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## “Canada”

More and more people came out of hiding as word spread that we were free. Some could barely walk. Others had to be carried. Still others lay on the ground, their eyes fixed in a trance. These were the *Musulmänner*; the people in the last stage of starvation. For them, freedom had come too late.

Mama took my hand and we headed toward the gate. As the railroad tracks came into view, images of the day we arrived rushed into my mind: getting off the train into the blinding light, clutching Mama's suitcase while she went to look for my father, Mama and Papa hugging and kissing before he got back on his train, the body being lowered from the cattle car, all the people. Gone were the SS guards and their dogs, the screaming voices and the red smoke and the smell of burning flesh.

Yet when I heard people shout, “We’re free! We’re free!” I had a hard time grasping what the words meant. The gate was wide open; we could have walked right out. But Mama hesitated and her voice cracked. “I don’t know where to go,” she said.

Indeed, we didn’t even know where we were. Auschwitz was just a name to us. And we had no idea what home was anymore. Gdynia? We hadn’t lived there since before my first birthday. Tomaszów Mazowiecki? All my grandparents were dead. So was my uncle James. And what about the rest of my family? My aunts Elka and Helen and Ita? The last time I saw them was when the Gestapo came by and took us away. And what

about my father? Even though we were free, we had no place to go. Finally Mama said, "For now, we better stay at Auschwitz."

The Russians had set up field stoves and were cooking pork in those huge kettles. But we needed shelter from the cold; that was more important than food right then. So we started looking for a barrack, a shed, anything the Germans hadn't set on fire. We thought we found one that was empty. Then a *Musulmann* tottered out the door and collapsed in the snow.

"Can't we get him something to eat?" I asked.

Mama shook her head. "He's too far gone to bring back to life. Food won't help him."

"What about me?"

"I don't want you to eat anything either."

"But I'm hungry."

"The pork will make you sick. Don't you see all those people throwing up?"

After we found a place to stay, Mama fetched a piece of dry bread. "Eat this, it's better for you," she said.

The dry bread was all we ate the day we were freed. A few days later Mama brought me bread and butter. Then she added sugar. "I want your body to get used to food," she said.

Finally I went out by myself and told the people at the baking ovens, "I'm six years old. I have no one. I'm an orphan." It worked: the person in charge gave me two pieces of bread instead of one. So I went back the next day and the next. Each time I got two pieces of bread; each time I gave one to my mother.

The nights were bitter cold. Every day hundreds more people died, some from freezing, some from starvation, some from wrenching stomach ailments after eating the pork. Every morning I woke up to the sound of trucks—Russian trucks—hauling more dead bodies away. Sometimes a truck was so full of bodies that one fell off, and it would lie there on the ground until the next truck came by and picked it up.

After they took the bodies away, Mama and I went outside and looked for people we knew from our town. Several storehouses stood in a section

of the camp that people called Canada, near the crematoria. Someone Mama knew from the ghetto told her to go over and take a look; she might find something she could use. "I could use a coat," she said. "The nights are bitter cold."

Mama led me through the door. All around lay piles of clothes, shoes, hair, eyeglasses, jewelry, false teeth, even containers of gold fillings. Mama led me to a pile of coats and said, "I'm going to take something to wear. But I'm not going to take a fur coat or anything beautiful. That way no one will think I took a murdered person's clothing because I liked it."

She reached down, pulled a man's overcoat from the pile, and put it on. The bottom hung down to her feet. "What do you think?" she said. It struck me how beautiful my mother was, even in that ugly coat.

In the next pile I found a mirror. I had no idea what I looked like until I held it in front of me: my hair was growing back. It was lighter than my mother's, and my face was round like my father's. I wondered if he had blue eyes like mine, because my mother's eyes were green.

Mama said we had to go. We couldn't touch anything else—the jewelry, the gold, not even a rag doll that caught my eye—because it was wrong to profit from people's death. "Put the mirror down," she said. "We're taking only what we need to survive the cold."

Even though we had the Russian army to thank for liberating us, they also terrorized us. Hardly a night passed when a soldier didn't come around and pound on our door; sometimes there were two or three. Almost always they were drunk. Each time I heard the pounding, my heart stopped. It sounded like the SS pounding on our door in the labor camp when they were taking the children. But this time Mama said they weren't after me; they were after her.

One night when Mama and I were outside, a soldier came up and grabbed her by the arm. He muttered something in Russian. Mama pulled away screaming, "No! No! Go away!" When she broke free, the soldier lunged after her. Thank God her strength was back: I grabbed her sleeve, and we ran and hid inside a building. The soldier staggered, cursing and waving his bottle as he fell. When we looked outside the next morning, he was fast asleep on the ground, his precious bottle at his side.

Mama said it was time to leave. It didn't matter that we had no home to go back to, we had to get out. I looked around for my friends Rutka and Frieda but didn't find them.

"Then where are they?" I asked.

"They probably left the camp. Can't you see most of the people are gone? The Russians have nothing else to do, so they drink and chase women all night and sleep all day. It isn't safe here anymore."

We headed toward the gate for the second time. White-canopied trucks with red crosses on the side waited near the railroad tracks. In one of them a radio was playing. The driver motioned some people over to listen; the voice on the radio was English. Somebody repeated the message in Polish: The Americans were closing in from the west, about to force a German surrender; it was a matter of days, perhaps hours. There were even rumors that the German leader—*der Führer* they called him—was dead. The war was almost over. But nobody seemed to care anymore. Mama asked the driver if we could get on his truck.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Tomaszów Mazowiecki."

"Over there," he pointed. "That one is going north."

Mama lifted me onto the truck. Then she climbed in after me. I started to cry. I didn't want to go anywhere on a truck. When it started moving, I closed my eyes. A few minutes later I looked back; we had left the gate. I watched it get smaller and smaller, and then it disappeared. "I'm never coming back," I told myself. But I could not imagine what lay ahead either.