

A New Life

Though I didn't know it at the time, the night I first saw my baby sister was the last night I would ever see my father.

"No need to break the chair," Sammy said with a smirk. "You will see the baby soon."

What did he know?

I was rocking impatiently on the living room rocking chair when I heard the cry I'd been waiting for all night. The cry that told me there was someone in the house that had not been here before. The cry of a newborn baby.

"Abba!" I cried "Ima, Abba! Where is it? Where is the baby?"

I ran hurriedly to the room where Ima (mother) and Abba (father) were talking to a doctor, leaning in to hear what he was saying, while the baby screamed at the top of its lungs. The baby was as loud as those air raid sirens.

Abba looked up. "Come Ayla, come see your sister."

"What's her name?" I said as I ran over.

I'd been hoping for a sister.

My best friend Sammy appeared at the door. "She's here?"

No one answered this question as Sammy walked across the room to see the beautiful little baby I now cradled in my arms.

"You have a healthy baby," said the doctor in a thick German accent. "Keep her well watered and fed, you know the routine."

Everyone laughed and the baby made a small gurgling sound.

“Good. Now I can attend to the nazi with measles.” He joked and we all laughed again. We knew he was the only German doctor who would tend to Jewish families like ours.

My father looked at me and Sammy, “Let’s get these two some dinner.”

We were at the table, thoroughly enjoying our dinner when they came. Loud as thunder, with swastikas on their arms, guns in their hands. We saw them going into our neighbors houses and taking all of our friends into their large trucks. Sammy gasped as a truck pulled away carrying his own family. He blinked a few times in rapid succession.

My Abba turned to us. “Ima, get the children upstairs, into the attic, and through the window. Sammy, grab that loaf of bread. Ayla, take the baby.”

We did what we were told without further hesitation. Ima dashed upstairs with me and Sammy in tow. We’d been afraid that an attack like this would happen. We reached the attic and I scrambled for the window where the others were waiting.

“See that ladder?” my mother pointed “I need Sammy to jump down and position it for us.”

When he jumped down into a pile of straw beside the ladder and gave us a thumbs up, we prepared to go out the window. I registered that I was holding my newborn sister whose name was Miriam. She was a perfect little angel, not pink and wrinkly like some other babies I'd seen before, but had smooth, delicate skin. The thought brought my attention to Abba, who was still downstairs in the kitchen. I didn’t know what he was doing down there, or what his plan was, I just knew that he had to make it to the woods with us. There wasn’t any other option.

“Come down Ayla!” my mothers voice drifted through the open window and snapped me out of my deep thoughts.

I climbed down the ladder carefully, making sure Miriam was safe. Rung by rung, step by step. All of the sudden I heard through the wall, the door banging open. There was a lot of shouting and some loud noises. I could only guess that it was the Nazis taking my father away.

“Ayla come back!” Sammy shouted as I ran around the side of the house.

He ran after me and by the time I had reached the front yard he was there tugging me back.

“I have to get to him!” I was kicking now. “Where is he?”

“It’s too late, he’s gone. They took him away.” Sammy led me back to where Ima was waiting with Miriam, whom I had pushed into her arms. I was vaguely aware that my cheeks were wet as my Ima hugged me.

“We’ve got to go Ayla, they will come back.”

“Go where?” I sniffled. “There is nowhere to go. No one will take care of a Jew.”

I realized as I said it that there was only one place to go: the woods. But the woods are dangerous and unpredictable. Nobody ever went into the woods, not even the Nazis.

My Ima must’ve sensed that I knew the truth. “We will survive for as long as we can. Maybe we will come across cabin owners who will give us food.”

“Okay.” I dried my tears. “Let's go.”

While I was worrying about food and survival, It turned out that part of the reason nobody went into the woods was because they were so dense. We were constantly glancing down, squinting in the dark, watching where we stepped because there were dips and roots everywhere.

“Where do the woods lead?” Sammy asked while tripping over roots.

“Outside Berlin.” Ima answered “I hoped to leave Germany, but for now leaving Berlin will have to do.”

“How much farther?” I asked, posing the most reasonable question.

“We are almost there. Thankfully we lived near the woods.”

Lived. My mind spun and I imagined never returning to my home, never seeing Abba again. I knew what happened to men who were taken by the nazis. Even though everyone tried to hide the truth from me, word got around. I knew that men like my Abba were taken and put in concentration camps where they were worked to the bone and later, were killed.

“They’re here!” We heard the loud voice before we noticed the footsteps.

The Nazis had been following us and we never noticed. Now they were almost here and we had nowhere to run.

“Get down and hide.” Ima pushed us over to a hollowed out tree.

As we crouched under, I was for the first time grateful that I was smaller than most of the girls in my class. Only me and Sammy fit so Ima took Miriam in her arms and ran off in the other direction. As the soldier ran by, I tried to shallow my breathing but one soldier was keener than most. My heart stopped when he looked at me. I was sure he could see me. Then there was a sharp commanding voice and the soldier ran off leaving me and Sammy to continue our journey alone.

We'd been walking for a little while more when suddenly we reached a small clearing with a tiny, quaint cottage. There was smoke coming out of the chimney and the smell of soup drifted towards us. My stomach growled as Sammy knocked on the door.

Suddenly a frail woman appeared from around the corner. "Hurry, they're coming!" she whispered and she ushered us to the back door.

Once inside she locked the door and turned to us. "Come upstairs with me."

"Where are we going?" Sammy looked a little nervous.

"The Nazis are keeping close tabs on me. If they see you here, they will kill us all."

I suddenly understood that she was trying to help us hide.

"Are there more people?" I asked, wondering if they were all Jews.

Instead of answering, she motioned toward the stairs and hurried up them. When we got to the top she took a pocket knife from the coat of her apron and stuck it in a crack in the floor. A trapdoor swung open and she directed us through a long tunnel that smelled like canned beans. When we got to the bottom, we saw a lantern that illuminated several different people and families. She turned to us.

"My name's Ella. You'll be safe here from the Nazis. Do you have any family?"

My eyes felt prickly as I said, "My Abba was taken away by the Nazis and my mother was chased in the woods."

"My family was taken away by Nazis as well." Sammy said, trying to be brave.

"Well then," Ella said kindly. "We can't send you off. We'll wait to see if your family finds their way here. If they don't then we will see if there is a safe place for you somewhere."

She left after giving us blankets and bread, and leaving us in awkward silence with the other families. After a few minutes an old man with gray hair, shuffled over and sat next to them.

“My name is Amos. What’s yours?” he said this in a gruff voice.

“My name’s Ayla and this is Sammy.”

Sammy waved and Amos nodded at him.

“We don’t see a lot of younguns these days, most get taken by the nazis. You two must be strong to have survived this long.”

“It was her mother who got us this far.” Sammy said in appreciation.

“Where is she?”

I spoke up. “We don’t know. She was chased through the woods with my baby sister.”

Something about this man was calming and easy to talk to. Part of me just wanted to give all my troubles up to him.

“We’re all Jews down here. We were given sanctuary by Ella. She’s trying to smuggle fake adoption papers in. Then we will all identify as German.”

We all went quiet at that thought and ate some bread, though I didn’t have that much of an appetite. After a long and brooding silence there was a loud bang upstairs. We all jumped but the others just looked down at their laps.

“What was that?” Sammy asked Amos.

“The Nazis. They’ve been coming more frequently in hopes of catching us in Ella’s kitchen.”

I grew alarmed. “They know where we are?”

“They suspect but for some reason they won’t arrest her yet.”

There were men yelling upstairs but we couldn't hear them. Sammy motioned for me to follow him and I got up. He started up the stairs that connected the tunnel to the house and I felt a little spark of doubt. Would Sammy really blow Ella's cover and get us all shot? I knew Sammy though, and by the way he was crouching I knew that he just wanted to hear.

"WE KNOW YOUR HIDING SOMETHING AND SOONER OR LATER WE'RE GOING TO FIND IT." This came from a younger sounding officer.

"Calm down Leon." a different man said, and directed his attention back to Ella. "Listen." "The Jews aren't people you know. They're uncivilized and they are bringing the German reputation down. We would not have them in our country if we could control it, but they spread like rats and as soon as you kill one, another one appears. So. Do you understand what we want you to do?"

"You want me to turn in any Jews I see?"

"That's right. And you can start by telling us whether or not you have seen some recently."

"I've not seen any near this house." Ella said in a sturdy voice. "Wouldn't they be too afraid to try going through the woods?"

"Fear is a wonderful thing Ella." A different man interrupted. His voice was daunting and cold. It made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. "Fear can move mountains, level cities, and crush people. But it can also make the hopeful stronger."

There was a long silence before the second man resolved it.

"Just be sure that you notify us if you see anything out of the ordinary. If we catch wind that something is happening here... well we hope that we won't have to deal with that."

"Of course officers." Ella said, sounding strained.

I heard the door close and looked at Sammy, who looked like he was trying to hide his discomfort. We heard Ella moving about in the kitchen upstairs.

“Should we check on her?” I wondered.

“No, they might be watching the house.” He frowned. “We will see her when she brings food.”

“Do you think that everybody thinks that Jews are rats?” The officer's words were ringing in my head. “I mean not just the Germans, everyone in the world.”

“Don't think that. My mother used to say that Hitler is scared of us.”

“What's there to be scared of?”

Sammy thought for a second. “Our religion. They think that we are unwilling to accept the word of God. Hitler's also convinced them that we are responsible for Germany's defeat in the first world war.”

“That's ridiculous!”

“I know!” he agreed. “Anyway, we get a bad reputation from some of our ancestors but not everybody thinks that way.”

“Well...” I said, his argument made sense and I trusted his Ima completely.

Ella knocked on the door and whispered. “Is anybody there?”

“Yes Ella?” I replied.

She opened the trapdoor softly. “We need to be quiet because the Germans could be spying on us, but I've got food.” She paused, “Did you kids hear that?”

“Yes.” we answered.

She was silent and then said, “Anyway, I’ve thought about it and talked to Amos... if your mother doesn’t show up within the year then he will adopt you two and we’ll find you a nice place to live.”

“Adopt?!” Sammy exclaimed, “Can you do that?”

“Legally? No. But we have someone who makes frauds.”

Our jaws dropped.

“You mean to tell me that in one year, we’ll be German?”

Ella nodded at me. “Good job, you caught on quicker than most. Now will you help me carry these trays downstairs?”

Looking out the window of our cozy cottage I reflected on that night that took place two years ago. Now it seemed like a bad dream. My Ima never came to Ella’s, so me and Sammy were adopted by Amos. He’s old but we all take care of each other.

We all hear that Ella is fine and is taking in more Jews everyday. We hope that she stays safe as the Nazi’s got bored of her after a year of finding nothing suspicious.

We have a nice little cottage like Ella’s somewhere in the middle of the woods. And we’re not ready yet, but my dream is to someday help little Jewish children being pursued by the Nazi’s. Just like Ella helped me.