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My First Life Ends

Our lives went on with little outward change until I was 16. Then, in February 1936, suddenly and unexpectedly, our lives altered forever. One rainy afternoon I came home from school to find the house filled with grieving relatives. My father collapsed just after lunch in his office at the bank, and died of a stroke. I was stunned and devastated. How could this have happened? How could my father be gone? How could there be no more Father to cuddle up to and confide the things I was afraid to tell my mother? I felt lost, with nowhere to turn.

My father had left our financial affairs in good order and all the relatives were helpful. With some economies, we were able to continue living in the same house much as before. The following autumn, I entered a business college. As soon as I graduated, my mother declared that there were still gaps in my education. I had been adding Russian to my German, Czech/Slovak and Hungarian. Now she decided that I also needed to learn French.

It struck her that I could also use the experience of living in a foreign land. Or perhaps she perceived my continuing grief and hoped a change of scene would help. Someone had told her of the Institute Michot in Brussels, a sort of finishing school for young ladies, which also offered courses in the arts and crafts. This seemed the appropriate place. And so, at the age of 18, I left for Belgium.

The school was beautiful, and located near a large park. The buildings were two stories high and well designed. A spacious courtyard served both as playground and promenade. Unfortunately, life at school did not match these charming appearances. Most of the students were 18 or older, and these adult young women were treated like young children. We were kept as virtual prisoners in a setting that was a cross between a reformatory and a convent. I had many good times and made good friends, but the claustrophobic atmosphere was often unendurable.

One consolation was the international makeup of the student body, some 40 girls from places as diverse as Holland, Tunisia, Austria, England, Turkey and Scandinavia—altogether quite a savory mix. Since we had no language in common, we were forced to master French. After three months or so, I could get by quite effectively. In the process I regained my old high spirits and made three close friends—an Austrian, Dutch and an English girl.

Boarding school had come to fill the entire foreground of my life. I knew there were unsettling things going on in the world, but they seemed remote from the secluded atmosphere of the Institute Michot. I had arrived there intending to stay for two years, graduating in the spring of 1940. But Hitler marched into Austria before I had finished my first year.

There was no way to miss the impact of this event. We girls were from many different countries. Suddenly, we found ourselves looking at each other with new eyes. What would the future hold for each of us? Who would see brothers and sweethearts march off to be killed? Whose nation would be at war with whose?

One day the headmistress called the class together. We could feel her seriousness and for once did not behave like clowns. She waited until we had quieted down, then cleared her throat and began. “There is a girl among you who is in grave danger if she returns to her home. Germany is about to attack her country. I am asking each of you to speak to your families and see if any can offer her temporary shelter somewhere that is still safe. Her life may depend on it.”

We looked at each other. Who was this girl? Which country was about to be invaded? The headmistress resumed. “Germany is about to invade Czechoslovakia.”

A shock went through me. I looked around. Everyone was staring at me, their eyes riveted. I was overwhelmed, terrified, and very touched at the deep concern I saw in every face. My mind raced. Where should I go? What should I do? What about my family?

The next morning, my mother phoned. She wanted me home immediately. I was stunned and bewildered. “But, Mother, why?” I asked. “Why so fast?”

“Because times are getting worse,” she told me. “Czechoslovakia will be next. Please, don’t ask questions. Just be quick about it.”

Several of the girls had already contacted their families. I had offers of immediate refuge in India, Turkey, Belgium and England. It was all too much to absorb. Everything looked so normal and unchanged, and yet the threat of death was hanging over me. And over my family. And my homeland. And the Jewish People. And—though we did not fully realize it yet—over much of the world. I felt paralyzed. I could not disobey or abandon my mother, yet neither could I bring myself to run headlong into danger. I could not choose among the invitations offered to me, or even determine whether to accept any at all.

Weeks went by and my mother called again. I must come home at once. I saw that she was right. I could not flee to another country. I could not stay with another family. I had to be with my own family. We had to be together.

She instructed me to pack my things and set out immediately, but to be very careful. It would be a difficult trip. I would have to travel two days and two nights, most of it through Nazi-occupied territory. I must keep my mouth shut and pretend I didn’t understand German. I must do nothing to draw attention to myself.

Grieved, somber, knowing we might never meet again, I said goodby to my many friends. Suddenly it seemed a terrible loss to leave these dear people and to miss my second year in Brussels. Everyone was tremendously kind, concerned and warm. As I packed, I had a sudden inspiration. I went to a nearby store and bought a yard of silk to make a scarf. That evening, I painted little national flags on it—one for the homeland of each of my friends. There were about 30 in all. I also painted a Nazi flag, a swastika, the symbol I dreaded the most.

That scarf turned out to be a most precious possession. Once I passed into German-held territory, I turned the scarf so that the swastika was prominently exposed right under my chin. Wearing it gave me a sense of security, a false one perhaps, but under the circumstances I was grateful for any help I could get.

I sat up very straight and self-assured in my compartment as SS officers came and went. I had never seen people like them. From their piercing eyes down to their highly polished boots, their every inch and gesture bespoke a merciless hardness and coldness. Their sharp military movements, so machine-like, and the sadistic way they deliberately imposed their will chilled me. They would click their heels and question me. “Miss, where are you from?” “Miss, where are you going?” “Miss, what is your purpose in traveling?” “Miss, what is your destination?”

I avoided replying. Once in a while, if one of them looked a little less threatening, I would answer in Czech or French. But when I did, they would ask even more questions, and I would be sorry I had ever said a word. If they learned my family name, which was Herskovits, they would know I was Jewish. I did not want to think of what they would have to say about that.

I never slept a moment, but stared out the window instead. Hitler’s Germany seemed one mass of factories, spewing up flames through tall chimneys. Would we never get to the border? Would this trip never end?

By the time we reached the Czech border, I was afraid that I would be stopped. But both sides looked at my papers and passed me without comment. The train took me into my native land.

I did not look back. Childishly, I felt that if I could only get back to home and mother, then I would be safe. I did not consider that these two days and nights of terror were just a prologue to the real horror story that had not yet begun.