

Plains-wanderer

A broad-shouldered man of short stature with locks of curly brown hair and piercing aquamarine eyes, stood in a small valley between two hills in the craggy mountainous regions of the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia, - perfectly concealed from prying eyes. He shivered as the crisp wind bit into his exposed skin and pulled his coats more tightly around him. 'Where is that smuggler?' the tailor thought to himself. He was getting impatient as this was a very important meeting. He was about to start his trek back up the slope and out of the valley, thinking that the smuggler was compromised, or perhaps was not going to hold up his end of the bargain, - when he saw a tall man come over the ridge wearing a heavy fur jacket. The men approached each other and started speaking in hushed tones, - not that anyone could hear them for that matter; this was no man's land. Not even the border guards ventured this far into the mountains for fear of the wild animals, - among other things. There were huge bears, fierce wolves, and bighorn sheep of reputed temper, - rumored to be able to gore a full-grown man - straight through the body.

The smuggler spoke with a heavy Russian accent, "I have the passport credentials you asked for. Where do you need to get to, and how many people will be with you?" The tailor replied, "the train station in Usti nad Labem, and there are four of us, - my wife and two young sons." "Children!" exclaimed the smuggler, "That will cost you extra. Do you know how much harder it is to travel with children? Someone has to carry them, especially in this type of environment, and they make plenty of noise." The tailor sighed, taking a pen knife from one of his many pockets, he cut a small slit in the lining of his innermost jacket. He stuck his hand into the slit and felt around for a few moments before his hand closed around a tiny packet that was sewn in between the lining of his coat. He gave a light tug, and the few threads holding it in place ripped. He handed the tiny satchel over to the smuggler. "What is it?" asked the smuggler, slightly

irritated. "Your payment," replied the tailor. The smuggler took the satchel. Upon ripping it open, a flash of astonishment crossed his face briefly while he made a mental accounting of the contents. Inside were several tiny emeralds. "This will suffice," he replied in an even tone. "Get your wife and children, - and in five days' time, meet me at the ruins of Chojnik Castle on the Karkonosze mountain ridge, 25 kilometers south of here, at daybreak. If you are not there within that time, I will assume you are all dead and I will leave." The tailor nodded gravely, took the forged passport documentation papers, and parted ways with the Russian.

There was no time to spare. The tailor made haste to quickly return to his wife and sons. After hiking through the mountains for a few hours he caught sight of a small scraggly caravan comprised of a polyglot of homeless Polish and Russian refugees. He was quite thankful and fortunate that these displaced people were kind enough to allow his family to travel with them, - as they were the only Jews among them. Reinvigorated by the aspect of being reunited with his family he picked up the pace and ran the remaining distance, waving in good faith to show that he was a friend and not to alarm the group. One of the elderly Polish men, riding a donkey in front of the caravan, recognized the tailor and waved back. The tailor kept running until he arrived at the small rickety wooden wagon in the back of the caravan that contained his wife and children. "Sabina, Leybish, Itzchak," he called out joyfully. Sabina, the tailor's wife, immediately picked her head up in response to the familiar voice. "Yoseph," she called out, relieved that her husband had come back safely from the mountains.

Later that evening as the caravan set up camp in the pine forest near Swieradow-Zdrog, - people started to prepare for sleep; wrapped in their bed rolls in anticipation of yet another frigid night. However, Yoseph, Sabina, Leybish, and Itzchak, slipped away into the dark unnoticed; they could not afford anyone asking questions. The weather was harsh, and the trip was difficult and lonely. Yet, within the specified time, they arrived at the designated mountain top to meet the

smuggler. As they neared the crest, they saw him waiting impatiently in his heavy fur coat. “You’re not dead,” the smuggler stated flatly. “Alright, let us waste no time. If we start now, we might be able to cross into Czechoslovakia before nightfall.” The sun was setting as they crossed the Sudeten mountains by foot and made their way into the dark forest. They set up camp under a larch tree. “I hope you brought warm clothes. They’ll be no fire tonight, or any other night for that matter. Don’t want any border guards to come and take back the wayward tailor.” After a few more days of traveling, they arrived in Usti nad Labem and parted ways with the smuggler. They boarded a train heading south to a Czechoslovakian town near the border of Hungary. They then crossed the Hungarian border and stayed in the beech tree forest overnight. When morning came, they walked to the closest village with a train station. After a couple of days, this all became a normal routine for them; traveling on foot from village to village, crossing over borders in the dark of night, hushing the children, bribing train station clerks when they became suspicious of their forged passport documents, and being stuck on noisy and bumpy trains for days on end.

During the long train rides, Yoseph helplessly ruminated over everything that had happened to him and his treasured family since their journey began. It was a miracle having survived this long.

In 1939, while living in an industrious Jewish community in Poland, Yoseph and Sabina got engaged. However, only a couple of days after that joyous announcement, World War II broke out on September 1st. Yoseph, along with many other Polish citizens, went off to fight for their homeland. Some called them ‘patriots,’ while others called them ‘dead men.’ Poland had no hope of holding off the combined forces of Germany and the USSR, and was forced to surrender. During the short time of Poland’s resistance, Yoseph was shot in the leg by a German soldier. The bullet went straight through his bone. In his state he was useless and was sent to rot in a hospital in some Russian occupied Polish territory. At the time, Sabina, still in their hometown in Poland,

waiting for Yoseph to return, received a letter telling her that Yoseph had come back from the front lines and was in a hospital. Sabina quickly packed up what she could, bid her family goodbye, and rushed to take care of him. When she finally arrived at the hospital, Yoseph was thankfully doing much better than what the letter had stated. As soon as he could stand, they got married. Sadly, it was a rushed ceremony witnessed only by strangers. But at long last they were married, and no matter what might happen, they would be all right. Tragically however, within a matter of days, they found themselves amongst one of the last groups of Jews and Poles being forcefully deported by cattle car to Siberia, - as they had not complied with the Russian regime's demand to become citizens. They were condemned to work in a frigid and unforgiving logging camp for approximately two years. Somehow, they survived.

By June 22, 1941, Germany had broken their nonaggression pact with Russia - and attacked them. An indignant Stalin signed a contract with Poland, agreeing to send the Polish citizens and Jews back to Poland. Russia started sending the Poles and Jews out of Siberia on trains, taking them to wherever it was most convenient until the war was over. Yoseph and Sabina happened to be dropped off in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, where their first son Leybish was born. After living there for four years, the war ended on September 2, 1945, and they were able to catch a train back to Poland. They tried to return to their hometown of Dzialoszyce, - but everything, and everyone, was 'gone.' The Polish citizens blamed the war on the Jews, and thought that it was because of them, that Germany had invaded Poland. Therefore, they felt justified in killing all the returning Jews. This was especially prevalent in the smaller towns where there was no military or police control. Yoseph and his family were forced to leave and move to Szczecin, a larger Polish city that had Soviet military police surveillance and protection.

After Germany's defeat, all the Germans who were living in the then occupied Szczecin and surrounding towns, were forced out in a hurry, - leaving many of their large and lavish

German built homes fully furnished and ripe for the picking. Yoseph's family moved into an abandoned German officer's house and opened a successful clothing factory. The family lived in Szczecin for four and a half years. During that time, Sabina gave birth to their second son Itzchak. Even though Yoseph and his family were incredibly fortunate and living quite comfortably, it was simply a materialistic existence. There was nothing really there for them. Their family and friends were all gone, - murdered by the Nazis. There was nothing tying them to this place anymore and it held too many painful memories. Yoseph had spent many exhausting months scrupulously searching for any possible surviving relatives, - but he could not find anyone. However, Yoseph had a faint glimmer of hope, - when he had heard that two of his cousins had inexplicably escaped the Nazi death marches and were heading to Palestine.

The train whistle sounded, - pulling Yoseph out of his melancholic reverie. They had arrived in Livorno, Italy, - at what was hopefully their last train station. They booked a hotel room for the night and in the morning set out to the docks to purchase tickets and board a steamship heading to the newly established state of Israel. The sun was low on the horizon when the ship left the harbor. The hum of the ship's steam engine and the sound of the calm sea had a soothing effect. Yoseph and Sabina sat on a bench on the deck watching Leybish and Itzchak leaning over the rail, - laughing and pointing at the seabirds that were following the ship. Yoseph could not hold back the small smile that graced his lips for the first time in so many long weeks – so many long years. He laid his head back against the wood paneling of the ship and inhaled the crisp wind that was blowing, - carrying with it the smell of the open sea, - and 'freedom.'