launched against us for months now—to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in building up the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions." Jonathan was surprised when the irreligious Ben Gurion placed his trust in the "Rock of Israel." I was thrilled that the new nation shared the same religiosity with the American people.

I needed Jonathan more than ever to help me channel my emotions as I embraced the weight of history. In his empty room, full of expectations, I became time and space when he kissed me. If only we could remain in this embrace for a lifetime, breath to breath, our bodies seeking unity. He accepted my love, with the will of the God of our fathers, behind the curtain of our secrecy. I felt the pangs of birth in the cradle of his muscular body. As I almost fainted with blissful weariness, I heard people shouting outside, "A war broke out!" Fear gripped me again.

Arabs attacked isolated Jewish villages and buses, and Jews retaliated. Jonathan wanted to join the *Haganah* forces, but I implored him to wait. He said that the Jews had very little ammunition left. The Egyptian army targeted the Jewish communities in the Negev, where Lena had settled. In a letter to Jonathan, she described tasting hell but was convinced a Jewish state would be soon born. She would come to see us as soon as she could. Jonathan kept silent while the radio blared its bad news. At last, he unburdened his heart:

"In each Jewish village under attack, they destroy the land we worked and the trees we planted! They are after our souls!"

"They can't destroy us," I could only reply weakly, and stroke his forearm, which he did not feel.

From the moment of Israel's declaration of independence, Jerusalem—the capital city of this old/new nation—was besieged. The Jordanian-occupied Old City of Jerusalem was stripped of all signs of its ancient Jewish presence. Synagogues and ritual baths that had existed for two thousand years were reduced to rubble. The Arab Legion soldiers isolated Jerusalem, depriving its Jewish inhabitants of food, water, and fuel. Arab bombings and attacks were followed by counterattacks by Israeli forces. Avidan, a friend of Jonathan's, found a cable that read, "We are out of ammunition, and our morale is at its lowest. If attacks go on, it will be the end of us." Two weeks after the fledgling state's founding, the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem surrendered. It shocked all of us.

That morning, I walked along the sandy shores near the kibbutz. The emerald waters of Sdot Yam, the Fields of the Sea, would carry away the new

waves of pain. May was drawing to a close, and soon I would return to America. Wrapped up in my thoughts, I barely heard my name:

“Rebecca!”

I was so used to being called Rivka that the voice had to seek me out a second time:

“Rebecca! It’s me!”

I could discern a feminine figure on one of the dunes bordering the wooden houses of the kibbutz. As I got closer, two blonde braids bounced toward me.

“Lena?”

I ran the last few steps to embrace her tightly. Long after the shock of seeing each other had passed, the rush of the waves added to the emotion of our reunion. We held onto each other for a long time.

The day before my departure, Jonathan introduced me to Myriam, a sabra born in the Land of Israel and a former member of the Haganah. Yigal, her older brother, had been killed on the road to Hadassah Hospital, located on Mount Scopus. It was Arab gunmen who attacked a convoy of Jewish nurses, doctors, and patients, killing seventy-seven in retaliation for the murder of two hundred villagers by Irgun troops—seeking snipers hiding out in the Arab village of Deir Yassin. Myriam’s parents still lived on Kibbutz Dan, on Mount Hermon. She seemed to derive her proud stature from that place. I envied her belonging to a people of pioneers in desert lands.

Myriam’s eyes met Jonathan’s without revealing their mystery. How long had they known each other? How intimate had they been? I noticed she seemed to take his presence for granted. She was undoubtedly more daring than I had been during my months with Jonathan, unsure of me and my future. For her, love had brought an end to her self-doubt. She seemed so poised, confident, even languorous at times, as if space had been created for her leisure.

When Myriam headed for the door, she pivoted, sending strands of her long black hair to stroke Jonathan’s neck, leaving behind a jasmine-scented breeze. Before observing Jonathan’s reaction, I left the room with a pounding head.

That night, I was lying on a mattress on the floor when Jonathan knocked on the door and entered without waiting for an answer.

“How’s your headache?” he inquired.

“How did you know?”

“Don’t move!”

He hit the wall above my head with his thick sandal in hand. A black scorpion fell onto the floor.

“My God, you saved me!”

“Rebecca, I need to go.”

“Where?”

“To join our Defense forces. Our towns have been cut off from the rest of the Jewish-held area by Arab armies.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” I stammered.

“Some of us may be sent to the North, maybe to Nahariya.”

“Nahariya?”

“It’s a city on the coast. It was founded by refugees who fled Nazi Germany before the war. Now it can only maintain contact with Tel Aviv by sea.”

“Do you really have to go?” I resisted an impulse to grab Jonathan’s arm as if he was already gone.

“We can’t let them down. “Our country is at war, Rivka.”

“Why do you always have to be the one to risk your life? You’re not the only soldier, Jonathan. Can’t you work in the kibbutz? You are needed here to work and guard the land.” I could say what came to me because I had nothing more to lose.

“Sweet Rivka, you don’t discuss orders in the army, especially when you are saving your country from destruction. The Arab armies intend to drive us into the sea.”

“Into the sea?”

“Not exactly for a boat cruise.”

“You mean to drown us?”

“Like the Egyptians did, in the Bible.”

I made every effort to retain my composure. He stared at me as if he wished to commit my features to memory: my sun-kissed face, my smile whenever he looked at me. I heard him say, “Take care,” as he walked out.

On May 30th, I left the kibbutz—a few days after Jonathan’s departure. I missed his presence by my side, the seashore and the cacti, the fragrant fig trees, and the roman ruins of Caesarea. I took a bus to Hadera and Tel Aviv, “the Hill of Spring.” After another bus to Lod airport, I boarded a plane to New York. I was thankful there were no ambushes or explosions.

The War of Independence claimed the lives of six thousand Israelis, a thousand of whom had survived the Nazi genocide of the Jews. Some were never identified. Once they disembarked from their frail ships, these survivors who turned soldiers had to fight with whatever weapons they could come by. Their strength lay in the spirit and determination found among the desperate passengers of the *Exodus*, as David Ben Gurion would later say about the fighters of Israel.

CHAPTER 28

A FREE ROAD

Back in Kansas City, all the events I had witnessed buzzed around in my head. I was still arrested by the powerful encounters forged in the new State of Israel. My boss at the Kansas City Star was eager to receive my assignment, which should have been submitted to the editor days earlier. I brooded for hours about the strong women surrounding Jonathan like Myriam, the radio operator equipped to guard the kibbutz, weapon in hand. She was ready to give her life for the security of our newly proclaimed nation, the State of Israel! Oh, how good it was to say “Israel,” even if my commitment paled in comparison. Yes, I engaged myself, but only through words written on blank paper, far from the bullets and the dangers of battle. Here in Kansas City, I was still regarded as a refugee and expected to behave accordingly. However, I could no longer play the victim.

Once I became aware of this, I stopped procrastinating. Making one cup of coffee after another, the journalist within me suddenly woke up. I pulled my hair back, sat at the kitchen table, and wrote. Under my fingers, the typewriter took on a life of its own. I accounted for the miracle of the resurrection of Israel; recalled the Jewish resistance against the British mandate of Palestine; the fight of a few men against five regular Arab armies; the prayers of Jewish soldiers in their tanks; the cooperation of their sisters as radio operators; and their mothers’ anguish.

These two columns in the Kansas City Star paved the way to acceptance in America’s Midwest. At last, I found my niche, if not yet a place I could call home.

That night, Frank woke me up.

“It’s only a bad dream; breathe slowly!”

“I can’t.”

“It’s not good for the baby. You’ll pass on your anxiety.”

“What can I do!” I screamed.

“Take something to calm yourself.”

“You have lost your patience with me,” I cried. “And there can be no love without patience.”

I buried my head in my pillow.

CHAPTER 29

SEEING THE LIGHT

Oblivious to the noise outside, my baby slept quietly in his cradle. At times, a furtive smile would stretch across his tiny lips while his pink eyelids remained motionless. I took him cautiously out of his nest and placed him against my breast to nurse. Nathaniel had given me life—he was my inner light. During those treasured moments, I was him, and he was me. I savored his rhythmic sucks, eyes closed, and his satisfaction after being fed. Sometimes, he would stop sucking, and smile. How could it be? Nathaniel was my response to our torturers, my revenge. I had interrupted my writing to bond with my baby. Imperceptibly, he took Frank's place in my life. I would lull him to sleep with a Yiddish lullaby my mother had sung to me—*Rozhinkes mitmandlen*, raisins, and almonds.

Exhausted by his research and work at the hospital, Frank would come back late each night, eat alone, and immediately fall asleep, unaware of Nathan's needs and my efforts to soothe him.

One night, home early to celebrate the completion of his research, he took Nathan from his cradle and lulled him in his arms.

“Do you see how he looks at me?” he asked.

“Exactly how you want to be looked at.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has a lot of admiration for his father.”

“Are you trying to please me?”

“Did you see his expression? So mature for a child!” I explored.

“He looks like someone who has already lived,” Frank said in a near-whisper, as if in the presence of something formidable.

“Do you believe in the transmigration of souls?” I asked, trying to make the moment last.

“Never thought about it,” Frank replied, the spell broken.

February 17, 1949. Nathan's smiles enriched my world for five months. Outside, the snow buried the landscape and stifled all sound. The doorbell rang, and I was startled. The Israeli stamp looked familiar, but not the sender's name and address. Nathaniel started to cry. While tearing open the envelope, I took him in my arms and read,

Rebecca,

I don't know you, but I found your address in Jonathan's address book. He often told me about a girlfriend from Warsaw who had settled in the United States. I understood you meant a lot to him. He made me promise that if something ever happened to him, I would send you a letter he had prepared for you. Jonathan was like an older brother to me. I found him by a miracle. But now I have lost him. On his way to irrigate the land, he was ambushed. He has returned to the soil for which he fought and gave his life.

May God give you the strength to carry on.

Kadima! His favorite word,

Joseph

I opened the letter feverishly:

Your future, Rivka, is your son.

Who will work for our ancestral land and fight for it

Every single day?

Don't look back; go to yourself.

And never let the light die.

You know that love is stronger than death,

For we will be reunited when everything is light,

Amidst the retrieved souls,

Because it is you, I always loved.

Jonathan

Nathaniel was still nestled in my arms. His expression both frightened and reassured me. This mature and dreamy look, I had seen before.

“We’re leaving tomorrow.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Françoise Ouzan received her Ph.D. in history from the Paris I-Sorbonne University. Formerly an Associate Professor at the University of Reims, she is currently a Senior Research Associate at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center of Tel Aviv University. Françoise Ouzan has published widely on displaced persons, antisemitism, and American Jewry. In addition to her most recent book, *How Young Holocaust Survivors Rebuilt their Lives*, she co-edited *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities* (2012), and *Postwar Jewish Displacement and Rebirth, 1945-1967* (2014, paperback, 2016).

Françoise was inspired by many great mentors along her research journey—Elie Wiesel being the most notable. The few handwritten letters from Elie Wiesel were golden pebbles that brightened her path. One of those letters is his endorsement of this book, it has been included below.

The former “Buchenwald boys” whom she traced in France and in Israel with the help of Judith Hemmendinger, who had directed one of the homes of the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE: Children’s Relief Agency) in France, patiently illuminated various facets of their life experiences and challenges both before and after the war. A letter of endorsement for this novel has been included.

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Elie Wiesel
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Le 7.8.2008

Chère Françoise Ozau-

bin, j'ai lu. Neuria,
un fait. Comme tu es
écrits, c'est un lien puissant
et doux.

Restons en contact -

Bien à tous -

Eugène

10/08/2007

DEMAIN, NOUS PARTONS

J'ai lu le livre *DEMAIN, NOUS PARTONS*, de Françoise Ouzan, édité chez Bibliophane, avec le plus grand plaisir. A peine commencé, je ne pouvais plus m'arrêter avant de l'avoir terminé, car l'intrigue vous tient en haleine et on voudrait savoir comment la jeune fille, si attachante, se sortira de ces camps D.P., camps de *Displaced Persons* où étaient confinés en Allemagne, après la guerre, les déportés libérés, quelquefois durant de longues années, puisqu'aucun pays ne voulait d'eux. Moi-même, j'avais une tante, sortie de Bergen-Belsen, qui m'a suppliée de lui envoyer un certificat de travail (je dirigeais à cette époque une maison d'enfants près de Paris) pour qu'elle puisse obtenir un visa d'entrée en France et quitter, enfin, l'Allemagne maudite. L'histoire relatée par Françoise Ouzan, est captivante et décrit si bien les difficultés d'arriver soit en Palestine, alors que seule l'immigration illégale, avec tous ses dangers, était possible, soit aux Etats-Unis malgré les quotas américains limités, pour s'y sentir mal à l'aise en tant que réfugiée. Il était bon, qu'en filigrane de l'intrigue, cette période d'après la libération des camps, si difficile à décrire car elle semble irréelle, soit présente tout au long de ce livre qui ne vous laisse jamais indifférent et vous oblige à y réfléchir une fois le livre refermé.

Judith Hemmendinger
Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur
Auteur du livre « Les enfants de Buchenwald »
Avec une préface d'Elie Wiesel

FRANÇOISE S. OUZAN

ACADEMIC BOOKS
ON RELATED RESEARCH

Françoise S. Ouzan, *How Young Holocaust Survivors Rebuilt Their Lives*, France, The United States, and Israel, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, Studies in antisemitism, 2018.

Françoise Ouzan, *Réussir pour revivre, Jeunes rescapés de la Shoah*, Paris, éditions Atlande, collection Témoignages, Dec. 2022 (French edition)

Françoise Ouzan, *Ces Juifs dont l'Amérique ne voulait pas, 1945-1050*, Bruxelles, Editions Complexe, 1995.

Françoise S. Ouzan with Dalia Ofer and Judy Tydor-Baumel Schwartz (eds.), *Holocaust Survivors, Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2012.