

Three

**Przemyśl • 10th of Av, 5674 – Sunday, August 2,
1914**

GITLA WOKE BEFORE sunrise, dressed without bathing, packed a bag, and left home without waking Juda. She walked barefoot west out of town on Mickiewicza past the shuttered café row: the Edison, the Grand, the Boulevard, and the Elite. As she passed the Weisses' manse, she began reciting a series of *Kinna*, each one passed to her by her mother, each one commemorating a tragedy that had historically befallen the Jewish people on this day. As the sun began casting shadows on the road behind her, she finished the last lament, the story of the fall of Batar, the last fort to hold out against the Romans.

With the first traces of dawn, freshly printed posters nailed to every tree, wall, and post emerged, announcing universal conscription and the formation of a dozen new Austro-Hungarian regiments to be composed of the boys and men of Galicia. General Kusmanek himself had signed the orders and had used the occasion to stir up patriotism and boast of the invincibility of Fort Przemyśl. All of Galicia, it seemed, would awaken to news that the Cossacks were riding west

and that the Austrians were heading east; all across the continent enemies had been named, industry had been mobilized, and conscriptions had been ordered. The war was on.

Just past Kolasa junction the cityscape dissolved into fields and swamps, albeit punctuated with an occasional farmhouse or barn. The Lemberg road was a mess, with wheel ruts cut deeply into the dirt and piles of horse manure dotting the spaces between. Gitla walked on the side of the road, her babushka pulled tight over her face against the onslaught of black flies. On any other August morning this far from town, she would almost certainly walk alone and in silence, save the occasional farmer heading for the fields accompanied only by a symphony of birdcalls. But today was different. Directly ahead of Gitla was yet another detachment of Austrians leading a long train of horses, each straining against an oversized cannon or a wagon filled beyond capacity with artillery shells. The air was thick with guttural, military German that disturbed Gitla in a way that odor never could.

“To Lemberg, to Kiev, to Moscow!” was all Gitla heard, repeated endlessly with vexing Teutonic enthusiasm.

The density of human, horse and steel increased as she passed Fort Ten, marking the inner ring of Przemyśl’s defenses. Her city had always been an armed camp and there had never been a time in her life when the military wasn’t working on the massive arc of forts, batteries, and trenches.

Gitla allowed herself a brief smile as she recalled a hearthside discussion between her father, recently returned from reserve duty, and her brother, many years before.

“Cossacks always come west, Germans always march east. To the north are the vast, impassable swamps of the Pripet Marsh, and to our south rise the mighty Carpathians. So what do you think lies at the very center? Between armies,

swamps and mountains?”

“Przemyśl?” Moses asked in a crystal-clear, ten year-old alto.

“Fort Przemyśl, son. The strategic value of our position didn’t go unnoticed by the generals, the Tsars and the Kaisers; they built here the most formidable fortress in Galicia, in all of Austria, perhaps in the entire world.”

“The world?”

“To defend the city and the place it occupies, the armies built a system of forty-three forts in several rings, the outermost at a forty-five kilometer circumference. Connecting the forts are kilometer after kilometer of earthworks, barbed wire, trenches, and fortified pillboxes, all spelling certain doom for anyone foolish enough to attempt a frontal assault. Prodigious amounts of concrete and steel, up to three meters thick in some emplacements renders siege impossible, even with the highest caliber of cannon. The forts are equipped with the latest guns, howitzers and cannons. More than one thousand in total and manned by a hundred-thousand of the finest troops the empire had to offer: the Tenth, the Forty-Fifth, Forty-Sixth, Austrians, Galicians, the Hungarian Twenty-Third...”

Gitla stubbed her toe hard on a rock hidden in the mud, propelling her back to the twentieth century, where she sat on the ground massaging her sore foot, just outside the village of Hureczko, within eyeshot of the airfield.

“Try shoes,” a fat, red-faced soldier yelled to her.

Gitla looked down at her toe and noticed it was bleeding before spitting on the side of the road while muttering something in Yiddish.

About a kilometer from the last fort, Gitla turned hard right off the road through a small but dense stand of evergreens, into a field of spear thistles before coming to what seemed to be an impenetrable wall of flowering greenery at the bank of a wide but dry creek. For as long as anyone could remember, women of the Arm family had come to this particular stand

on this day each year to collect the thorny stems of the sweet briar.

Spreading a canvas tarp, she pulled a small machete from her satchel and began hacking away at the sprawling vines, inured to both the rumble of the earth beneath and the buzz of flying machines above her. After cutting off all the flowers, Gitla wound the canes into necklaces and bracelets. Twenty minutes later, a carpet of dainty yellow roses strewn about her feet, she tied off the bundle, hoisted it over her head and set off for town, blood oozing from a hundred tiny cuts on her hands and feet.

Gitla made it back to the city by noon and took up a spot on the Plac na Bramie where she handed out the barbed wire jewelry in silence. Friend and stranger alike wore the briar thorns until sundown as a reminder of the pain and suffering her people had endured down through the millennia. Many cried; almost everyone who took a wreath had a son or a father or a husband who would be in uniform by Shabbat.

Tomorrow, everyone's world would be different; tomorrow, nothing would ever be the same. It was the saddest Tish B'Av of Gitla's life.

Przemyśl • 11th of Av, 5674 – Monday, August 3, 1914

“NEXT!” ROARED THE impeccably uniformed major in the general direction of Elia, his eyes cast down toward the desk. “Name, birthplace, date and race!” he barked.

“Elizar Reifer, sir,” Elia said, wondering what his older brother would have looked like today had he survived childhood. “Medyka, eighteen ninety-six. Yiddish.”

The officer looked perturbed. “Medyka?” He scanned a pile of leather binders piled on the side of the desk and eventually lifted half the stack to a new pile, leaving the one he sought

on the top. He opened it and scanned several pages before stopping on one, his finger stuck to the entry in question.

“The Tenth, Gustav the Fifth, König von Schweden Regiment, attached to the Forty-Eighth Brigade under the Twenty-Forth Infantry Division, Tenth Corps, First Army,” he barked in machine-gun German without raising his head. “Will you swear to defend the...” he glanced up at Elia, losing his focus. “What year were you born, son?”

Elia stood at attention, avoiding the Austrian’s eyes, “Ninety-six,” he said, quickly adding, “January thirteen.”

“Who was your father?”

“Izrel Reifer.”

The Austrian dropped his pen and reached up to take his field officer’s cap off. Scratching his balding head he set the pike-gray hat on the table such that it rocked back and forth on its stiff leather brim. The Austrian moved his finger across the page, noting that the hand written birth record seemed to match what the boy had said. He looked up, suspiciously. “Really? And your papers?”

“Destroyed in a fire.” It was neither the first nor last lie told at the castle that day.

The impeccably uniformed Major look at Elia, back at the ledger then to Elia again before shaking his head and snorting, “*Juden.*” He put his cap back on and inked his stamp, prepared to slam it down on the papers before him.

Just as the Austrian’s hand reached its apogee, Manes stepped out of the line and blurted in German, “My most esteemed major.”

Still holding the seal aloft, the army officer glanced in the general direction of Manes, asking dryly, “And who would you be?”

“Manfred Sterner, Sir,” he replied. “I can vouch for this boy. We have worked in the same factory for the past year. The finest sixteen-year-old I have ever known.”

The major glared at Elia, “Sixteen?”

Elia turned to Manes then back to the major, who sported a thin smirk, “But I... um...”

“The army is for men,” the major picked up the sheets of paper in front of him and dramatically ripped them in two. “Leave before I have you throttled,” he said coldly, pulling his tunic tight beneath his belt.

“But I want—”

“Next,” he said, eyes cast down toward the desk.

Elia walked slowly to the door as the recruits broke into laughter. As soon as he was out of the hall, he broke into a run. Hirsch fell out of the queue, catching up with Elia at the bottom of the castle hill.

“Manes is a traitor. I should shoot him,” Elia said.

“Shoot? Have you ever even fired a gun?” Hirsch asked.

Like the kinetoscope machines that lined the walk on the south side of the Castle, dozens of scenes from his life whirled through his mind before stopping at one featuring his father. “When I was seven or eight, on my way back from study some dog went mad and came at me. Foaming mouth and all. I froze like a statue. Out of nowhere I hear a roar and see the dog crumple on the ground, then twist in place trying in vain to get to its feet. I turned around and saw my dad holding his Mannlicher. He ran right by me to the dog. I’ll never forget it. He loaded a shell, cocked it into the chamber, pointed the barrel toward the dog at point blank range and pulled on the trigger. The dog’s head exploded like a melon dropped from a tower. I never really wanted to shoot the gun after that. You?”

“My uncle Mur in Dynów, he takes me hunting when we visit. I’ve shot my share of deer.”

They walked in silence past the Blonie Field, then along the river past the bridge, these days thick with a steady stream of men, horses, carts and cannons. As they passed a kiosk with an onion-shaped top plastered with a mosaic of posters, Hirsch stopped to read aloud a large and obviously new

message lettered in both Polish and Yiddish. Elia retraced his steps and joined his friend, who was staring transfixed at the poster of a mustached soldier mounted on a rearing white steed, imploring all brave sons of Poland to come to the defense of freedom and fight the Tsar; to join the Legions.

The two boys reversed course, crossed the bridge, and found their way to the Worker's House.

Two hours and many lies later, Elia and Hirsch joined the men sporting newly fitted uniforms streaming from the castle and the Worker's House. All were headed home to explain to their loved ones that they were to report to the train station at six the next morning for deployment to the front.

ELIA PAUSED AT the door stoop, catching pieces of conversation along with the aroma of his aunt's latest culinary abomination. "How can such a wise woman of the earth, a magician with a rainbow of herbs at her command, be such an awful cook?" He smiled, recalling last year's Seder when he had shamelessly pandered to Gitla's unexplainable ego, spewing out course after course of effusive praise as he choked down bite after bite of tasteless, shoe-leather-tough, boiled *flanken*. He straightened his uniform and pushed the door open, marching through the house and into the kitchen. Juda, Gitla, and Rivka were gathered around the stove in close quarters, and seemingly all talking at once. As Elia came through the kitchen door, they turned their heads in unison, still jabbering.

"What the hell kind of uniform is that?" Juda asked.

"Legion," Elia answered, "Polish Legion." Gitla shook her head.

"Legion?" Juda's agitation increased. "Legion? What do you think this is, the Scouts? Learn some knots, go on a hiking expedition? The Cossacks are animals. Animals! You'll end up in Siberia, if you're lucky."

“Enough.” Gitla said brusquely, still prodding the long since over-cooked meat with a slender two tined fork.

“They cut the beards off the old Yids. They—”

“That’s enough, Juda. He’s not a boy and he’s made his decision, however wise or foolish.” She took her husband by the arm and headed for the swinging door. “He has nothing to answer to us...” Gitla looked at Rivka, “to *us* for. Now let’s give the *basherte* some privacy.”

Elia studied Rivka’s face for a clue, a hint of feelings, but found it impossible to stay focused, losing his thoughts in the complex black ringlets of hair cascading down her neck, contrasting with the ivory triangle of skin exposed above her blouse. As she breathed, his heart kept time with each gentle swelling of her breast. “Rivka, you look beautiful tonight,” he said, confidently.

“Elia,” Rivka said. He moved closer, his heart racing in anticipation. “You clueless oaf.”

“But why?”

“You idiot! You blind idiot!” she said, raising her voice. “Why? You ask me why?”

“We’ve talked about revolution forever. We’ve debated the process by which the workers would gain control over the Capitalists. Theory. Talk. Concept. Talk.” He raised his voice, trying to match her volume and tone. “Now the capitalists have forced the issue on the working class.”

“Enough with the working class, all right? For once, for just tonight can we not be part of a class? Can’t we look beyond that?”

“What are you saying? Are you renouncing your—”

“You are so clueless!”

“I’m stopping all the talk and putting my life on the line for the working class.”

“This is not about the precious working class!”

“For our rights here in our *Przemyśl*—”

“And it sure as hell isn’t about *Przemyśl*!” They were now

squared up, face to face.

“And for our Poland!”

She dropped her head and lowered her voice, “Elia, Elia, please.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you’d be happy.”

Head still down, she raised both arms, grabbing onto the epaulets poorly sewn onto the shoulders of his tunic. Slowly, Rivka lifted her head up until her misted, earth-toned eyes were locked on his. “Goddamn it, Elia, I love you.” Her evocation of the Almighty was as shocking to her as to him.

She pulled his head into her chest. His hands found her waist. “Rivka, I love you too,” he said into the black cloud of her hair that seemed to envelop his head, curled by the late summer humidity. He breathed a premature sigh of relief.

“But I see you in this costume, fake silver buttons, the poorly scalloped pocket flaps, that silly beret, going off to kill and be killed,” she said, pushing him away from her but keeping both hands anchored on his shoulders. “I can see my gallant Socialist hero coming home in a pine box. I can imagine visiting a stone with your name on it up on Słowackiego. Yes, Elia, I love you. But at this moment...” She welled up.

“What, sweetheart?”

“Right now, I hate you more than I’ve ever hated anyone in my life.”

She dropped her head and cried as he pulled her toward him in embrace. “Shhh, it’s all right. I’m no hero. I don’t want to die. I am now and have always been a...” He stuttered, searching for words, “...a coward. I’m a coward, Rivka.” He pushed her back so they could see each other. “Your beautiful eyes, your hair, your chin,” he moved his hand from her waist to her face, gently wiping aside the tear beading just below her right eye, “I love the freckles across your cheeks.”

“But Elia...”

“I’ll be back for you, my Rivka. I won’t die, I promise.” He moved his hand from her cheekbone to the back of her head and pulled her close. Elia’s fingers danced along the hairline on the back of her neck as their mouths opened and their lips touched, then refused to part. Rivka’s arms met at the small of his back and pulled him into her as Elia’s free hand found its way up her frock to her breast, caressing it in the palm of his hand.

Rivka finally broke the embrace, pushing Elia’s head back. “That, Mister Reifer, was not the act of a coward.”

**Przemyśl • 12th of Av, 5674 – Tuesday, August 4,
1914**

“WHAT IS THIS?” the old man said as he put his arms around Rivka, leaving a palm shaped flour print on the shoulder of her blouse. She continued to weep and knead. “Don’t cry, sweetheart.” He gently squeezed her, to no effect. He released his grip on her shoulders and grabbed her hands, stopping the kneading. “I am Isidore Besser!” He spoke in mock grandeur. “I am the master bread maker. I order you to stop crying.”

A tear streaked down Rivka’s cheek, clearing a path through the dusting of light brown flour that clung to her skin.

“Sweetheart, sweetheart. You simply have to stop crying. I must insist.”

“Why?”

“My pumpernickel recipe does not call for salt water.”

Rivka smiled as she continued to cry.

“What’s this?” Isidore pointed a finger at her chin. “Don’t look down.” As she looked down, he gently grabbed her nose. “Gotcha!”

Rivka threw her arms around the old man, a good half foot shorter than she, pulling his head tight to her neck. “Talk,

talk” he whispered into her ear.

“My Elia joined the army. He’s going to war today; this morning, by train.” Her tears dried as she continued, “I’m scared for him. I’m scared for me, and I’m scared for all of us.”

“Sugar plum,” Besser’s tone became serious, “it’s all right to worry. War is never good for anyone. And it’s even worse for the Jews. Now listen carefully, young one. You can make it through anything if you use your Yiddish head, not your Yiddish heart.”

“What do you mean?”

“Here’s the way it is. If they say ‘everything is perfect,’ you worry.”

“All right.”

“If they say there is plenty of food, you hoard.”

She nodded.

“If they say the paper money is good, you collect coins.”

“I see.”

“They told me to have a month of flour in reserve, so since the Archduke was shot I built up six months worth into the cellar.”

“But what do you do when they send your *basherte* away?”

“You take your apron off and run like the wind to the station and give him a big kiss, so he can remember why he needs to come home in one piece.”

She pecked the old man on his cheek, tossed her apron on the chair, and was out the door, running toward the station just as the sun peeked up over the horizon.

“Sweetheart,” Isidore whispered as soon as the bakery door slammed shut. He finished kneading the pumpernickel and put it in a wooden bowl to rise, not realizing that some salt water had made its way from his own eyes to the dough.

“HOW’D IT GO last night, Hirsch?”

“Father yelled, mama cried. You?”

“Pretty much the same.”

“Yes, and?”

“Rivka was good news and bad.”

“So the good?”

“She said she loves me.”

“So what could be so bad?”

“She hates me too.”

Both boys scratched their heads as they walked toward the brick, limestone and concrete train station dead ahead of them on the far side of Kolejowy Square.

“Say, Hirsch, what did you bring?”

“Not much. I tried to get my father to give me his Gasser pistol but he said he needed it. You?”

“Gitla tried to make me take my jersey. It’s forty degrees out and she wants me to take a wool jersey. All I have is my *Manifesto* and mama’s ring.”

They arrived at the station square just as the rifle sized minute hand on the clock face atop of the station clicked to 6:00. A moment later, church bells tolled in the background and a few seconds after that the boys felt the concussion of distant mortar firings deep in their lungs.

They sat for an hour on the gravel by a boxcar that, as far as Elia could tell, the Jewish recruits of the Second Polish Legion brigade would be sharing with the Jewish recruits of the fourth battalion of the 10th Austrian Infantry Regiment. Elia kept his back to the men of the 10th, listening closely, parsing every sentence he heard, hairsplitting every word uttered as if it were written in the Torah.

The new Austrian battalion was made up of former bakers, brewers, several peddlers, a few shop keepers, some random laborers, a pharmacist, and an ex-waiter or two. They were all Przemyslers, they were all either friends or at least familiar faces, and they were Zionists, Bundists, football players, and

musicians. While Yiddish was their native tongue, most spoke at least some German, Hebrew, French, Russian, Ruthian, and Polish. They cursed and prayed in a dozen different ways, if they prayed at all.

“Now that’s a bit of irony for you comrades!” laughed Manes. “The finest clothes any of us have ever had, courtesy of Franz Joseph! See how they dress us up like dolls as we do their bidding.”

Osais, a plumber, interrupted, “You ungrateful Yid! Can’t you think of how aristocratic we will look in these tunics while they say Kaddish and dump us into the earth?”

“Cigarette?” Elia turned his head, recognizing the voice.

“Go bang your head against the wall, Sterner.”

Manes stuck the cigarette into his mouth. “I do you a favor and this is how you repay me?”

“It was not your decision,” Elia snapped back. “And you embarrassed me in front of my comrades.”

Manes lit his cigarette, exhaled toward the ground then looked directly at Elia, “I humbly apologize. It was not my intention to humiliate my favorite comrade. As to the authority to make the decision, well, all I can say is anytime I have the clear option to live or die and I opt for the decision to die, I invite you to intercede on my behalf with or without my assent.”

Elia sat silently, eventually letting out an audible sigh, “How about that cigarette?”

“I take it you accept my apology.”

Elia lit up and both smoked for several minutes. “Taken correctly.”

“Good,” Manes said. “So we’re square?”

“Not quite. Promise me that from here on, you’ll treat me like a man.”

“Yes.”

“Not like a child.”

“All right.”

“No, I want your word.”

“Comrade to comrade, man to man, you have my word.” They shook. Manes smiled broadly out of one side of his mouth, the other side busily clamped onto the cigarette. Reaching down, he grasped Elia around one of his triceps and hoisted him to a standing position with the ease of a housekeeper lifting a broom from the floor. For the next hour, they mingled with the men of the Polish, Hungarian and Austrian battalions. To his great relief, Elia noted several boys who appeared to be even younger than he was.

They were all laughter and smoke until an officer called the soldiers to attention in terse, authoritarian German.

The men found seats on rough wooden benches as a roar of released steam followed by the lurch of boxcars and the squeal of steel wheels on rusty tracks announced the army’s departure.

“Elia! Elia Reifer!” Someone seated by the car door yelled. “Where is Elia Reifer?”

He recognized Dov’s voice from football. “What? I’m here!”

“There’s some young lovely looking for you. She’s walking with the train. Come quickly.”

Elia was on his way to the car door before Dov finished his sentence. Grabbing a metal rail just over the door lintel, he swung himself out of the car, one foot on the train, the other hanging free.

“Elia!”

“Rivka!”

She accelerated gracefully from walk to a slow trot, crossing the chasm that separated them in the blink of her misted eye. Elia leaned further and further out of the boxcar while Rivka struggled to keep her arm steady through a slowly increasing pace. Finally, their hands joined and fingers entwined. Eyes met. Each mouthed to the other, “I love you.” The bridge just a few dozen meters ahead, he let go of her hand. Rivka lost her battle against the tears but continued jogging alongside

the train, empty hand extended.

Elia fished his mother's ring out of the breast pocket of his uniform and tossed it toward her, just missing her outstretched hand. "After the war, marry me?"

"Yes, *basherte*. Yes!" Rivka stopped to pick the ring up from the sooty gravel surrounding the tracks. After finding it too loose on her forefinger she found a snug fit on her middle digit.

"Still hate me?" Elia yelled to her, the distance between them now growing rapidly.

"Not if you come back to me."

Elia touched his hand to his lips and then extended his arm, throwing a kiss toward Rivka. Smiling and crying, she blew a kiss back at him. Each watched until the other disappeared as the train accelerated through a wide arc, crossed the bridge over the San, passed by both rings of Fort Przemyśl, and headed north toward Jaroslaw, on its way to the front; to war.

**Nowy Korczyn • 4th of Elul, 5674 – Wednesday,
August 26, 1914**

"NO! NO! NO! The Mauser is not your waltz partner to be flung about the dance floor; she's your unblemished virgin, to be handled gently, in need of care and understanding. Never pull or tug on her, squeeze her tenderly." Lendas grabbed Elia's rifle, loaded a seven millimeter shell, cocked, aimed, and slowly breathed, "Squeeze," as he fired.

A dark spot appeared in the center of the forehead of the crude body outline drawn on a bed sheet tacked to some bales of hay stacked at the far end of the field. A rumble of awe passed through the battalion. "Every time, Lieutenant. It must be hundred meters away. How do you do it?"

Lendas rested the rifle butt on the top of his boot. The

Legion Company fell into a semi-circle around him as he began to tell the story. “We were poor growing up. Our town was four families. In comparison, Stalowa Wola was a metropolis.”

“Didn’t the train stop to let us piss near there?” Someone asked.

“I pissed on Stalowa Wola!” Someone yelled from the back of the group.

Fisticuffs nearly broke out when a burly private took exception but discipline was soon restored and Lendas was able to continue. “From the day I could walk, I would stand on one side of the oak tree and scare the squirrel to the other side where my papa and uncle would pick them off. By age six, it was my little brother Georg scaring them and me putting slugs through their little heads.”

“All I ever shot in Medyka was a football.” Elia managed, impressed by his own rapidly improving Polish.

“We didn’t deem it a clean shot unless the slug went through one of the squirrel’s eyes.”

A low mumble of admiration passed through the men.

“We moved to Puławy when papa died and I joined the St. Bernardine Shooting Club mostly because I knew I could drink a few liters of beer and still win all the competitions. The club eventually became part of the Rifleman’s Association, then the Rifleman’s Union and finally the *Strzelcy* under Pilsudski. And now I shoot for the Legions.” Lendas brought his rifle to his shoulder, “As do you.”

The company continued firing practice for the next hour in a gentle rain.

“Gentleman, fall in!” Lendas yelled. A staccato, “Attention!” and twenty seconds of scurry brought the recruits into four ranks of eight, each holding a stiff, upright posture, rifle butts resting on the muddy ground to the left of each man’s foot.

“Patriots of a free Poland, marksmen for freedom!” A large

group of men on horseback approached. “The time to shoot at hay has ended. With the grace of our lord Jesus Christ, now is the time for us to rid our sacred land of its Tsarist oppressors. Alone, this would seem an impossible task. But we do not fight alone.”

The horses came to a stop a few paces behind Lendas.

“For, today we cast our lot in with the dual monarchy of Austro-Hungary in our common quest to rid our homes of the scourge from the east.”

“Psst. Elia,” Hirsch whispered, keeping his head steady and trying to minimize the movement of his lips. “It’s him, the castle major.”

“Brothers in arms! We will swear allegiance to Emperor Franz Joseph the First and gladly fight and happily die under his auspices.”

The lead horse, a white dappled stallion, lifted its front foot from the mire it was sinking in. It made a surprisingly loud squelching sound. Lendas glanced at the regally appointed mounted officer, taking in the somewhat sarcastic nod of his *feldkeppe*.

Elia studied the Austrian’s face, and then took a moment to admire the perfect fit and precise stitching that framed an impressive array of medals and ribbons pinned to his tunic. “You’re wrong. It’s not him,” he said to Hirsch.

“Left, behind the Colonel. Don’t look.”

Elia froze then swept his eyes to the left, taking in the faces of the Colonel’s staff.

Lendas turned to his men and barked, “Company, at ready!” Elia, Hirsch and thirty others lifted their Mausers off the mud, stamped their feet, placed their rifles on their shoulders and stood still at attention, eyes fixed to the horizon.

Lendas slogged off to a position beside his men and the dappled horse advanced to center stage in front of the troops.

“At ease!” the mounted officer commanded in German.

The Legionnaires returned their rifles to the ground but remained at attention.

He's right. In the back, it's the same one. Thank God we're in the third row. No eye contact, Elia. Focus! He'll never recognize me in uniform.

"I am Colonel Felix Ritter Unschuld von Melasfeld³," he said while walking his steed sideways along the troop line, a masterful display of horsemanship lost on all but a few of the recruits. "I will be your commanding officer. You will fight as an intact battalion attached to the 47th brigade, but in all other manners you will be part of the Austrian Army, with similar privileges of rank, subservient to all its rules and subject to its rigorous discipline. You will, however, wear rosettes, not stars, on your regimental colors."

There were some disappointed rumblings from the legionaries.

Oh no. He's looking at Hirsch. Focus Elia!

"Now repeat after me. I swear my allegiance to Emperor..."

Lendas translated Unschuld's recitation into Polish, stanza by stanza. As soon as the oath was confirmed, Lendas's offer to demonstrate the marksmanship of his battalion was unenthusiastically accepted by the Colonel. Lendas selected three of his ablest marksmen, all Polish farm boys, for the exhibition.

Elia and Hirsch maneuvered, trying to keep the bulk of the battalion between them and the mounted officers. As each of the first two salvos found the target at the far end of the field, an increasingly immodest, nationalistic cheer rose from the recruits. Just as the third sniper lined up his sights, Elia's focus was shattered by a light but persistent metallic prick on his shoulder. He turned to investigate as the rifle's report echoed across the range.

To Elia, the well-shined, action-ready Cavalry Saber seemed like a frozen lightning bolt arcing toward his unprotected chest. Raw fear ripped through his guts. When they had

first met, the Major was no more than a paper-pushing bureaucrat, capable of no more than verbal abuse. Somehow, he'd metamorphosed into a three-meter-high monster of flesh, leather and steel; a fierce, fully appointed warrior; a death machine. The horse's rippling muscles brought back his grandfather's stories of marauding Cossacks sacking Galician villages and the infinite hopelessness earthbound men face when confronted by mounted swordsmen.

"Mister..." the Major paused, searching. "Reifer, yes, Mister Reifer, the underage boy from Medyka. And his sidekick, underage as well, I presume?"

"I can—"

"Silence!" the Major ordered, sheathing his sword.

Quiet rippled through the ranks to Lendas. He handed his rifle to a recruit and ran to investigate, saluting crisply on arrival. "Sir," the Pole said in perfect military German, "is there a problem with the cadet?" Lendas took note of the guilty look on Hirsch's face and added, "Cadets?"

"They are not cadets," the Castle Major said. "Not in the Legions and certainly not in the Austrian Army. They are underage. Boys. Children. Spoiled children who need a good beating before being sent home to their mothers."

"Sir, there must be an explanation."

"Lieutenant, confiscate their weapons."

The rest of the company began gathering around the confrontation. Lendas turned to deal with the two boys when the sea of onlookers parted, clearing the way for Colonel Unschuld's horse.

"What's all this, then?"

The Major snapped to attention. "Sir!" he saluted with a gloved hand. "These boys are not of age."

Unschuld raised one of his bushy eyebrows as he maneuvered his horse to the small space between the Major and the boys. Elia and Hirsch stiffened, partially at attention, mostly from fear. "How old are you and why are you here,

son?” he said to Elia in a surprisingly gentle manner.

Elia exhaled. “Seventeen, sir. To fight the Russians. To throw the Tsar out of Galicia.”

“For the Emperor. For Franz Joseph” Hirsch added.

The Commander deftly backed his horse away from the crowd to a more commanding position from which to address the whole detachment. “Legionnaires! To the Emperor, you are loyal allies. To your wives and children you are brave soldiers. But to the Tsar, you are traitors. If an Austrian is captured, he ends up in Siberia. If a Legionnaire is taken, he ends up with a bullet in his temple. The son of a Russian whore, Ivanov, has said as much in writing.”

A murmur passed through the battalion.

“The Tsar thinks this will scare the Legions. Does this scare you?”

Shouts of “No!”

“The Cossacks will learn to tremble before the sons of Poland!”

Cheers in German and Polish.

“But unlike the Tsarists, we Austrians are men of honor. Men of our word. I will gladly send men to whatever fate God has ordained.” More cheers. “But I will not send boys to their death. You two,” he aimed his riding crop at Elia and Hirsch. “You are out of the legion.”

Unschuld, the Major, and a 2nd Lieutenant conferred on horseback as Lendas rallied his men and marched them off, leaving Elia and Hirsch in the mud, rifle-less. Led by the Colonel, the mounted officers, except for the 2nd Lieutenant turned and rode off.

Hirsch turned to Elia, “We’re finished.”

The junior officer stopped his horse in front of the boys and spoke, his facial expression neutral. “Colonel von Melasfeld was impressed with your initiative and patriotism. You are hereby assigned to the Fourth Battalion of the Gustav von Schweden Regiment, with the rank of cadet-private. Report

to Sergeant-Major Silverberg immediately.”

“Where?” Hirsch asked.

“Six kilometers.” The 2nd Lieutenant pointed to the horseshoe-pocked path on which the mounted officers had come and gone, then turned his horse and spurred him to a gallop in the direction he had just indicated.

Przemyśl • 10th of Elul, 5674 – Tuesday, September 1, 1914

TANCHEM SAT OUTSIDE at Antmann’s waiting for his tea and his daughters, contemplating the impossibly ornate double Austrian imperial eagle adorning the manila and brown pack of Memphis Cigarettes sitting on the table. A lifelong citizen of the Empire, he had been in the Army reserve for decades, retiring from the 10th Engineering Battalion at age fifty, having reached the highest non-commissioned rank possible, sergeant-lieutenant. The sight of men with guns neither disturbed nor intimidated him as he took in the scurry and confusion unfolding on the street before him.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack and lit it. Perusing the street, he began playing a game he and his mates had played long ago, before his Bar Mitzvah. *Apple-Green facings. Yellow buttons... The Clerfayt Regiment.* He took a long drag on his cigarette, exhaling from the side of his mouth as he continued to survey the scene. *Red, amaranth-red with white... the Ninetieth... no, no, that’s with yellow... cherry-red, yes, that’s it, cherry-red with white, the Seventy-Seventh von Wertemberg.* A detachment of men in brightly colored uniforms rode by on horseback. *What the hell are they, Dragoons? Dark-blue facings—Ulans? Ash-grey shako, of course, Hungarians. The Eleventh, what are they... yes, Ferdinand I Hussars.*

Tanchem relaxed back into his wicker chair and smoked

until his tea arrived. “Thank you, Morrie. How’s business? You look like hell.”

“I can’t complain, and you’re no Lionel Barrymore,” the proprietor said as Tanchem smiled and patted one of the empty seats he was reserving for his daughters. Morrie noted the mostly deserted tables on the cobbled sidewalk before reaching to his waist and pulling on a loose string, releasing the stained white apron straining against his ample stomach. “Just for a minute.” He glanced at the door that led to the kitchen, “My wife will crown me.”

“So business is all right?”

“In truth, it’s better than all right, almost too good. Since mobilization I sleep maybe four hours a night. You see the streets, packed with men. They’re everywhere. A few march out, more march in. And what does an army move on? What keeps it going? I’ll tell you: coffee, tea, beer, cigarettes, and schnapps.”

“I was kind of hoping you’d say *armoires*.”

“I’m afraid not, my friend.”

“And how’s the family?”

“Judes is forever sickly. We both work like dogs. But she’s glad that my deferment lasted through the call-ups. Mama thinks it’s because I am the only support for her, the poor old widow. Judes says it’s because I’m a little too—how did she put it—well grazed.” Morrie patted his stomach. “But we both know it’s because they understand that keeping the boys drunk is more important than keeping them in ammunition.” He glanced around at the tables, “All things being the same, too much work is better than not enough. So we get up with the sun, feed a company or two coffee, sugared tea and cakes. Later we get the whole battalion drunk until they stumble back to camp past midnight. They sleep so soundly that the Cracow train passing right through the camp can’t wake them, while Judes and mama and I wash dishes, most nights until two. Then we do it again. Even on Shabbat.”

“You really have to tip your hat to those Austrians. They sure knew what they were doing when they deferred you.” Tanchem said, reaching for his tea.

“Yes and no. I don’t have to fight, and God knows I don’t want to, but I also can’t run.” The waiter took another look around before leaning half way across the table, speaking in a near whisper, “Serving soldiers, officers, you—how can I put this?” He paused, looking around again, “I hear things. I’ve heard things.”

Tanchem moved in closer, “Like what?”

Morrie leaned in so their heads almost touched, “Like that the Tsarists are rounding up the Jewish men and shooting them. Women raped, children bayoneted. For being disloyal, like we owe a single rotten Heller to the bastard Nicholas.”

“I’ve heard rumors too, but nothing like this.”

“All the regular army boys are going one direction—out Mickiewicza or across the river and north to the front. This morning I served a group of Austrian officers, one was a...he had two silver stars on a zigzag background—”

“Lieutenant-colonel.”

“Yes, a lieutenant, just back from the Lemberg salient, here for a day. I pretended to clean tables and eavesdropped.”

“Morrie, if you are going to shorten a lieutenant-colonel, call him a colonel, not a lieutenant.”

“The Colonel was just back from Lemberg.”

“Better. And?”

“The war is not going well. We’re being pushed back all across the entire front. Lemberg falls any day or has already fallen.”

“The newspapers are lying?”

“Well, if I understand what they were saying—my German is far from perfect—not exactly. They talked about how our First and Fourth have pushed the Russians back to the north, near Lublin and Zamosc.”

“That sounds promising.”

“Well, I thought so too, but then the Lieutenant said something about how Bruddermann’s Third at Lemberg is in total collapse in front of Brusilov, exposing the rear.”

“So we have no problem pushing north and east. They have clear sailing south and west. Like a fucking circus carousel.”

“Yes, but as it turns, it brings Nicholas to Przemyśl.”

“In chess, Russians beat Austrians. Ivanov is ten times the player Conrad is. Conrad spends all his time crying to Moltke, who ignores him as if he were a bastard stepchild while drooling over the pretty girls he’ll have when he gets to Paris.”

“I’m not crazy about trading Galicia for Poland.”

“All of the officers agreed that there is no choice but to withdraw all our armies to a more defensible line along the Vistula.”

“Vistula? *Oy vey.*”

“We will have Cossacks at the doors of Przemyśl within a fortnight.”

“Are they worried?”

“They weren’t Jews,” Morrie said as he stood up.

“No, not that, about Przemyśl?”

“No one thinks the fortress can be breached.” He pulled the two strings of his apron tight across his stomach and tied them off in a bow. “But there is one more thing I overheard from another group of men that’s a bit more than disconcerting.”

“Uh-oh. What?”

“Of the six Colonels stationed at the Fort, five have already sent their wives west. Gone, out of Przemyśl.”

“God forbid, my friend, God forbid.”

“What will be, will be. What can we do? Besides, I’ve got soldiers to get drunk,” the proprietor said, walking toward the door.

Tanchem lit up another Memphis before consulting the

hands on his Longines. "Like I have time to lounge around," he muttered to himself, noting the low rumble of a far away mortar. "This is worse trouble than I thought."

He smoked his cigarette down to a near burn of his fingers before dropping the butt on the sidewalk; its explosion of red, glowing embers in a circular pattern reminiscent of a howitzer impact. Lifting his head, he saw his two daughters sauntering across the square. He was not pleased as they joined him in the two wicker chairs across the table.

"Malka, what the hell is that orange monstrosity you're wearing?"

"It's peach, daddy. Don't you just love it?"

"I can see your arms almost all the way up to your shoulders! And your cleavage!"

"All covered by lace. I think it looks divine. Rivka? What do you think?"

"Can't you see how the men look at you?" Tanchem said.

"Men always look that way at me, daddy," she said, batting her eyes. "Eisner says the prettier I dress, the more the officers spend."

"Damn it, I'm serious! It's no joke. You need to cover up when you go out." He realized that he could easily be overheard and lowered his voice, closing in on his daughter to make up for his diminished volume, "There are tens of thousands of boys away from home. From the big cities, from Budapest, Vienna, hell, even Berlin!"

"Oh father, you worry too much," Rivka enjoined, brushing a dusting of flour from her forearm.

Tanchem caught Morrie's eye as he was delivering drinks and cakes to a group of Hungarian soldiers. "Three," he mouthed silently, briefly holding up the same number of fingers just to be sure. He turned back to his daughters, "Izac is well. I have a post from him. He's was fixing cannons behind the lines near Rzeszow a week or so ago. Said the weather was nice."

“What else does he say?” Rivka asked.

“That was pretty much it.”

“My brother: short and to the point.”

“Listen girls, these are dangerous times. We are not immune from war, and the fighting may soon be on our doorstep.”

“The Germans crushed the Russians in the north. All of Prussia will be back in kraut hands by next week,” Rivka replied with authority.

Her father leaned back in his chair, stroking his beard. “Well, well, well. My daughter the Field-Marshal.”

“Father, I talked to Zipre, who heard from Meyer who—well we know who he talks to.”

That grabbed Tanchem’s attention. “What did he, I mean she, say?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Something about a huge victory near Konigsberg or Tannenberg, some berg. So bad that the Russian General shot himself.”

Morrie delivered the three teas to Tanchem and his daughters along with perfunctory smiles and nods then was gone without a word.

“Konigsberg? Do you have any idea how far away that is? It might as well be Siam.”

Tanchem sipped his tea, and then addressed his daughters in the most authoritative tone he could muster, “I’m closing up the shop and we are leaving Przemyśl. I don’t want any discussion on this. It is just too dangerous. Dangerous as Austrian citizens, even more dangerous as Jews. We will go west to your aunt Sheine in Oswiecim next week. We’ll be safe there and we can return when the war is over.”

To Rivka, Tanchem’s slow, acerbic delivery coupled with the subtle bulging of his carotid artery underscored the seriousness of his declaration. In all her memories, she could count but a handful of occasions when her father had used that particular tone with her. Nevertheless, she knew he was

wrong, yet she needed to consider how to explain why.

“Daddy,” she spoke to him as if she was the parent and he was her young boy, “We are infinitely safer here in Przemyśl than we would be in,” she paused, thinking of how bored she had been during her one visit to Oswiecim, two years ago, “in Cracow. Our fort is totally impregnable. The best troops, the best artillery. We won’t even hear the guns, they are so far away.”

“Rivka, you need to—”

“No, you need to—”

He poked his index finger at her, “Don’t you ever interrupt me, Rivka Chana.”

Rivka reached across the table and put her hand on her father’s arm. “I’m sorry, father. It’s just that—”

“I received a *feldpost* from Manes today.” Rivka and Tanchem frowned, both a bit perturbed at the frivolousness of Malka’s interruption. She produced a postcard from her shoulder bag and dropped it picture-side up onto the table, “Our sister fort, Jaroslaw.”

Tanchem and Rivka glanced at the picture of Austrian gun firing off a mammoth shell, and then turned back on each other, ignoring Malka.

“Did you read the latest communiqué from Kusmanek?” Tanchem said, trying a new approach.

Inured to such snubs, Malka flipped the card and began reading, “He sends his regards to Rivka and Tanchem.”

“Of course I read it. How could I avoid it? His announcements are plastered on every wall in the city!” Rivka said, pecking at the table with her forefinger, “The Czech is far more interested in what is coming for lunch than what is coming to attack.”

Malka continued reading, “And he tells us to get out of Przemyśl immediately.”

There was silence around the table, punctuated only by the sound of horse whinnies and army boots hitting cobblestones.

Tanchem snatched the card from the table. He read it

again and then passed it to Rivka, who did likewise before returning it to the table.

There was another moment without words, the quiet filled by the low rumble of far off mortar fire. “Like I said, we close the shop and book the Cracow train for next Monday.”

The girls nodded and finished their tea wordlessly.

Morrie walked over to pick up the bank note Tanchem had slipped under the ashtray. Glancing at the twenty Kronen note, the waiter pursed his lips and moved his chin back and forth beneath the mustache centered on his upper lip. “You know we’re not giving silver anymore. Paper only for paper. Sorry.”

“Of course, Morrie. Of course,” Tanchem said exchanging the bill for a five Kronen note, trying not to look embarrassed. He gestured to the impatient waiter that by taking the banknote their transaction would be complete.

Malka leaned over to Tanchem and kissed him on the cheek, “I’m back to the store, father. See you for supper.”

“Daddy, you know how I really feel about leaving.”

“Don’t start with me, Rivka.”

“No, no, that’s not it at all. I agree that it would be safer to leave for now.”

“Thank God you are growing up.”

Rivka noticed Elia’s mother’s ring on conspicuous display and quickly put that hand under the table so the ring was safely out of sight.

“Yes, I am. I’m nearly eighteen now.”

“If you are going to ask if I’ll let you marry Elia, it’s a bit of a moot point now, isn’t it. Austrian army or Polish Legions, men of the common rank may not marry while on active duty. And I doubt very highly that Elia has made Major in a month.”

“Oh no! Say it’s not true, father! I had no idea.” Rivka decided not to share that her boss Isidore, a retired army reservist himself, had told her as much a few days ago.

“That’s so unfair!”

“I’m afraid so, sweetheart. But it will be all right. You’ll see.”

“I’ll be a spinster my whole life!” She cried, rubbing her eyes with her palms to redden them. “Why, I didn’t even get to say goodbye.” She couldn’t believe she was lying to her father, what bothered her just was how easy it was to do.

“This mess will be over in no time, and then you and Elia can come to me the right way.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, dumpling.”

“Isidore has friends. He knows things.”

“Like?”

“This cannot be repeated, but he knows someone who knows the commander of Elia’s company.”

“So?”

“He told me, for a fact, that Elia will be through Przemyśl, one day, on his way to the front.”

“And?”

“It is the day after you—after we are to leave for Cra—, for Aunt Sheine in Oswiecim.”

He leaned back into his chair and began to stroke his beard, “Go on.”

“You are my father, and of course I will do whatever you want me to do. You want me to leave Przemyśl, I will leave Przemyśl as you desire. No argument. No fuss. But please, I beg you; allow me to stay two extra days, to see my Elia.”

He stroked his beard a few times, thinking, “Who would see after you?”

“I have talked with Gitla. She will take me in for the two nights.” She quickly added, “And chaperone us when we meet at the station.”

“So you would be on the train on Thursday?”

“Yes, with Gitla and Juda. They’ll be going to Cracow too.”

He let out an audible sigh, blowing a lung-full of air through

his pursed lips, like a bored horse. “This goes against all of my better judgment.”

“But, Daddy!”

Tanchem studied his daughter’s beautiful but crestfallen face, seeing in it traces of the love of his life. The profound sadness of being forced apart from the one you love flooded his soul. “I will allow it.”

“Oh, Daddy!”

“If,” he wagged his finger at his daughter, “you swear on your mother’s grave that you’ll be on that train.”

She lunged across the table and threw her arms around Tanchem, kissing him three times on alternating cheeks. “Yes, yes, yes. I do, and I will. Thank you, Daddy!” She hurried back to work as Tanchem sat, imagining how Lea would have handled Rivka’s request, missing his dead wife more than ever.

Puławy • 14th of Elul, 5674 – Saturday, September 5, 1914

“DON’T LOOK OUT there again when you hear incoming!” Manes grabbed Elia by the shoulder and shook him. “Are you listening to me? When you hear a whistle, you keep your head below the trench line.”

“Sorry, bad habit.”

Gerson, who had been reassembling his rifle, stood up, his four-foot, ten-inch height posing no risk to his head, and declared, “Goddamn it, why do we have children in the trenches anyway? One wants to get his head blown off, the other reeks of shit.”

Silverberg, the company sergeant, took offense. “Leave him alone. It’s no shame to be scared here. Hell, when that shell hit I would have shit my trousers too if I had anything left in my bowels.” He fished into his field pack sitting at the

bottom of the trench and pulled out a mud-caked pair of wool field pants and tossed them at Hirsch without comment.

“How long since the last one?’ Gerson asked, oblivious.

Hirsch disappeared around the corner of the zigzag field trench. Elia looked at the watch on his wrist, realizing that it had been quiet for longer than it should have been. He made a quick calculation. “Thirty-six seconds, give or take.”

Manes, in perpetual crouch, exchanged a glance with his sergeant, “Either we got the howitzer or the Russians found the vodka factory in Puławy.”

Silverberg turned to Elia, “Either way, son, time for you to run.”

“Ready, sir.”

“Medic!” Silverberg yelled, in German, repeating it until they all heard a bored “*Ja?*” from around the corner of the trench.

“Is Wald ready to move?”

No answer.

“Is he ready to move?”

As he finished his second request, a crouching field medic came around the corner. Hirsch followed a moment later.

“Well?”

“Sir,” the medic said, “the private is gone. Dead.”

Eyes avoided other eyes.

“Hell.”

“*Ach.*”

Yis’ga’dal v’yis’kadash sh’may ra’bbo...

After waiting for the final line of the mourner’s Kaddish to be mumbled by his men, Silverberg issued orders to the boys, “Get the body back to camp.” He turned to Manes, “Take the first watch.” Turning back to Elia, “Find the Field Rabbi and be sure he knows that Dov was *frum.*”

A large caliber mortar shell detonated nearby, quickly followed by another. Dirt cascaded down the walls of the trench.

“Go! Now!” Silverberg ordered.

Elia took the two handles of the stretcher at the front and Hirsch the ones at the rear, and carried Dov’s body the three kilometers to the main encampment.

• • •

FELDPOST – Infantry Regiment X

*Rivka Arm
Czarnieckiego 27
Przemyśl*

Dearest Rivka,

I trust this letter finds you, Malka, and Tanchem healthy and safe. As to myself, I am well, dreaming every night about walking along the San, our hands entwined. It seems like years since we last saw one another at the station, yet it has been but a month.

On arrival, we were trained by a Polish patriot in the arts of marksmanship, orienteering, ordinance and close quarters combat. Not the usual Hashomer fare to be sure! And now for the important news: after completing training, Hirsch and I have been reassigned from the Legion to the k.u.k.⁴, serving with our fellow men of Przemyśl in the Fourth Battalion of the Gustav V. König von Schweden Regiment. The censors will not allow me to tell you exactly where we are but suffice it to say we are encamped to the north, engaged with the enemy, and on the march daily.

My commander is Osher Silverberg. Do you remember him? His son Asher played football. Before the war he was a maker of talits. Quite the change!

Life in war is hard but not intolerable. I have come to appreciate the ease and comfort of peacetime. Small things we take for granted. A warm bath, sleeping in a bed, or simply private time, become lost treasures, to someday be recovered.

We see death every day, mostly in the train of wrecked bodies being ferried from the front to field hospitals in the rear. Remember Dov Wald? The barber's son? A shell fragment, no larger than a coffee bean, sliced through his neck. Dead in five minutes.

I have quickly gotten used to the gore and the blood, which scares me just a bit. What you never get used to is the constant noise of the exploding artillery. When it's near, it's like lightning hitting your house, over and over again. But even worse is when it's just a bit farther away. You don't so much hear it as feel it, vibrating every bone in your body.

I have a request, my darling. Can you please write to my sister Jette? Tell her that I'm safe. And tell her that I love her. Ask Gitla for her postal address; she'll know what to do.

Then there's you, my Rivka. Your love is my shield against bullets, my tent against rain, and my blanket against the cold. When despair is thick and trouble is at hand, I conjure up a picture of your beautiful face, and all becomes right again in the world. We'll be together soon. I promise.

With all the love in my heart,

Elia

**Przemyśl • 3rd of Tishrei, 5675 – Tuesday,
September 23, 1914**

A GENTLE ROLL followed a sharp tremor as the train passed over a double slip switch. “Sweetheart,” Juda said to Rivka, “I just can’t bear to see you cry. I was in the army. Orders change. Sometimes they have you marching right for an hour, and then you go left for two. Don’t worry about your boy, he’ll be fine.”

“But what that officer said yesterday—”

“He said it just to get you out of the station. You’d been there all day.”

“Maybe he knew something?”

“If something had happened to the men of Przemyśl, don’t you think we would have heard of it on the Marconi?”

Rivka smiled at him through her tears, appreciative of his heartfelt attempt to soothe her, even if she had already made up her mind to not be placated. She sat snugly next to Gitla, a pile of the Arm’s valises crowding in on the bench, her head resting on Gitla’s shoulder, buried in her aunt’s kinky, thinning black hair. After ceding his seat to an elderly Polish couple heading toward Pozan, Juda stood, hand wrapped around the edge of the iron luggage rack suspended from the ceiling. All five were knee-deep in valises, sacks, and bags, rendering movement problematic.

“Ever seen the trains this full?” Juda asked absentmindedly in Polish to the seated man, noticing the slightest hint of wetness just under his thin, blue-grey eyes.

“No,” the man said. He turned his head to the window, away from Juda, eyeing a line of horse-drawn artillery almost as long as the train. Flanked by mounted fighters in brightly accented uniforms, they moved along the road parallel to the train tracks. “Will any of us ever again see Przemyśl?”

Conversations quickly petered out into whispers as most of the people in the seventeen coach cars pulled by locomotive

were resigned to silently contemplate their war-ready town. At irregular intervals the relative peace of this wordless reflection was shattered by the report of howitzers—a single, sharp jolt if the shell landed nearby, or a prolonged rumble for impacts at a distance.

“Fucking bastards,” Gitla mumbled, her forehead pressed against the window to keep from bumping her head every time the train rolled over a warped segment of track. “Devastation before war.”

A shell exploded nearby making the train car jump like it was a bale of hay kicked by a horse.

Gitla shook her head, “It’s all gone; leveled; here; look.

Rivka lifted her head. “What?” she asked before blowing her nose into the handkerchief she clutched to her chest.

Three shells impacted in a row, much too close for comfort.

The train, moving no faster than a horse’s gallop, let out a metallic scream and slowed. A valise dislodged from the ceiling rack and would have landed in the Polish woman’s lap had Juda not intervened. As the coach came to a full stop, the train let out a mighty fart of steam in relief.

“Stumps.” Gitla said, peering out the window.

“Stumps?” Juda asked, perplexed.

“Stumps. Like where trees used to be. A whole forest worth of stumps. They murdered a whole forest.”

The tracks shuddered as a big cannon shell was fired from a nearby fort toward the Russian lines, eight kilometers to the north.

“To make a clean alleyway to shoot at the Russians,” Juda said, gesturing with his hands.

“The whole forest, damn it all. The whole thing.”

“Better trees than people.”

“And the village? Dunkowiczki. There used to be houses and farms—there and there. They burned them. Burned them to the dirt! We don’t even need the Russians for war; we can destroy the land all by ourselves.”

Juda looked away. He'd had this discussion with his wife before and had no stomach at this particular juncture to answer to all of the complaints she had for the male elements of humanity. Once engaged, there would be no stopping her. He counted thirteen more shell impacts before the train lurched backwards towards Zasanie. "They'll never take the forts lobbing small stuff like this at us," he concluded.

The train had only begun to move when a soldier jumped onto the stair at the end of the car where he could be seen speaking to a civilian standing by the exit. The soldier jumped off, waiting for the next car, presumably to again board and spread his message. A whisper started traveling through the car. As the civilian conferred with another who had been standing next to him, many, including Juda, yelled out, "What is going on!"

"Gentleman and ladies!" the civilian called. It took a moment for the voices in the car to silence. "As you can see, we are headed back to Przemyśl. The Russians have attacked the fort." He paused, a hundred eyes riveted on him.

"Let's go anyway!" one man shouted, followed by another. "It's dangerous either way, let's get to Cracow!"

The civilian hesitated, trying to form his words. "Um, we don't really have, how can I say this, any choice."

"Why!"

"No!"

"Cannot be!"

"But it is", he continued. "Blown up. Gone. There are no tracks to Cracow anymore."

The passengers fell silent. Wheels groaned against the track as more artillery rounds fell.

"The rails and the roads have been cut. We are encircled."

"You mean..."

"The fort has been invested. Przemyśl is besieged."

Four

**Przemyśl • 10th of Tishrei, 5675 – Tuesday,
September 30, 1914**

“WAR SERVICES LAW, pumpkin,” Juda said over morning tea.

“But you served. You retired. It’s not fair!”

“You want fair? I’ll give you fair,” Gitla said to Rivka, jabbing at the quarter loaf of dark rye on the table with her finger. “Is it fair that the boys at the forts salivate for a lousy crust of bread while the Viennese strut about like peacocks feasting daily on spätzle and schnitzel?”

Juda shrugged. “The tower on Katedralna Hill is the only link the fort has to the outside, to news. Besides, it is our fortune that I know wireless. Weiss has already tried three times to bribe me to pass messages first to him.”

“Take his money next time, schmuck,” Gitla said to her husband like she meant it, drumming the fingers of her left hand on the wooden table.

“I made three trips to the forts yesterday. No signs of Russians to the south though we still seem to be shooting off our cannons,” Rivka said, spreading jam on a slice of bread.

“South is all right,” Juda said with authority. “Most of the

action is north and west. We hold all the passes and may even be in Sanok by now. We'll be linked up and relieved in a matter of days. Stay away from forts five through eight and you'll be fine this week."

"You're such a big shot at Antmann's with all your secret communiqués, Juda dear. Free beer all siege long," Gitla said, rubbing her husband's shoulder. "The bread girl and the sauerkraut lady hear things too."

"Seriously, ladies, this thing could be over next week or could go on all winter. We need to prepare for the worst."

"Izzy begs me to stay quiet about his cellar," Rivka injected. "About how much flour he has stacked away."

Juda nodded. "No use in rubbing anyone's nose in it."

"Or inviting the Viennese to just take it," Gitla added, now serious. "I've got cabbages and salt to make two, maybe three barrels of kraut. I could use some help cutting and kneading. And if we can get ten or so liters of vinegar I can lay away six month worth of beets."

"I can get the vinegar," Rivka said. "It's stocked by quartermasters as part of rations. They'll do anything for real bread."

"You would, too. I've lived on zwieback. It's like eating shoe leather."

"I'll need some Kronen." She paused. "He'll just pay me less. Izzy's such a sweetheart."

"Besser? A *mensch*," Gitla concurred. "A good man, making a small fortune in ten and fifty Heller coins having you ferry his bread to the forts. He'd just scrape by if he only had to bake for the yids left on Franciszkańska. We should buy, or better yet, trade with Besser. A few bags of flour for some kraut."

Rivka smiled sweetly, "Don't worry; I'll take care of my little Isidore."

The three rose and left the home. Juda climbed Katedralna Hill and took his seat at one of several Marconi sets, code-

book in hand, ready to decipher. Rivka headed to the bakery and picked up two sacks of *semmel* rolls while Gitla packed her canvas sack full with sauerkraut, preserves, and wild honey. The woman met just past the inner defensive ring before making their way across crater-filled fields to Fort III where they peddled their goods to soldiers longing for small reminders of better times.

**Nowy Korczyn • 23rd of Tishrei, 5675 – Tuesday,
October 13, 1914**

“WHO’S GOT A smoke? I need a Memphis,” Elia asked, leaning against bullet-pocked tree.

Manes passed an open carton to Elia.

“I could use some food that might have actually been alive sometime this century. This shit isn’t fit for a dog. To hell with cigarettes,” Hirsch said, tapping an empty beef stew can with his knife.

A boy dressed in black and wearing a *keppe* approached the camp from town. He kept his eyes on the dirt path, dragging a lame leg while balancing the bundle he clutched in both arms. His slight frame and large cargo cast a long, erratically moving shadow on the ground in front of the soldiers.

“Hang on, Herschel. Here comes the cavalry,” someone said.

When the boy was within earshot, Hirsch called to him, “Chocolate! Dear messenger of God, please have sweet chocolate tonight.”

The boy approached a makeshift table erected by the soldiers from trench boards and freshly felled timber. A dozen men drew to a tight semi-circle around the lad as he prepared to display his wares by pulling on several bow-tied knots holding his sack together. The uniformed men inched

closer, some tense with anticipation, others just curious or simply bored.

“What’s your name, kid?” a soldier asked.

“Shlomo,” he said, the drama of the moment completely lost on him as he pulled the canvas back, revealing a few dozen 100 count boxes of cigarettes.

“Crap,” Hirsch mumbled, as he and several other men left the circle.

Manes pulled a carton from the bag, displaying for all to see the cover advertisement of a rosy cheeked, red vested cigarette offering, jolly-faced man standing beneath a globe printed in Cyrillic. “The whole world smokes Russian Renta cigarettes,” he read aloud, adding with his own jolly smile, “Only when the alternative is no cigarettes at all.”

The remaining men laughed as Manes tossed the cigarettes back to the table.

“How much?” Max, the company carpenter asked.

Shlomo looked up at his prospective buyer. “Ten if coin, twenty if note.”

“Usury! Twenty for cigarettes? Let the Russians come back here for twenty Kronen.”

The boy was unmoved.

“Ten by note. But only because you’re lame.”

Shlomo began tying the strings back together.

Manes dropped three ten Kronen notes onto the half closed canvas. “Two for thirty.”

The boy snatched up the notes and examined them before securing them in his pants pocket. Manes helped himself to a carton. “What the hell else are you going spend your weekly pay on, gentlemen?”

Standing firm on price, Shlomo sold all his Russian cigarettes to the troops before limping back toward town.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER in a cold drizzle, Silverberg, three *Hasidim*, and the limping cigarette boy, who apparently never made it home, appeared at the edge of the field, walking toward the soldiers gathered under a tarp, drinking tea and smoking Rentas.

“These things taste like shit.” Manes said, spotting the approaching party. “What’s the Sergeant want with the black-hats?”

“They probably need help clearing a building or defusing a shell,” Elia said, drawing deeply on his new brand before flicking it into a puddle and spitting. “Shit is about right.”

The Sergeant addressed his men once in earshot, “Boys, gather round.”

They slowly assembled around the table.

One of the black-clad men, walking a half a step in front of the others, addressed the men in a remarkably loud and clear voice.

“Shalom, brothers, and welcome to my town. I am Chaim Frydenberg, Rabbi of Nowy Korczyn. This is Avner Feiner, synagogue *meister* and Avraham Bauman, one of our leading citizens, head of the burial society.”

He took note of the Rentas, “And I see many of you’ve met my son, Shlomo.” Chaim put his arm around the boy, who tried hard to show no emotion before breaking into a gap-toothed grin.

“The war is a terrible thing,” the Rabbi continued. “Most of our sons are gone, taken by the Tsarist army. One or two we hid, a few got across the river and joined the Emperor’s Army or ride with Pilsudski.”

A few men mumbled their skepticism aloud.

“But today is day that transcends war, which goes beyond the bounds of all earthy concerns. Today we both finish and start anew the great cycle of Torah, the eternal and unending gift from God. While you may have to fight tomorrow, the people of Nowy Korczyn would be honored if you would come

to our modest synagogue and celebrate this night with us.”

Manes flicked his cigarette into the grass. “It seems to me your God and your Torah hasn’t done all that much for the working class soldier lately,” he said, then added with enmity, “Mister Rabbi. I don’t need your moralizing, your bourgeois superstitions, or your town’s naive piety. Manes would rather drink by himself.”

“Listen, Sterner,” Silverberg started, before being muted by a wave of the rabbi’s hand.

Rabbi Frydenberg walked up to Manes and looked him in the eye. Seated at the makeshift table, Manes and the five-foot-tall rabbi ended up face to face. “I am Chaim, or Mister Rabbi, as you like. And you, I take it, are Mister Sterner or Manes. Which do you prefer?”

“I’m Manes; Comrade Sterner to you.”

“Mister Comrade Manes,” the rabbi began. “You seem to be strong man. A man the others respect; a man of judgment.”

“I trust my own eyes and ears, if that’s what you mean. No rabbi is going to tell me what to think.”

The brigade slowly closed in on the two men.

“Right you are, Mister Comrade Manes. Right you are to trust your senses. No so-called expert can tell you what to think, can they.”

Hirsch leaned to Elia and whispered, “It’s a trap.”

Manes nodded to the rabbi, “The working class can think for itself.”

Elia nodded to Hirsch.

“Yes, yes it can. So true.” Frydenberg began to turn away but stopped, looking lost. “But I’m a little confused. Perhaps just one little question for you, Mister Comrade Manes, all right?”

“Go ahead.”

“I am an old man and my mind is not what it once was.”

“Manes is dead,” Elia mouthed to Hirsch.

“When did you live in Nowy Korczyn?” The rabbi’s voice

grew stronger. “How is it that you know the soul of our village?”

“This is my first visit to Nowy—”

Chaim cut him off. “And when did I have the opportunity to moralize you into this state of aversion?”

“Well, I...” Manes pursed his lips, his shoulders slumping.

“I must be getting old. I can’t remember doing this, though given your experience here, I must have.”

“Rabbi, I didn’t mean to...”

“Oh, this is your first visit to our town, isn’t it? And we have only had the pleasure of meeting just this instant, yes?”

Manes laughed, shaking his head.

“Then someone told you about us, about me. Or you just don’t like my ugly face. I couldn’t blame a handsome young man for that. I’m just a feeble old man.”

“Give up, Manes!” one of the soldiers blurted out.

“Resign!” Hirsch added.

“Just a feeble old man, the Rabbi muttered, shaking his bowed head, hiding a smirk from the howling troops.

“Tip your king, soldier!” Elia yelled.

Manes stood, towering over Chaim. “All right, I give up. Resign! I love Nowy Korczyn. The people are beautiful. I give a day’s pay a week to the Temple!” Manes joined the balance of his battalion in laughter.

The rabbi held his hand up bringing a jovial silence to the clearing. “It is a truly wise man who can laugh at himself.” He took a step forward and embraced Manes as best he could. Manes returned the hug, lifting Frydenberg clear off the ground.

“Simchat Torah!” Elia yelled over and over. He was soon joined by everyone else.

The rabbi turned and started walking toward town. He waved an arm and called over his shoulder, “Let’s drink! To the synagogue!”

THE SYNAGOGUE WAS a two-story brick box with a clay tile roof capped by a secondary slate bonnet. A large concrete pad sat between the packed gravel street and the brick riser that led through double wooden doors into the sanctuary. The interior was dominated by a dark wooden Ark resting on a carved limestone slab protected by a wrought iron gate. Long wooden benches provided seating for worshipers in front of the velvet-covered *bimah*. White-washed walls were covered with Hebrew verses, each framed in a decorative floral border.

Bottles of schnapps and flasks of vodka circulated freely in front a fresco of the Jerusalem skyline painted across the wall holding up the women's balcony.

By the time Rabbi Frydenberg approached the Ark, most of the soldiers and townsmen were well on their way to being drunk. After opening the gate under the crown topped Ten Commandments, presented in relief and guarded by a pair of fearsome limestone etched lions, the Rabbi passed scrolls to Avner and Avraham before taking the last one himself. The three townsmen carried the scrolls to the three chairs next to the *Bimah* as the congregation sang old melodies with even older words. Two young boys and an elderly man with a cane left the benches to attend to the Torahs, removing their embroidered velvet covers, the sterling *yads* before lifting off each scroll's shield and finial.

Rabbi Chaim, Avner, and Avraham began a march in a wide arc around the *Bimah*, with more singing, more men rising, encircling one side of the gallery. As they stepped out, one by one, the seated men and boys joined the procession. The three men took a turn, lifting their scrolls overhead, held aloft only by two poles. As the liquor flowed, it became a contest: which man could spread his arms furthest, displaying the most Torah.

With each revolution, the Torahs were passed to other men and new competitions joined, fueled by ever more alcohol.

Soon, the entire main floor was up, marching and passing back and forth the three Torahs.

By the fourth circuit around the synagogue, the soldiers of Przemyśl had joined the competition and the synagogue at Nowy Korczyn was a riot of singing, dancing, drinking, and revelry.

On the sixth lap, a stocky, bald-headed butcher named Ejchler spread one of the scrolls to five full panels. The feat, apparently a local record, was celebrated with cheers and schnapps.

“Take a turn, Manes.” Elia slurred.

Fifteen minutes later the exhausted Rabbi addressed his congregation, now considerably calmed. “Had I been blessed with daughters, I would die happy to have this man as my son-in-law.” He wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. “For the first *aliyah*, I call to the *Bimah* the lion, the only man to ever show six panels.” He pointed to the back row. “Manes Sterner: honorary son of Nowy Korczyn.”

The soldiers cheered and reveled as Manes weaved toward the *Bimah*. He kissed the Rabbi, and then turned to acknowledge his audience. In a matter of seconds the synagogue came to order, the jovial became deferential, the gleeful turned reverent. He chanted, “*Bar-chu et Adonai ham vorach...*”

One by one, the Rabbi called up all of the soldiers to read the final Torah portion of the yearly cycle:

Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses – whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel.

Continuing without pause to the beginning of the cycle:

When God began to create heaven and earth the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

An hour later the tipsy locals and drunken soldiers from Przemyśl spilled out onto the muddy dead end street where the synagogue stood. Once again taking up arms and lighting cigarettes, the men from Galicia led the inebriated celebrants in a song and hoot-filled parade punctuated by rifle shots, into the cool, starless night sky. When they reached the center of Nowy Korczyn, no further from the synagogue than the Scheinbach was from Plac na Bramie, the Rabbi declared his intention to lead the two hundred marchers for seven full circuits around the market square.

The next morning, after coffee, cigarettes and some serious retching, not a single man in the battalion could remember exactly how wide Manes had held the Torah or how many laps around the square had actually been completed.

FELDPOST – Infantry regiment 10

Elia Reifer

Dearest Elia,

First of all I love and miss you and I hope and pray for you daily— and you know how much I dislike prayer! But with all seriousness, I trust this letter finds you safe and healthy.

As you might know, Przemyśl was besieged by the Tsarists with contact to Crakow only reestablished the day before yesterday. What you probably did not know is that I am still in the city, living with Juda and Gitla.

I was hoping, no, dying to see my Elia, even if but for a minute, so when I heard a rumor that your Tenth was being deployed through Przemyśl, I talked daddy into allowing me to stay just for a few days after he and Malka left. But alas, Przemyśl these days is nothing but rumor; no Tenth, no Elia. Our train made it just past Zasanie before we were forced to return when the Russians blew up the tracks. That was three weeks ago.

Now, my love, the difficult part: Even as trains arrive hourly to stock the fort and bolster the city, returning nearly empty with ample space for the trip to the west, I have decided to stay in Przemyśl. Please don't be cross with me love – I have to stay.

Isidore has no one other than me to sell his breads at the forts. He's like a zayde to me and I cannot leave him to fend for himself. The Russians are fleeing and the siege will soon lift, but just in any case, we have laid away plenty of provisions. Besides, Juda has been pressed back

into service as a wireless operator so he and Gitla are here with me too.

Daddy will be fuming when he receives my post, but I am not a child and people here rely on me. And don't you worry about me. Przemyśl is safe and compared to what you must face, no real hardship.

I'll tell you what hard is – living in your room, sleeping in your bed wrapped in your blankets – surrounded by you – without you. That's cruel; nearly intolerable.

Elia sweetheart – flip this card and look at the picture of the river. I want you to know that every night I dream of warm summer nights on the quay, on a blanket next to you, watching for streaking stars in the heavens or in your eyes.

With all the love in my heart,

Rivka

**Przemyśl • 28th of Sh'vat, 5675 – Friday, February
12, 1915**

THE COAL-FIRED BREAD ovens vented into a narrow walkway that separated Besser's Bakery from an apothecary. On most days, the prevailing breeze pushed the heavenly aroma out onto Słowackiego, enticing local shoppers to stop in for a fresh pastry, while teasing hungry soldiers marching past the store on their way to the forts.

"Please, Rivka, please don't go. Who needs the money, anyway?" Isidore said pulling rolls off the cooling rack and putting them into the grey burlap sack on the kneading counter.

"We are not selling our breads to the Polacks for valueless paper, or worse, for lousy Viennese scrip," Rivka shot back. "And that's not really the point and you know it. If I don't bring it to the boys on the front, all the fresh bread ends up

on the tables of the Generals at the Metropol and the working class eats moldy zwieback.”

“Rivka, it’s not safe out there anymore. And our sack or two of rolls can’t feed fifty forts. Besides, we should cut back a bit, in case this thing goes on and on.” He paused and put a hand on her shoulder, “*Our* bread? So exactly when did you become my partner, Miss Arm?”

“Mister Besser,” she said, throwing her arms around the old man, squeezing him tightly.

“It’s Isidore, precious.”

“Oh, Isidore,” she said playfully.

“Please?” he whispered into her ear. “A meter of snow last Shabbat, and now minus ten at midday and minus twenty-five by night. Who needs it? Stay here with me.”

“All right, I’ll deliver these today then we’re done with the forts. We’ll sell our—I mean your—breads to the Poles and be happy. No, not happy. War is so full of choices between bad and worse, between feeling awful and getting killed.”

“That’s my little sheep with the Yiddish head.”

The sound of boots being kicked against the stone foundation of the building to rid them of snow followed by the ring of bells hung across the door jamb alerted them to the arrival of soldiers, sending Besser scurrying from the back room, past the main counter, and towards the door, standing ajar.

“Tomas, come in, my son. And don’t worry about the snow.”

“All right if the men wait inside today?”

Tomas was a thin and pale, just like every soldier that manned the forts over the winter siege. His features were smooth and angular; a scab on his badly chapped lower lip was the only splash of color to be found on his entire face.

“Of course. Yet another day in our crummy paradise.”

“Thank you, Mister Besser.” Tomas nodded toward the door as two more Hungarian soldiers came in out of the snow, the last one closing the door again to the sound of bells. Each

propped his rifle up by the coat rack then stood to the side in the bakery customer queuing area, rubbing their hands together for warmth. Tomas's glasses, nestled deeply in his eye sockets, instantly fogged.

"No, thank *you* Mister First Lieutenant Lenard," the baker quickly corrected. "And for heaven's sake, call me Isidore. Or, Izzy."

The soldier shrugged, "The army needs for your rolls to make it to the fort and I don't want Miss Arm robbed again."

"Hungry?" Isidore asked the Magyars.

All three soldiers looked at the baker, inhaled, feasting on the nearly edible aroma of freshly baked bread that wafted through the store, and then looked down at the floor.

"Of course, I'm an idiot." Besser addressed one of the privates, "You, what's your name?"

He looked up, "Imre."

"So young." He patted the boy on the cheek. "When did you last eat?"

"Fourteen hundred yesterday, sir. Soup."

"To call it soup is a stretch. More like warm water with a few specks of sinew of highly questionable origin," Thomas added.

Isidore counted out three squares of honey-nut roll from the large collection in the wicker basket resting on the wooden countertop and set them on a china plate. "Eat! Eat my boys," he said to the soldiers, waving with both hands.

As the Magyars descended on the plate, Rivka appeared from the back room with a large canvas sack slung over her shoulder. Each man consumed his square in a slightly different manner; one devoured his in two bites; another savored a hundred tiny nibbles.

"Drink some hot tea before you brave the snow," Isidore said, guiding a small glass tumbler under the spigot before flipping the brass stopcock on the samovar.

Each of the soldiers licked his fingers clean of the last hint

of honey before joining Rivka and Isidore for tea.

A PRIVATE NAMED Laszlo walked in front, rifle cocked and ready, while Imre followed closely behind him, carrying the burlap sack filled with bread rolls over his shoulder. A few paces behind, Tomas escorted Rivka, carrying Imre's rifle as well as his own. On particularly frigid days like this, Rivka wore Juda's old army coat with a wool blanket draped around her shoulders. Her head was covered by a babushka and further wrapped in a long scarf, treated by Gitla with a concoction of herbs said to repel the myriad diseases constantly circulating within the confines of the besieged forts.

They chatted as they slogged through the snow to the east toward the outer ring.

"As for me, before being conscripted, I was teaching at the University of Szeged after taking degrees in both physics and mathematics from the Budapest University," Tomas told her, stealing a glance at the uncovered parts of her face.

"I don't want to sound too naïve, but I find this science, these invisible waves, to be almost spiritual. I see nothing in science that contradicts the existence of God. I really appreciate the opportunity to discuss this—" They ducked as the party was sprayed with slush by the wheels of the passing flat-bed supply truck.

"Bastards did it on purpose," Tomas said, under his breath.

"So these X-rays are like light but we can't see them? And they can pass through anything?" Rivka asked, oblivious to the supposed insult.

The rumble of a shell hitting closer than usual briefly upset the group's gait.

Tomas continued, "Not lead, but most everything else. And the important point is that they act in very specific ways when they pass through crystals of pure element. And

because they are so small, we can use them to probe the very structure of matter itself.”

“So it’s sort of like identifying where the glass in a kaleidoscope came from just by the pattern you see in the eyehole?”

“Exactly. You’re brilliant, Rivka. After the war you should come to Szeged and take a degree.”

For a brief moment this marvelous dream seemed to be within Rivka’s reach before reality came crashing down in the form of two horse-drawn wagons. The first, loaded with broken, bleeding, and moaning men, the last stacked with neatly arranged corpses, each covered with a rough field blanket.

Rivka fought back a flood of horrible images of war and joined the Magyars in staring at the ground as the wagons passed.

“Tell me about you, Tomas,” Rivka said as the wagon passed behind them and they resumed walking. “You wear a cross yet I’ve heard you use Hebrew. Are you—, did you, is there a family back in Szeged?”

Tomas exhaled, his breath looking like cigarette smoke in the frigid air.

“I was born, raised, and became a Bar Mitzvah in Gyor, but in fact, I do not believe in God any more than I believe that the moon is made of cheese. At age seventeen I fell in love, or so I thought, with a Catholic girl. We were both young, stupid. As these stories usually go, she soon was with child. Her father was a powerful man, not one to be made a fool of, so we ran off to Budapest. I took the sacrament to wed Vilma, for our Jonas, and, I suppose, because I thought it would ease my way to University.”

Rivka turned to see Tomas looking at her.

“She died of a breast tumor soon after I received my degree. After burying her I contacted her father, as a good Catholic should. Within a month he had the marriage annulled and

bribed the courts to award Jonas to his custody.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rivka said, turning her head back to the road.

“Life has a way of just going on.” The wind gusted. A tear from the corner of Tomas’s eye rolled down his cheek before freezing in a ridge on his chin.

They turned off the Lemberg highway onto a smaller road. Just past the junction they came to two three-gun tripods set up in a wind-blown clearing at the top of a small rise. Boot prints pointed the way to the field where six soldiers were on their knees, clearing snow, hacking away at the frozen dirt with their bayonets.

“Digging for beets,” Laszlo said as he passed by.

Rivka stopped in her tracks, glanced at Tomas, then at Imre’s bread bundle, then back at the field.

“Rivka, please don’t do this. You can’t save everyone,” Tomas said, raising his voice as she stormed by him.

“Put it down!” she yelled at the soldier. “Give me my bread!”

“Rivka,” Tomas said, now softer, as if pleading, “It’s not legal to feed the troops.”

As Imre set the sack down in the snow, Rivka spun and looked at Tomas, with mouth pursed and daggers in her eyes. “This is my bread, not yours. You may think that there is no greater power watching as we walk by these boys, no right or wrong as they catch a whiff of my bread. You may be able to ignore the screaming from their empty stomachs, but I can’t.”

Tomas leaned against his rifle while Rivka took six rolls from the sack and forded the snow to the men. After a brief discussion, Rivka waived off the payment one of the starving men offered at her. One by one the six took a roll then dropped to their knees, snow to their waists, furiously crossing themselves before devouring the bread. As she retraced her steps through the snow back to Tomas, he called out, “I won’t tell anyone,” and then whispered to himself,

“Because you are so good; because I desperately want to make love to you, Rivka.”

They headed for Fort XV, now faintly visible through the light snow and smoke. Eventually, the mood calmed, and Tomas and Rivka restarted their conversation.

“And you? What of your life, Rivka Arm.”

“I’ve lived in Przemyśl all my life”.

“Lovely little hamlet.”

“Sarcasm is not wit.”

“Sorry, I...”

“I’m just pulling your leg. I know it’s hard to imagine, but it actually was quite lovely before all this.”

“And what of religion. Of God?” Tomas asked. “Seems you were alluding to the subject back there.”

“God, hmm...” Rivka’s voice trailed off as she contemplated the question and tried to formulate a response, looking for the words that would be both accurate and convey the impression that she was an erudite, modern thinker.

“I do believe in God, but not in a corporeal sense, more as a summation of human morality.”

“Then there is absolute right and wrong?”

“No, but people like to group with other people who share their moralities. As Jews, we have an elaborate set of stories, metaphors really, that define our common moralities. Catholics have the New Testament. Ottomans have the Koran.”

“If they have all the rules, then why do they all need a God?”

A barrage of mortar fire, three loud reports in a row, came from the fort off in the distance, followed by an explosion from an incoming round.

“We had better not be walking into another shell fight, Rivka.”

She continued, “Remember, there are no absolutes. If you boil it all down, distill it to the essence, all religions are based

on just a few basics. Dictums such as ‘thou shall not kill.’ If it all depends on just a few of these, you really need people to not question them.”

“God as an axiom. Excellent.”

Rivka smiled.

Tomas was even more pleased. He thought that never, not once in a decade, had he had an exchange at that intellectual level with his petite, vacuous wife, Vilma. He snuck a glance at Rivka, trying to imagine what her face and body would look like stripped of all the layers that covered her against the cold.

THE EARTH SHOOK, then shook again.

“Artillery barrage. Looks like tens or twelve’s,” Tomas said, huddled behind a stand of boulders a few hundred meters from the entrance to Fort XV.

“What’s the count of the hits behind us?”

“Twelve then thirty between salvos, I think,” Laszlo said.

“Two guns at forty two seconds between shells,” Tomas concluded, adding, “And timing ahead?”

“Forty-two also. Must only be one cannon,” the private said, looking up from his watch.

Tomas addressed the privates, “One gun aimed forward versus two behind us. We go forward to the fort.”

“Looks like about a minute in this snow to cross the field,” Imre said.

“Agreed. Single file, following me,” Tomas commanded. “Laszlo will keep track of time. At thirty five seconds he yells ‘ready’. At forty seconds he yells ‘cover’ and we all hit the snow and cover our heads.”

“And pray,” Imre added, crossing himself.

“As soon as it hits, count to three, then get up and follow me into the Fort.”

Laszlo peeled his leather glove back and looked at his

watch.

“Got it?” Tomas asked.

Four heads nodded.

“Count it down.”

“Twenty.”

“Ten”

“Five, four, three...”

A high pitched whistling noise was followed by a flash and an immediate concussion as the space between the rocks and the Fort became a mélange of snow, dirt, shrapnel, and smoke.

“Now!” Tomas shouted, dashing from behind the rocks into the open.

They rushed through the field as fast as they could, trying not to make fresh tracks and staying between the sticks that had been placed in the snow to show the safe route around the mines. Sometimes this meant sliding down the rim of a bomb crater and climbing back out a few meters later.

“Ready!” Rivka heard from just behind her. She sped up, placing her foot in the snow just as Tomas’s foot vacated it.

“Cover!” Laszlo yelled, diving into a drift with Imre.

Rivka hit the snow, covered heavily a moment later by Tomas, like a woolen comforter pressed fast to her back along the entire length of her body, from head to back to buttocks to legs. A split second later, as a shell’s impact concussion shook them, a pleasant shiver radiated out from the soft wisps of hair on the back of Rivka’s neck. She tilted her head, exposing more skin as his warm, wet lips alit on her.

Laszlo’s, “Three!” separated Tomas from her and brought both to their feet, running.

Soon, Rivka and the Magyars were safe underneath the twenty meters of dirt, steel and concrete – Fort XV, otherwise known as Fort Borek.

“RIVKA, TAKE THE bread and stay close behind us. Imre, Laszlo, in front with me.”

A mob grew at the fortified entry portico as rumors of the bread’s arrival spread through the Fort.

“Form a line! There’s enough, no need to push!” Tomas yelled.

The artillery men ignored him, pushing closer. Rivka didn’t need to understand a word of Hungarian to be concerned as they all backed up toward the side wall of the entrance.

“They’ve only brought enough for the officers!”

“I’ll pay twice for each roll!”

“A silver Krone for one! Silver for a lousy roll!”

“I beg you!”

“Let’s just take the bread!”

Tomas cocked his rifle, “I’ll shoot the first one who grabs for the bread.” Imre and Laszlo cocked their rifles too. “You should set a higher price.” He said, turning to Rivka.

“Let’s just give it to them. Who can blame them, they’re starved.”

As her back touched the dirty concrete wall, the end of the barrel of Tomas’s rifle rested on a corporal’s chest. Like all of the men, he looked thin and gaunt, with bloodshot eyes and a radiating bodily stench. He was hatless, with numerous scars on his scalp. Like about half the men in the mob, he had recently had his head shaved, likely to rid him of the ubiquitous lice that plagued every fort, camp and trench from the Urals to the English Channel.

“Magyar brother, either you shoot me or I’m getting some food,” the corporal said, grabbing the rifle barrel and guiding it to a spot on his tunic that was over his heart.

Tomas had just pushed him back into the crowd with his rifle, when a gunshot reverberated in the enclosed concrete, silencing all but the artillery rounds.

“Attention!” the officer barked, holstering his pistol.

“Lieutenant Colonel Kaszás, sector commander,” Tomas

whispered to Rivka, bringing his gun to his side, standing straight up and leaning his head back a few degrees toward her.

“Fall in!” Kaszás commanded, pointing at the far wall.

The men quickly lifted their siege of the bread party and formed two lines a dozen or so meters away as the Lieutenant Colonel approached the three soldiers who were guarding the woman.

After saluting crisply, Tomas was dismissed with a perfunctory half wave, half salute. Kaszás then addressed Rivka, “Do you speak German?”

“Yes, Colonel,” she said, noting that other than an impressive saber and a nice collection of stars on his facings, he looked like all the other men: tired, dirty and hungry.

He bowed to her, “Lieutenant Colonel Georg Kaszás, at your service.”

She nodded, “Rivka Arm, baker.”

“Please accept my humble apologies on behalf of the Twenty-Third Artillery Brigade. Our behavior has been quite unbecoming of Magyar soldiers.”

“That is not necessary, sir. The starving should never be asked to apologize to the well fed.”

He briefly contemplated before speaking. “You have my undying gratitude for risking life and limb to bring food to the men at the front. If we are ever—when we are relieved, I am going to see to it that you receive *Die Zivilverdienstmedaille*, or whatever medal they are giving to civilians.”

“I’m not giving you bread, I’m selling it to starving men. A medal? I should be shot as a capitalist, a gouger.”

Kaszás leaned in toward Rivka and smiled broadly, displaying a nasty array of crooked, yellow teeth, with his back to his men, so only she could see, and whispered, “Our time will come soon, Comrade, our time will come soon.”

Turning to the men, he spoke forcefully, “There will be no bread bought today.”

Moans and sighs.

“It is not fair that men now manning the cannons can get no bread. That men without silver are denied.”

More moans and sighs.

“Fort Borek will buy all the bread and divide it evenly amongst all the men.”

Rivka accepted Kaszás’ first offer for the sack of rolls and each of the men manning Fort XV feasted that afternoon on quarter rations of canned pork stew accompanied by half of a freshly baked, hard crusted *semmel* roll from Besser’s bakery.

THE ARTILLERY PETERED out after noon. Rivka and Tomas left the fort for town at 14:00, after an hour without incoming fire.

“Will I ever see you again?” Tomas asked as they retraced their steps through a crater.

“It’s not like you’re going anywhere any time soon, Mister Lenard. Come in the morning, I’ll save a honey roll for you. We’ll have tea,” she said as they approached the rocks at the far end of the field.

As soon as the pair disappeared behind the first large boulder, Tomas sped up and put his hand on Rivka’s shoulder. “Rivka, please.”

She stopped walking and turned to him. Tomas put his free hand on her waist. Their eyes met. He pulled her to him. Their lips met. She instinctively pushed back for a moment before relenting; now using her arms around his waist to pull him tight to her. Eyes closed, mouths opened, and tongues entwined.

She broke the kiss and pushed back. They each took a small step back from the other. “I’m sorry, Rivka.’

“Don’t be sorry, Tomas. I liked it and I... I’m fond of you. Very fond. But we can’t do this. I have a, a boy in the army.

This can't lead anywhere."

"You intrigue me, Rivka. Time here moves when we're together. And it's not like I want to marry you. And I can't even begin to say what the provost would say if a proper Catholic professor married a Jewess." He moved a step closer and put a hand on her waist, "But tell me, why does it have to lead anywhere?"

She turned and started walking, "Because it is wrong. It's breaking faith."

"Rivka, we're both stuck in this hellhole, surrounded by people who want to kill us, with men killing each other for two thousand miles in every direction, each of our hearts heavy. If we can find some calm, some peace, some pleasure in each other's arms, it's not wrong and it's not any real breach of faith."

"I don't think so," Rivka said as they reached the main road.

"As long as we don't fall in love, it's no different than taking a bath or having a massage or any other pleasure. Just more so."

"That's just rubbish, and you know it."

"Why does it have to be so? Open your mind."

She stopped and turned. After waiting for a group of soldiers to pass, she spoke, "Trust, fidelity, love, these are feelings that you do not, no, cannot have all to yourself. They are, by definition, the feelings of a pair, where both must agree or all is lost. You may not think that kissing me, not that we would stop there, is a breach of faith but what you think is irrelevant. What would Elia think, that's what matters, how would *he* feel?"

"He wouldn't feel because he wouldn't know."

"A crime is a crime even if the police don't know it happened. Besides, how can you put yourself in a position where you have to either lie or hurt someone you love?"

For the first time in their short relationship he was at a loss

for words. “Of course you’re right... I was just rationalizing. I just wanted...”

“Sex. You wanted sex. Stop the presses! Issue an extra! A soldier far from home wants sex.”

He smiled broadly, glancing around to be sure no one could hear them talking. “Yes I do.”

“Know what? I do too. But I want a lot of things. Like hot tea at Antmann’s.”

As they walked into town, she thought about Elia, determined to lose her virginity to him at the earliest possible opportunity.

“MORRIE, TOMAS LENARD. Tomas, Morrie Antmann, the owner,” Rivka said. “How are you holding up? Can you sit?”

Morrie glanced over the empty bar and the thinly populated tables lining the windows looking out at the square. “Sorry, no time, Riv.” He glanced at the door that led to the kitchen, “Since Judes passed, no time at all.” He shuffled away, mumbling.

“Typhus,” Rivka said, “She died on New Year’s Day.

“A million tragedies, all around us.”

“Indeed,” Rivka concurred, thoughts drifting.

They drank hot tea with honey in silence. While Rivka stared out the frosted window at the mass of horses on the Plac na Bramie, Tomas stared down at his tea, watching the vortex created by his nervous stirring.

“What?” Rivka exclaimed, breaking a long silence. Leaning toward the window, she used her glove to scrape clean the frost obscuring her view.

“What is it?” Lenard asked, looking up.

Rivka pressed her forehead to the icy pane, struggling to make out the scene unfolding on the Plac through the smeared, streaked glass. Trembling, she kicked back her chair and wiped her brow with her hand before bolting for

the door, leaving her hat, gloves and shawl behind.

Civilian and soldier alike referred to Kusmanek's entourage and their majestic white and dappled grey mounts as "the herd." Today, the herd's seventy horses were tied to the black iron railings in front of the Café Metropol where the supreme commander of the fortress and his general staff were taking their lunch.

By the time Tomas reached her, Rivka was on her knees, thigh deep in snow, straw and horse urine, sobbing uncontrollably.

He took his attention off her for a second to look at the horses. "Oh my God," he said while his hands stroked her head.

"Bastards! Bastards!" she managed to squeeze out between sobs and gasps for air.

Tomas knelt in the fetid slush, crying with Rivka, while dozens of porters streamed out from the Café laden with silver platters overflowing with beets, carrots and greens, offered to the seventy horses by a cadre of junior officers until the beasts could eat no more. Long after Tomas was back in his quarters and Rivka had returned to the bakery, the General Staff finished their marathon lunch. Many of the officers fed handfuls of sugar cubes taken from the coffee service to their mounts before riding off en masse to inspect the front lines.

**New York • 29th of Sh'vat, 5675 – Saturday,
February 13, 1915**

THREE SOLID KNOCKS had Marta tossing the *New York Times* on the coffee table and heading toward the door. Julia didn't look up, focused on Hans and Fritz Katzenjammer, recent additions to the *New York World's* comic page. She would read, then repeat aloud: "*Vun ting is sure, if vee find a island mit cannibals on I send you ashore, you little*

skallywaggers.” The colloquial English mixed with the occasional German word was good practice for the sort of patois often spoken on the Lower East side of Manhattan.

Marta slid open the iron plate, creating a two by four inch gap through which she could safely communicate with anyone who came to the door of the house at 111 Ridge Street. “Whadda ya want?”

“I’m looking for Sophie,” a man’s voice said. “She here?”

“No one here by that name. Good day.” Marta slammed the iron plate shut and headed back to the couch. As she was reaching for the paper, the man at the door knocked again. Marta returned to the door and reopened the slot.

“What?”

“I’m here for Sophie. Big redhead. Joey King over on Spring sent me.”

“Wait,” Marta said, shutting the speaking hole and turning to Julia who had put the *World* down and was now looking at the *Times*. “King? Do we know a Joey King from over by Spring Street?”

“Przemyśl. Here,” she pointed at the words on the news print. “It’s talking about Przemyśl.”

“Right, but this guy’s got the name of one of the girls. Do we let him in?”

“Przemyśl, Przemyśl. King? Hmm... no.”

Marta opened the slot, “Go away.”

“But the King ...”

“You need a fat lip buster? You wanna fuck with us?”

“The King,” Julia said with a smile. “Marta, come sit and read this to me.”

She slammed the iron plate closed, “Coming, Julia.”

As Marta finished reading, Julia’s consciousness was flooded by voices and images from a family visit to Przemyśl, pulled from fragments of memories that lingered in the deep recesses of her memory.

She recalled a small but brilliant sliver of red-orange

peeking out from between piles of dark clouds hung over a denuded grain field under the twilight sky. Julia remembered that it rained all that day in Medyka and that the horse cart wheels had cut fresh grooves in the mud.

“The King!” she could hear little Elia saying, over and over again, becoming more animated with each poster that he pointed at.

“The Emperor Franz Joseph,” her father had corrected.

“For sixty years the Jew’s savior,” her mama had droned.

She could see the breath coming from Elia’s mouth as he pointed and called out, “Fort Hurko!” Julia heard her father lecturing from the driver’s bench, voice deep and sure, pretending he was a rabbi. “A Skoda mortar can lob a cannonball all the way Mościska. And those round turrets, they swivel so we can point the cannons anywhere. Some are even with electric motors that retract the mortar after each firing. Przemyśl cannot be taken by any mortal force of arms.” Again and again he said it. “Przemyśl cannot be taken by any mortal force of arms.”

Julia saw every café and beer hall filled to capacity, overflowing onto the street. She could feel Elia’s head on her shoulder, staring up at the new electric lamps connected by slender threads wrapped around glass insulators at the top of each pole. She could practically reach out and touch the banner held by a pair of brightly colored Hussars trumpeting 2 December 1908 as the Night of Light in Przemyśl, in honor of the diamond jubilee of the reign of Emperor Franz Joseph.

She breathed deeply after feeling the concussion of mortars lifting fireworks skyward from the station, echoing off the Zasanie hillside.

Julia mouthed along with every man, woman and child in Przemyśl, “drei! zwei! einz!” before gasping as lamps bathed the town in warm, yellow light for the first time...

Another knock on the door brought Julia back to the lower East Side of New York City.

**Przemyśl • 3rd of Nisan, 5675 – Thursday, March
18, 1915**

MAJOR GENERAL STEPHAN Ljubičić, commander of the 45th Brigade of Magyars, nervously brought his men to attention as General Kusmanek and his entourage marched into the hushed mess hall and mounted the hastily erected platform. In the tense silence Ljubičić's beaten down, starving men radiated a palpable homicidal air, and he found himself fondling the polished wooden grip of his service revolver and mumbling a plea to his savior. "Please, Jesus, they've given enough. Don't make me shoot them. Not for that bastard." Oblivious, Kusmanek stepped forward to address Ljubičić's troops.

"Soldiers, half a year has passed while we children of almost all nationalities of our beloved country have incessantly stood shoulder to shoulder against the enemy. Thanks to God's help and your bravery, I have succeeded, despite the enemy's attacks, despite the cold and privations, in defending the fortress against the enemy. You have already done much to win the acknowledgements of the Commander-in-Chief, the gratitude of the country, and even the respect of the enemy.

Yonder in our beloved country, thousands and thousands of hearts are beating for us. Millions are waiting with held breath for news of us.

Heroes, I am about to make my last demand of you. The honor of the Army and country requires it. I am going to lead you out, a steel wedge, to break through the iron ring of the foe, and then, with unflagging efforts, move farther and farther till we rejoin our Army, which, at the price of stubborn battles, has already approached quite near us. We are on the eve of a big fight, for the enemy will not willingly allow the booty to slip through his fingers. But, remember, gallant defenders of Przemyśl, each one of you must be possessed of a single idea, 'Forward, ever forward!' All that stands in our

way must be crushed.”

Ljubičić’s aide leaned over and whispered in his ear, “He’s fucking joking. Thin tea and moldy zwieback all winter and he expects us to break through and defeat a million well-fed, dug in Russians?” Ljubičić scanned his men for signs of aggression.

The general continued, “Soldiers, we have distributed our last stores, and the honor of our country, and of every one of us, forbids that after such a hard fought, glorious, and victorious struggle we should fall into the power of the enemy like a helpless crowd.” Kusmanek moved out from behind the makeshift rostrum, perspiration beading on his forehead as he shook his fist wildly. “Hero-soldiers, we must break through, and we shall!”⁵

Ljubičić pawed his revolver as Kusmanek waited on stage for cheers that would never come. After a nervous pause, he dismissed the men. As Kusmanek and his officers rode the herd back to town, Ljubičić sat at his desk and thought about not being there to kick the football with his twin ten-year-olds, Petar and Janka, and about never seeing how beautiful his daughter Magda would look at her first communion in the white, flower-patterned dress that his wife Ana had sewn. Eyes moist, he composed a long farewell letter to his wife and children in Zagreb.

Przemyśl • 5th of Nisan, 5675 – Saturday, March 20, 1915

“SIR, THE SORTIE was not successful. They were—”

“They were what?” Kusmanek yelled at the colonel.

“They were driven back. Artillery fire. Perhaps five thousand casualties.”

“And what of the other Honveds?”

“They didn’t make it. Not even to the Russian line.”

“How many fought?”

“Well, our regiments aren’t at full complement because—”

“Tell me how many,” Kusmanek screamed.

“Four.”

“Twenty goddamn thousand Hungarians was all we could muster?”

“Sir, the men... they’re—”

“Blast! Incompetents!”

“Sir,” General Tamassy, chief of the Honved and Kusmanek’s second in command, interrupted, “The Russian food dump in Mościska is twenty-five kilometers to the east. East, away from the main body of Austrian forces and into the heart of the enemy. Four or forty regiments could not be expected to defeat a million Russians.” He paused briefly, “Sir.”

Kusmanek was a formidable man with a square chin and intense eyes. His uniform, even in these worst of times, was always perfectly tailored, expertly pressed and adorned with a full complement of ribbons, medals and lanyards. His face was dominated by a bushy moustache resembling two whisk brooms, each growing out of a nostril at a 45 degree angle.

“Get out, get out!” He screamed at the colonel. “I am the Lion of Przemyśl! I am not going to spend the balance of this war freezing in Siberia!”

The room cleared, leaving the two Generals alone.

“I will not have history remember me as another General Mack,” Kusmanek said, slamming his fist down on the Fort map spread across the large table.

“Ivanov is no Napoleon and unlike Mack, we have fought bravely for months.”

“Perhaps another sortie, this time...”

“It’s over sir.”

“But if—”

“It’s over.”

Kusmanek stared at the Hungarian, trying to calibrate the challenge in his tone. For the first time in his career, he

chose to ignore the challenge.

“They’ve taken hill four-o-three.”

Kusmanek raised one eyebrow, “Really?”

“From those heights, they can rain shells down on Przemyśl. It is just a matter of time before—”

“Before we are forced to capitulate,” he interrupted. “I can see that. I’m no War College cadet.”

“Of course not, Sir.”

Kusmanek turned his back to Tamassy, dropped his chin into his palm, and fell deep into thought. Eventually, his head rose and the Czech turned to the Hungarian and issued an order: “Get Dankl on the wireless.”

“Sir, we still don’t have contact with Nowy Sącz. The Russians are still broadcasting over our frequencies.”

“We’ll send our surrender plan by airplane tonight.”

“What plan?” Tamassy asked. “Sir.”

“We will destroy it all. Leave not a single gun, bullet or bayonet. Not a scrap of food or an animal that isn’t a rat or a louse.”

“Surely you don’t intend to blow the bridges?”

“I said everything. Bridges, too,” Kusmanek said, sliding his hands into tight leather gloves.

“Sir, the town’s civilians, specifically the Jews, are in a state of utter panic ahead of the Russians. Thousands are fleeing across the San. Besides, if we—”

“To hell with the Jews! They can suffer and cope with surrender as we all must.”

“Blowing the bridge will only delay the arrival of foodstuffs for the civilians.”

“Do I need to remind you who the commander of this citadel, Herr General?”

“We will leave nothing, sir,” he said, saluting briskly and snapping the heels of his shiny knee-high boots before leaving the map room to coordinate the destruction of Fort Przemyśl and any items of value it contained.

**Przemyśl • 6th of Nisan, 5675 – Sunday, March 21,
1915**

“WE HAVE HAD a slight change in orders,” the commander of the Fort’s administrative facility, Lieutenant-Colonel-Engineer Deuter, told the jammed mess hall. “Those of you living here, the civilians, you may not leave until all our work is completed and I have released you from duty.”

Almost all the men in the room, paymasters, engineers, advocates, and technicians, were way ahead of the common soldier with current information and knew what was coming. Juda had known for three days, having been the one to receive and decode the General Staff’s final instructions to Kusmanek. The night before, at his insistence, he had buried the remaining silver coins in a hole at the back of the cellar while Gitla hid a large cache of preserved fruits and vegetables in crawlspaces under floorboards in three separate rooms of the house, each covered by old runners.

Deuter continued, “We are surrendering the Fort at dawn tomorrow.”

Vacant stares covered the faces of fifty non-commissioned officers.

“Wireless men will take all papers, and I mean *all* papers, including worksheets and scraps, outside for burning. We will use the latrine behind the tall mast. Use as much petrol as required. The Paymaster-Major, assisted by his four divisional paymasters, will remove all bank notes from the vaults and burn them in the same fire. Sappers will wire the radio rooms and we will blow the entire facility at precisely o-five hours.”

The proposed burning of millions of Kronen caught the attention of many of the otherwise resigned men. Noticing this, the Lieutenant-Colonel-Engineer added, “Oh yes, one more item. Anyone caught absconding with as much as a Heller of the Emperor’s money will be summarily shot.” He

then looked at the Paymaster-Major and his four helpers and added, “along with the five paymasters.”

Vacant stares returned to the faces of the fifty non-commissioned officers.

Deuter stepped out from behind the small rostrum and tugged at his tunic from the bottom, flattening the folds over his stomach as best he could. He stamped his right heel hard on the concrete floor, the metal heel-piece producing a revolver-like report that echoed loudly down the length of the semi-circular ceiling.

“I will now read an order from our commander, General Kusmanek.”

He cleared his throat and produced a small slip of paper. “His Excellency, Emperor Franz Joseph, appreciates his subjects’ loyalty and their continued commitment to Austria’s noble cause. The defense of Fort Przemyśl by his brave and heroic subjects against overwhelming numbers shall forever be remembered as one of Austria’s finest and proudest military endeavors. As of twelve-hundred on twenty-two March, all uniformed soldiers of the realm are to peacefully surrender to the forces of Tsar Nicholas of Russia. Prior to surrender, all items of value whatsoever are to be destroyed.”

At 22:30 sharp Deuter dismissed Juda along with the nine other War Act civilians working at the administrative center. By then, all of the papers in the wireless room had been mixed with 10, 20, 50, and 100 Kronen notes, doused in petrol and burned in the pit behind the tall radio tower. The banknotes were being incinerated in small batches and would require most of the evening and early morning hours to assure complete destruction of the lot.

Juda was down the hill like a shot, anxious to get back to Gitla and Rivka, desperate to burn his Austrian Army issued green work fatigues before the Russians arrived. Breathing hard and relieved to be back on a city street, he headed toward home, glad that he wouldn’t be climbing the Katedralna Hill

again anytime soon. There were fires and explosions coming from all directions now. Not Skoda firings or incoming shells, but purposeful arson, wanton destruction of everything from radios, to guns, to forges.

As Juda merged onto Grodzka he became aware of a stream of soldiers, seemingly attracted from every compass point, moving across his path toward the *Rynek*, ahead on his left. The current quickly became a tide, then a torrent of soldiers, running, acting as if possessed, yelling unintelligibly.

The second siege had been a desperate few months for everyone within the Fort. Owing largely to inept and often corrupt leadership, it had fallen especially hard on the lowly infantry soldiers. Juda, Gitla, Rivka, and most townsfolk, in contrast, had been prudent, organized, and well prepared. They had thought of safety and security. They had cached ample food. Juda had prepared for every possible eventuality. But he wasn't the least bit prepared for what he witnessed at midnight at the *Rynek*, on his way home, on the day that Przemyśl finally fell.

“JUDA, THANK GOD you're home,” Rivka said as he walked past the table to the hutch at the far end of the kitchen. “We spent the day putting the shutters up.” Hearing the pop of a cork and the gurgle of pouring liquid, she walked up behind him and embraced him around his waist.

“You all right?” She asked. He was shaking. “Juda, are you all right?”

“No.”

She hugged him gently. He emptied the Kiddush cup in a single tilt, then set the metal chalice on the table, swallowing with a slight tremor that caused Rivka to briefly tighten her hold. “What happened?”

The sound of booted feet on wooden treads came from the stairwell behind them. Rivka let go of Juda and took a step

backward as Gitla's head popped through the threshold. She stopped momentarily on the top stair, "Juda, you look like death. What's wrong?"

He turned and Rivka moved to the side. "I... I... you wouldn't... I..." His eyes closed and he covered his face with his hands, weeping. Gitla walked over to her husband and put a hand on his shoulder. "Sit, sweetheart. Talk. Don't hold it in. Let it out." She guided him to the chair where Rivka had been sitting. Keeping her hand on his shoulder, Gitla moved around the chair and sat gingerly on his lap.

Juda looked up at his wife, his eyes red and misty, letting out a long sigh as he shook his head. "There are no words..."

"Talk, talk sweetheart. Get it out. You'll feel better."

"You're probably right."

Under normal circumstances Gitla would have said, "I usually am." But today she simply touched Juda's cheek.

After a nod and a long exhale, Juda began his story. "Leave 'em nothing but cinders,' the major said. So we destroyed it all—papers, money, everything. I was in charge of the radios. When we were released, I ran down the hill. Explosions were still coming from all over—it seemed they were blowing up every single building in town. And not just the forts - the bridges, the army camp, the stables, everything. Just past the church, I noticed that a lot of foot soldiers were running wildly toward the square. Even given everything going on today, this breakdown in order seemed so odd to me, so I decided to have a look. By the time I came to the *Rynek*, the entire square was packed with horses carrying men who looked to be dressed for Purim." Gitla moved off Juda to a chair as he continued, but she kept her hand resting lightly on his arm. "You need to understand; the entire garrison was there, from Kusmanek on down, a thousand officers on a thousand steeds. Every good horse left in Przemyśl."

Rivka sat, then inched her chair closer to Juda.

"Kusmanek came to the head and dismounted. The men on

horseback came forward in waves, a hundred or more across and ten or twenty deep. On command, they dismounted as one. Kusmanek drew his sword and yelled a command. The men stamped their boots on the cobbles while he sheathed his saber. With all the commotion, it seemed like not a horse in the square moved a hair.”

“Noble beasts, accustomed to the noise of war,” Gitla offered.

“Meanwhile, foot soldiers had begun assembling—no, assemble is the wrong word—more like they just appeared out of thin air at every intersection surrounding the square. Something was odd. At first I couldn’t put my finger on it, but soon it became clear. They ignored each other and they couldn’t have cared less about the officers in the *Rynek*.”

“What, then,” Gitla asked.

“They were dirty and they smelled, they were about to be marched off to Russian prison camps, yet all they cared about - all they could do - was to drool at the horses like hungry wolves.”

“Oh no...”

“It was getting crowded on the street by this time so I moved back up the hill, out of harm’s way, just as Kusmanek yelled another command and every officer drew his service revolver. The *Rynek* went silent for an instant as the General grabbed his horse’s bridle and put the revolver to the poor beast’s temple before shouting ‘*Vorbereiten sie.*’ A moment later all the men joined him yelling ‘*ziel*’ in unison. It sounded like a football game cheer or a chant at a political rally. I never did hear them say ‘*feuer*’ over the noise that followed. Such a noise I will never forget.” Juda buried his head in his hands.

“Bastards,” Gitla seethed.

The corners of Rivka’s mouth sagged as she fought back tears.

Juda looked up and wiped the dampness off his face with the back of his hand. “I need to finish, all right?”

“Of course my love,” Gitla said, reaching for her husband’s hand.

Juda met Gitla halfway across the table for a brief kiss before he continued, “You can’t imagine what a sickening sound it was. No one can because such a devilish noise there has never been. It was not a single noise, like a shell—that would have been infinitely preferable—they fell in waves, like a row of dominoes. Some of the horses didn’t die right away and screamed out before being silenced by another gunshot. I even heard the muffled cries of a few officers who were trapped when their horses fell on them.”

“It serves them right, the heartless curs,” Gitla snorted. “Go on, dear.”

“Kusmanek called the men to attention then marched them out of the square, right by me. The General was stone-faced and I saw that some of his men were crying. But many more were smiling. Smiling! Why? Why on heaven or earth would they be happy?”

“Because they lost whatever humanity they had,” Rivka said shaking her head. Gitla nodded in agreement.

“I’m sorry, but it’s not the worst of it.”

“Oh?” Gitla and Rivka said in unison.

“By the time the Viennese marched off, there were hundreds, if not thousands of conscripts converging on the *Rynek*.” He signaled Rivka to fetch the vodka. “Battalions of angry, starving men who had survived on nothing but zwieback and lard face-to-face with a hectare of freshly slaughtered meat.”

Juda uncorked the bottle and nervously fondled the cork. “It started with just a small group of men, four or five soldiers descending on a stallion, hacking at it with their field knives. One of the privates managed to cut a thick slab of meat from a thigh and held it up in the air for all to see before tearing into it with his teeth. Other soldiers joined them. More knives. Everyone was covered in blood.”

He poured himself another cup of vodka.

“The scene that followed was...”

He closed his eyes, which did not stop the tears from flowing.

“Hell. It was hell. Not the one from books, and not the one in your imagination, a real place, right here in our *Rynek*. Good men, reduced to the level of rats. Just imagine, Gitla.” Turning to Rivka he asked, “Can you? Can you just imagine?”

Both women shook their heads. He drank and swallowed with a slight shiver. “I’ve just been there. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen hell.” There was a long silence.

“Yes you have, husband, my dear husband.”

“Can you blame the men, the conscripts?” Juda asked Gitla. “Can you?”

“No,” she answered.

“Of course not,” Rivka added.

“I don’t look down on the horse-eaters. We boast of being something higher, of being human. But deprived of the necessities of life, we all revert to animal. There’s not a Jew or a Viennese officer in Przemyśl who wouldn’t have ripped the meat off a horse’s bones today if they too were starving.” Juda reached out for the women’s wrists and held them tightly, “No, the well-fed can never judge the starving. Never.”

“Never.” Gitla and Rivka echoed.

“Come here, sweetheart,” Gitla said, standing. Rivka joined her and the three held each other close for a long time, long enough for Juda’s trembling to end.