

## CONTENTS

### *Foreword / ix*

- CHAPTER 1 Far from Home (MONTREAL, 1947) / 1
- CHAPTER 2 The Ballet (WARSAW, 1938) / 12
- CHAPTER 3 The Sirens (MONTREAL, 1947) / 19
- CHAPTER 4 The Soldiers (WARSAW, 1939) / 24
- CHAPTER 5 Sunlight (MONTREAL AND  
STE. ADÈLE, QUEBEC, 1947) / 32
- CHAPTER 6 The Ghetto (WARSAW, 1940) / 42
- CHAPTER 7 Escape (WARSAW, 1942) / 56
- CHAPTER 8 “Liar!” (ROCKVILLE, ONTARIO, 1947) / 73
- CHAPTER 9 The Pit (ZALESIE, POLAND, 1943) / 94
- CHAPTER 10 The Apology (ROCKVILLE, 1947) / 104
- CHAPTER 11 Makeup (MONTREAL, 1948) / 110
- CHAPTER 12 Victory and Loss (ZALESIE, POLAND, 1944) / 132
- CHAPTER 13 The Ruins (WARSAW, 1945) / 144
- CHAPTER 14 Love and “Love” (MONTREAL, 1948) / 155
- CHAPTER 15 Joshua (MONTREAL, 1949) / 170
- CHAPTER 16 The Old Brown Suitcase (MONTREAL, 1949) / 190

### *Historical Notes / 195*

### *Further Reading / 201*

### *About the Author / 203*



## Foreword

THIS BEAUTIFULLY written book by a child survivor of the Holocaust reveals glimpses of the horrors of loss, abandonment and fear no child should ever have experienced. It is a true account of the systematic deprivation to which Jewish children were subjected, with the final deprivation being that of life itself. Life in the Warsaw Ghetto was such that the author and others her age witnessed cold-blooded murders, the deaths of friends and family from tuberculosis and typhus, and desperation resulting in suicide.

By age ten, eleven or twelve, these children of the Ghetto had literally “seen it all.” And yet, our author was lucky

enough to survive as a chronicler, a witness to the events. Nearly one and one-half million Jewish children did not survive. They were not able to bear witness, to make a new beginning, to enjoy what life can offer.

The description of the re-emergence from a world of death to a world of life in Canada is one which should resonate in the being of every Canadian child of a refugee background. It is one thing to be an immigrant moving from one relatively secure place to another. It is quite different to escape a tragic past of torment and persecution and carry the enormous psychological burden of memories too terrible to remember but which nonetheless becomes a part of memory.

The author succeeds admirably in conveying the weight of the past while struggling towards a more hopeful future, all the while demonstrating clearly the complexities of transition.

How does one express oneself in a new language? How does one explain oneself? Will anyone understand? Will anyone care?

I too survived the Holocaust as a child. In the period of transition from Europe to Canada, I too was sustained by having several dear friends in childhood and adolescence. In *The Old Brown Suitcase*, the main character's friendships and her capacity to make friends and keep them offer a key to the puzzle of how to overcome adversity. A child needs a friend.

Perhaps this compelling story will influence its readers, young and old, to be more compassionate to newcomers, to those with uprooted lives — whether from overseas or from another school or neighbourhood.

Everyone suffer losses. No one lives life free of personal tragedies. A little kindness saved and salvaged a life which still enriches us today — fifty years after the destruction.

It reminds us of what might have been, had greater kindness and compassion existed in those dark days. Read and learn and remember.

— Robert Krell, MD

Professor of Psychiatry, University  
of British Columbia, & President,  
Vancouver Holocaust Centre  
Society for Education and  
Remembrance

## CHAPTER 1



# Far from Home

(MONTREAL, 1947)

MY LITTLE SISTER cried out in her sleep.

It was evening in Montreal, and darkness had descended upon the sweltering city. A white Cadillac carried my family and me towards an uncertain destination. The car was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg, who had just met us at the train station and recognized our faces only through photographs sent them by my uncle from New York. We were to stay with them until we found our own apartment.

Mr. Rosenberg was pudgy, jolly and perspiring on this hot July night as he drove the big white car. Back at the train station, he had put his arm around me and said, “My you’re a pretty little girl.”

Hogwash. I knew I wasn't pretty, at least not at this moment, after the long trip. I felt like crying, that's what I really felt like doing. I wanted Father to hug me and tell me everything could be all right again. Instead, I smiled like a puppet.

My sister cried out again. Poor little Pyza was wide awake looking uncomfortable in the crowded car with only my mother's lap for a seat. Her face, chubby and round, was the reason we had named her Pyza — Polish for a dumpling. But now her blue eyes were all teary.

I sat wedged between Mrs. Rosenberg and my mother, who were trying to keep up a conversation in Polish. Their words travelled over my head and were drowned by my sister's cries. I felt that it was definitely up to me to pacify her.

"Shh, little one," I whispered and patted her fat little hand. Pyza looked at me with big sad eyes. Sometimes, when she looked at me that way, she reminded me of our other sister, Basia, who was lost somewhere in Poland.

"Once upon a time . . ." I began making up a story about three sisters who got lost in a storm but miraculously found each other again. Pyza stopped her sobbing, and before I had finished my story she was fast asleep.

Mother and Mrs. Rosenberg were still conversing over my head. I leaned back and looked at Mrs. Rosenberg, who sat tall, straight and thin in a grey dress. Mother's eyes were attentively focused on Mrs. Rosenberg's face, but there was a look of weariness in them.

“What is your older daughter’s name?” asked Mrs. Rosenberg. She must have forgotten, because we’d been introduced at the station.

“Slava,” answered Mother.

Mrs. Rosenberg delicately clasped her hands.

“Slava may be a lovely name in Poland, my dear Lucy,” she said to Mother, “but it won’t work here when she goes to school. Hasn’t she another name, something more familiar to Canadians?”

“Elzbieta is her first name,” offered Father, from the front seat.

“Elzbieta is better because it can be Elizabeth,” said Mrs. Rosenberg.

Elizabeth? It felt like some other person. Just like “Irena” had felt when I saw it written in my false documents, back in Poland during the war.

“El-i-za-beth!” I repeated silently. With the pronunciation of “th,” my tongue curled like a worm and my cheeks felt hot. What right did this lady have to dismiss my Polish name?

Father sat in front with Mr. Rosenberg. Their conversation sounded a lot more interesting.

“You know of course that Quebec is primarily a French province,” Mr. Rosenberg was saying. “But the English minority has the upper hand. The French are treated as if they were a minority, and they resent it.”

“And how do we Jews fit into all this?” asked Father.

“Have no fear,” said Mr. Rosenberg with a smile. “Of course there is anti-Semitism. There is always that. But Jewish people are fairly safe here on most fronts, and we do well professionally. You’re a lawyer, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I had a good practice in Poland before the war.” Father looked pensive. “Now I must find work. European law is much different from Canadian, so I will have to relearn everything in English.”

Father’s back was very straight and his head erect, while Mr. Rosenberg’s balding head was round, set so deeply between his shoulders that you could barely see it. Although Mr. Rosenberg’s hands were on the steering wheel, I had the curious feeling that it was really my father who was steering us towards our new destination. Just as he had always done.

I closed my eyes and wished that we were back in Warsaw, even in all its ruin.

The car stopped in front of a big house with a brightly lit porch. We gathered our things and climbed the steps. I sat down on my scuffed brown suitcase and waited.

The door opened and a young girl came out.

“*Dobry wieczor*,” she greeted us in Polish with an English accent.

She was a bit taller than I, with brown hair and eyes. Her blue high-heel shoes matched her suit, and her hair was coiffed in perfect waves. She wore a bright red lipstick and matching nail polish. She must be a lot older, I thought.

“This is our daughter, Ina,” said Mr. Rosenberg. Looking at me, he asked, “how old are you?”



“My name is Slava, and I am almost fourteen,” I replied with emphasis on Slava. Once again my cheeks felt on fire.

“Our girls are the same age,” said Mr. Rosenberg enthusiastically. “They must have a great deal in common. Come on, everyone, let’s go in and get comfortable.”

I pulled my suitcase into the hall and looked at Ina. She looked so sophisticated. Compared to her I didn’t feel a day over ten, especially when I saw myself reflected in the large hallway mirror. Was that really me, that small girl with short, mousy-blond, and every-which-way curls, wearing a child’s sailor dress and thick beige stockings with black ox-fords, one tied with a piece of string because the shoelace had broken on the train? I looked hideous. If only they had let me keep my long braids. But they hadn’t. It was all the fault of a lady on the boat that had taken us away from Europe. She had told my parents that my braids would look “positively outlandish” in America. So the next day they cut them off. I had saved the braids, still tied with red ribbons, and placed them in my old brown suitcase.

Mrs. Rosenberg said that we should all wash up before dinner.

“Come on, whatever your name is, we’ve got to get ready for dinner,” said Ina in broken Polish. “I am in charge of you now.”

How insulting, I thought. A voice inside me said, “Tell her again that your name is Slava.” But I said nothing and followed her up the stairs.

“Come on. I’ll show you to your room,” said Ina yawn-