

Journey



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*To Mia! Thank you, for your
inspiration and guidance*



To Tyrone, thanks for all your help



This is a work of fiction based on actual events

Chapter 1

Berlin: February 26, 1933.

The gray light was peeking through the almost-pulled curtains in Maria's bedroom. Maria stirred, and her eyes focused on the calendar by her bed. There was a big circle around February 27, her birthday. "I will be ten. I wonder what present I will get?" she thought excitedly. She heard the chain on the front door being removed, and footsteps going down the corridor and stairs; her father, a prominent cardiologist in a local hospital, had left for work.

She could hear her mother coming toward her door, followed by her head appearing in doorway. "Get up Maria you don't want to be late for school!"

"I am coming, Mama."

Fritz was up unusually early, dressed, and already sitting at the breakfast table. Maria rushed to the bathroom, washed, and cleaned her teeth. As she put her school uniform on, she remembered the unfinished homework still lying on the desk in her bedroom. "I will have to copy from Herta before we go into class," thought Maria. "Herta is my best friend, after all. Tomorrow, after school, Uncle Herbert, Auntie Hilda, and their daughters Lily and Rosa are coming to my birthday party. I can't wait! It will be a lovely party." Herta and Joseph, her best friends, are coming, too. Mother promised to do a cake and some strudel. After a hurried breakfast and kissing Mum good-bye, she left for school.

At the bottom of the street she saw Herta and Joseph coming toward her. "I didn't finish my homework. Can I copy from yours?" asked Maria.

Herta, a studious girl, who looked much older than her ten years, nodded in agreement. They sat on the step, and Maria hurriedly copied the work. Her writing was untidy, while Herta's homework was very precise and neat.

“Miss Swartz is always saying that my writing is messy,” complained Maria.

“That is because you are always rushing,” said Joseph. Herta agreed, with a smile.

On arriving at school, they went to assembly then their class. Joseph, being older, attended classes on the other side of the school, but Maria and Herta shared the same desk.

Miss Swartz, their teacher, a severe-looking woman with her hair pulled tightly into a bun, strode into the class. Everyone got up and said, “Good morning, Miss Swartz!”

“Good morning, children,” she answered back. “I hope you have finished the homework I assigned to you yesterday.”

There was a chorus of “Yes, Miss Swartz, we have.” Miss Swartz turned toward Gerda, who was her head pupil, and asked her to collect all of the notebooks.

As soon as the lesson was finished, Maria was out of the door quickly, followed by Herta and two or three other girls, who were eager to get out and play some games such as hopscotch. In the furthest part of field, the older boys were playing with a ball. There were benches all around, so Herta sat on one while Maria carried on playing hopscotch.

“I can’t see Fritz anywhere,” said Herta, looking toward the kindergarten students.

“He is probably with his friend, Jacob, in the library. He is such a bookworm,” said Maria sneeringly. “He is my little brother and I love him, but all he ever wants to do is read, read, and read.”

The bell announcing the end of recess rang shrilly through the playground. Miss Swartz was standing on the steps, a foreboding figure in black. She was clapping her hands and telling the children to hurry back to the classroom. Maria was halfway through the hopscotch game, and she wanted to finish it. Miss Swartz’s voice boomed, “Maria Levy, go to

the classroom immediately! As always, you are a stubborn disruptive girl.”

Maria wanted to say something in her defense but realized that it would be totally pointless, so she followed everyone into the classroom.

“Well, Maria, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“About what?” asked Maria, bravely.

“Why your homework is, word for word, the same as Her-ta’s? I know that you copied from her,” accused Miss Swartz.

“I’m sorry, Miss Swartz,” whispered Maria. “I forgot to do it last night.”

“Well, for that, you will have to be punished. You will have to stay tomorrow, after school, to do lines, and I am sending a letter to your parents.”

“Miss Swartz, please don’t do that. Tomorrow is my birthday, and I am really looking forward to my party.”

“Well, you should have thought about that before you copied.”

“But, Miss Swartz, my uncle and my cousins are coming. We don’t see them very often!”

“Enough! You will do as you are told. No argument.”

Maria stood for a moment blinking away tears as they threatened to spill down her face.

The rest of the lessons were a blur. Maria felt upset knowing that when she showed the letter to her parents she would see disappointment in their eyes. At last, the bell rang announcing that it was time to go home. She hurriedly gathered her books and pushed them into her satchel. In her haste, she caught her cardigan on a loose screw of her chair. As she tugged at it, a big hole appeared on the sleeve of her cardigan. Maria looked at it with horror and suddenly burst into tears.

The classroom was empty now, except for Maria and Miss Swartz. “What is it now?” The stern voice of Miss Swartz boomed above her head.

“My cardigan is new, and it is ruined already.”

“Well, I hope that will teach you not to rush. Please make sure that your cardigan is repaired before you come to school tomorrow.”

“Yes, Miss Swartz, I will.”

“This is a letter for your parents. Please make sure that they sign it.”

Maria grabbed the letter, feeling upset, and still on the verge of tears. Her friend Herta was putting her coat on and slowly walking toward the exit. Maria caught up with her halfway down the corridor, and they started walking home in silence. When they came to a corner, Maria turned to Herta and said, “She was just so unfair. I told her it’s my birthday tomorrow, and she still insisted that I stay behind and do the one hundred lines.”

Herta didn’t answer; she just carried on walking in silence, occasionally kicking a loose stone from the path. When they had almost reached Herta’s building, the question, which she was trying not to ask, escaped her lips. “What about your party then? Can I still come?”

“Of course you can. It won’t take me long to do the lines, and you and Joseph must come to my party.” When she realized she was still holding the letter, she pushed it into her satchel.

They said good-bye, and Maria walked slowly toward her building and up to her apartment on the third floor. Slowly, she mounted the stairs, ignoring the elevator, which passed her by with a hiss. Upon reaching the second floor landing, she saw that Mr. Kurt was trying to fit the key in the lock of his door, while holding a parcel marked “fragile.”

“Good afternoon, Maria,” said Mr. Kurt. “Could you help me open the door? I don’t want to break these glasses.”

Maria obliged. After Mr. Kurt thanked her, she made her way to her floor. All of the sudden she remembered the letter squashed in her satchel, and the wave of shame overwhelmed her. She pressed the bell of her apartment and waited for

Mum to open the door. The door opened immediately, and Fritz laughed at the serious expression on her face.

“Come in quickly. Mum is baking for your birthday tomorrow.”

As she walked into the hallway, the aromatic smell of strudel and cakes wafted over to Maria. Suddenly, she realized how hungry she was.

“Hello, Maria,” said the voice from the kitchen. Maria made her way to the stove, where the smiling face of her mum greeted her. Her mum’s hands were still caked in flour, and there was a smudge on her cheek. “Wash your hands, then come and sit and have something to eat.”

While her mum was busy preparing the meal, Maria remembered the letter from Miss Swartz, and guilt washed over her. “I will give her the letter when Daddy comes home,” reasoned Maria, to her guilty conscience.

“How was school today?” asked Mother.

Maria opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment Fritz barged into the kitchen carrying his toy trucks, along with many colorful bricks.

“Oh no, not under my feet, Fritz. Go and play in the hallway or in your room,” said Mum.

“I got good marks in my math lesson today!” announced Fritz cheerfully.

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Fritz. Well done,” smiled Mother.

Again shame overwhelmed Maria as she remembered the letter in her satchel. Mum was busy getting the meal ready—stew and pancakes, with strawberry jam, which both Maria and Fritz loved so much.

At that point, the sound of a key being turned in front door announced that Dr. William Levy was home from work, to join his family for lunch. Usually their father came straight into the kitchen, but instead, they heard him moving about in the parlor. Curious, Magda went in search of her husband, while the surprised children waited for them. They heard the muffled voices from the parlor, but they couldn’t understand

the words. Maria and Fritz crept carefully through the hallway and stopped just outside the parlor door, which was left slightly open. They heard their parents speaking with subdued voices and noticed the worried expression on their mum's face as she turned and spotted them hovering near the partially open door.

"I am hungry, Mama," Fritz burst out. He didn't understand why their parents, who were always cheerful and happy, were now looking so worried and almost solemn.

"I am coming, Fritz. Go back and sit quietly at the table. I will be there in a minute."

Before Fritz could object, Maria ushered him into the kitchen and made him sit down. Although she didn't quite understand what was going on, she instinctively knew that it must be bad news.

Their mother came into the kitchen. Her face still carried a worried frown, although she tried to busy herself at the stove. "Is Father not joining us?" an anxious Maria asked.

"No, Daddy is not feeling very well, so be good children, and after your dinner, go to your rooms and do your homework."

After the meal was over, Maria helped her mother wash the dishes. She noticed that her mother's hands were shaking. This was not the time to tell her parents about the letter from Miss Swartz. Meanwhile, Fritz was already in his bedroom working hard on his project for school.

"Maria, please go to your room and do your homework," her mother's voice was curiously curt.

Surprised and little hurt, Maria crept to her bedroom. The first thing she noticed was her satchel, which contained the letter, and then, draped over back of the chair was her school cardigan with a glaring hole in the sleeve. She walked to the parlor and opened the door, but before she had a chance to utter any words she heard her mother sob. Hurriedly, Maria turned around, confused and frightened. Her parents were gentle, kind people who never argued, and she had never seen her mother cry.

“Maria, please go to your room and do your homework, as you have been told to do,” her father spoke, harshly.

Maria stood rooted to the spot bewildered, her father looked totally dejected. “But, Mama,” Maria started to say, but could say no more.

“Whatever it is, it will have to wait. Now, do as you are told, and go to your room.

Maria stumbled out of the parlor, with all kinds of emotions running through her mind. “What is going on? It must be something really bad for her parents to behave like this.” Back in her bedroom Maria noticed her cardigan with the hole in the sleeve, seeming to mock her. Her legs felt heavy, and she sat heavily on her bed, the hole in her cardigan still glaring. Maria went into the hallway in pursuit of her mother’s sewing kit. She eventually found it in a cupboard in the hallway. Going back toward her bedroom, she heard her mother sobbing and her father’s muted response, which she couldn’t quite make out. Very frightened now, Maria looked into Fritz’s bedroom. He was oblivious to everything, happily reading a book. Maria didn’t want to disturb him, so she crept back to her room clutching the sewing kit.

On finding the right color of wool, Maria started to repair the hole in her cardigan. She was not a good sewer, and now she regretted not paying much attention when her grandma, Anna-Maria, was trying to teach her. Clumsily, Maria threaded the needle and promptly pricked her finger. Her vision blurred, but she was determined to finish the job. Eventually, she managed, although very poorly, to cover the hole. Her eyes fell on the satchel, and she remembered the letter squashed in between her books. Shame welled inside Maria, but she knew that she could not show her parents the letter tonight.

I will ask Mother in the morning, but right now I have to do my homework, because I don’t want more trouble from Miss Swartz. Maria pulled out her math homework and tried her best to do it. But, as hard as she tried, she couldn’t concentrate. So again, with her homework unfinished, Maria put

on her nightclothes and climbed into bed. Tired out, she fell into uneasy sleep.

Maria opened her eyes and, with surprise, noticed that it was already morning. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand and saw that it was only 7:00 a.m. She drew the curtains to reveal a gray, rainy, cold morning. The roofs on the houses next door were wet, and a few birds perched miserably on the chimney. She walked to the bathroom, but the door was locked. "Come on, Fritz, hurry up!" shouted Maria.

"Stop that shouting at once," came the stern voice of her father.

Surprised, Maria backed off, curious as to why her father, who normally leaves for work before seven, was still at home. Maria sat by the open door of her bedroom waiting for the bathroom to become vacant. Soon her father passed by her door, and Maria greeted him cheerfully, "Good morning, Papa." Surprisingly, her father didn't acknowledge her but went on by with a distracted look. Maria dressed, minus her cardigan, then went to the kitchen. Mother emerged from the pantry with a solemn look on her puffy, red face. Maria was expecting a cheery greeting and "Happy birthday," but instead, her mother ignored her and busied herself with preparing breakfast. Resentment flooded through Maria. She finally blurted out, "It's my birthday, Mama! I am really looking forward to my party tonight!"

"Oh, that. I had forgotten. Happy birthday, Maria" uttered Mother, and she bent down to kiss Maria on the cheek.

At that point, Fritz walked into the kitchen, followed shortly by their father. Maria's questions died on her lips when she saw her father. William Levy, normally a neat and tidy man, looked gray, worried, and unshaven, and was still in his pajamas and robe. Magda and William exchanged looks, and he sat heavily at the kitchen table.

"What's wrong, Papa?" both children asked in unison.

“Your father has lost his job,” answered Mother.

“But why, Papa?” Maria couldn’t understand why her papa, who was a well-respected cardiologist, had suddenly, with no warning, lost his job.

“No questions right now, please,” William said, turning toward his children, whose worried faces upset him. “Today is Maria’s birthday, so we won’t discuss any problems. Happy birthday, darling daughter,” William uttered, and he somehow managed to put smile on his face.

Momentarily Maria forgot all the worries that had been nagging at her since last night. “Did you get me a present?” she inquired. Magda and William brought her a beautifully wrapped parcel with an open top. There was a noise coming out of the box. Maria hurried over and pulled at the side ribbon to reveal a cage with a bright yellow canary. Oh thank you, Mama! Thank you, Papa! I have wanted a bird for so long. I even have a name for him.”

Magda and William smiled at her excitement; even Fritz looked surprised and happy for his sister.

“What are you going to call him?” asked Fritz.

“Koki,” answered Maria. “I remember reading a book about a yellow canary called Koki, and I really like the name.”

Even in all of her excitement, Maria noticed that her father looked tired and somehow smaller, as though he had shrunk overnight. Although noticing that her parents didn’t look as cheerful as usual, Maria’s joy overwhelmed any other thoughts.

“You will have to look after your bird, clean his cage, and make sure he has enough seeds and water,” said Mother. “That will help you learn about responsibility.”

“Yes, Mama, I will. I promise.” Maria hurried through breakfast, as she couldn’t wait to see her friends and tell them about her lovely present.

“Come straight home from school because Uncle Herbert, Auntie Hilda, Rosa, and Lily will be coming to wish you a happy birthday,” replied Mother.

“Yes, Mama.” With a quick kiss for their parents, Maria and Fritz ran out of the apartment. At the bottom of the stairs, Maria remembered, with horror, the letter still squashed in her bag.

As always, Herta and Joseph were coming out of their building, so Maria ran toward them excitedly. Almost shouting, she told them about the beautiful canary in a gilded cage. Both Herta and Joseph were very happy for her.

“You are so lucky,” said Herta. “I have wanted a bird for a long time, but my parents won’t allow me to have any pets.” As they reached the school gates, Herta asked, “Did you give the letter to your parents?”

“No, I forgot,” lied Maria. The otherwise happy morning was marred by expectations of the wrath of Miss Swartz when she didn’t produce the signed letter. “She will punish me even more,” said Maria. “As it is, I will have to stay and do the lines after school, and with it being my birthday, Mama is expecting me to come straight home from school.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Herta, who although she loved her friend, found her attitude very blasé.

“I will say that I forgot the letter,” said Maria nonchalantly, even though she was secretly worried.

After arriving at school and hanging their coats on pegs outside the classroom, they hurriedly went in and sat down. Shortly Miss Swartz arrived, and all of the children stood up and chorused, “Good morning, Miss Swartz.”

“Good morning, children,” she replied curtly, and her gaze settled on Maria. “Did your parents sign the letter, Maria Levy?”

Maria felt a guilty flush rise up her neck. “I forgot the letter, Miss Swartz. I am very sorry.”

While Maria stood nervously, Miss Swartz’s gaze traveled down Maria’s cardigan and settled on the poorly sewn hole. “How dare you come to school in such a state! Were

you dragged through the bush or did the wild animals attack you?" There were suppressed giggles from the class, which made Maria even more embarrassed and ashamed. "In addition to the lines, 'I will do my homework,' you will have to do extra lines of, 'I will come to school neat and tidy.'"

There was more giggling, especially from the head student Gerda, who also gave her an almost pitying, condescending look. Rage overwhelmed Maria, and she uttered, "I will get you."

"Miss Swartz, Maria is threatening me!" said Gerda.

"Again you, Maria!" hissed Miss Swartz. "I will send another letter to your parents, and I expect both to be returned tomorrow, signed."

"But, Miss Swartz, it's my birthday today, and I am having a party."

"That's too bad," said Miss Swartz. "You will be late for your party, but maybe this will teach you to behave."

Gerda glanced at Maria with a smug, sly expression. The rest of the lessons passed in a blur. Eventually, the bell announced that it was time to go home, and while everyone else hurriedly bustled out of classroom, Maria had to stay. Miss Swartz gave her a notebook and told her to start writing. "Remember, you have to do fifty lines of 'I will do my homework' and fifty lines of 'I will come to school neat and tidy.'"

Shame and embarrassment engulfed Maria. She knew how disappointed her parents would be.

The writing took her much longer than expected, and when Miss Swartz grudgingly told her she could go, dusk was already falling.

Maria walked slowly home, the joy of the day lost, and the dread of disappointing her parents great in her mind.

Upon reaching the corner of her building, someone called her name. "Stop, will you?" It was Joseph and Herta. In

Joseph's hands was a gaily wrapped present. "We are just coming to your party," said Herta, "it must have taken you quite a long time to finish the lines."

"Yes, Miss Swartz was standing above me and kept saying 'nice and neat,' so I really had to write carefully."

Maria could hear the voices of her cousins, Lily and Rosa, and her brother Fritz coming from the apartment. She started to press the bell, but before reaching it, the door was opened by her mother. She had a reproachful look on her face. "You are late, Maria! You knew your cousins would be here, now where have you been?"

"I had to do lines," answered Maria.

"Miss Swartz usually sends a letter telling us when you will be late."

"I forgot to give you the letter. I am sorry, Mama."

"Oh, Maria!" her mother said regretfully. "We will discuss this later. For now, go wash and change your clothes so that you can join your cousins and friends for your party."

As soon as Maria came into the room, all eyes turned on her. "Happy birthday, Maria," chorused Rosa and Lily.

Uncle Herbert and Auntie Hilda were seated around the table where there was a cake with, as yet unlit, candles. "We thought you forgot about your birthday," joked Uncle Herbert.

"No, of course not," replied Maria. "I am sorry that I am late."

Uncle Herbert gave her a package with a big red ribbon on it. Hastily, Maria opened it and discovered a beautiful red bag with a matching purse, and in the purse were ten Marks.

"Thank you so much," she said dutifully and went across to kiss Uncle Herbert and Auntie Hilda.

After blowing the candles out, Maria and her guests enjoyed delicious desserts—cake and lemonade for the children and coffee and schnapps for the adults.

When everyone was finished eating, William said, "You children go and play in Maria's bedroom."

Once they reached Maria's bedroom, Maria, Rosa, Lily, Herta, Joseph, and Fritz all crowded around the cage which

held the little yellow canary. “Oh! He is so beautiful!” cried Rosa.

“He is so tiny,” added Lily.

“Does he fly?” inquired Joseph

“I only got him today, and I will not let him out of the cage yet,” Maria responded.

At last Maria opened the present that Herta and Joseph had left on her bed. It contained a beautifully illustrated book about birds and flowers. “Thank you so much,” she said. “Let’s look at it together and see how many birds and flowers we recognize.”

While they were engrossed, Magda popped her head through the door. “I brought some more cakes for you all.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Levy,” said Joseph, gratefully accepting the tray of cakes.

“Thank you, Mama,” said Maria.

“If you want more lemonade, the jug is on the kitchen table.” With that, she left the room.

After a while, Maria decided to refill everyone glasses with Mother’s delicious lemonade. As she headed toward the kitchen, the parlor door was open, and she could see her father and uncle—they looked worried. Mother and Auntie Hilda were embracing, and it looked as though they were both crying. Puzzled and a little scared, Maria hovered by the door, all thoughts of lemonade vanished from her mind. Suddenly there was a loud banging on the front door. Maria was so startled that she dropped the glasses, and they shattered in jagged pieces all over the hall.

Magda and William came out of the parlor. Annoyance creased her mother’s brow. “What have you done now, Maria?”

In a sorrowful whisper, Maria replied, “Mama, I am so sorry. I broke the glasses.”

“Quickly clean it all up before someone gets hurt on the broken glass.”

While Maria scuttled to get the dustpan and brush, William went to open the front door.

“The Parliament is on fire!” screamed the disheveled figure standing in the doorway. It took some moments for them to recognize the newcomer as Mr. Wiess, a doctor who worked with William.

“Come on in,” Magda uttered in a shaky voice.

“It’s terrible, just terrible,” Mr. Wiess kept repeating, “and the Nazi party is blaming the Jews.”

“That’s impossible,” they cried in unison.

The rest of the conversation was muffled as the door to the parlor was firmly shut. Maria stood frozen to the spot, lemonade and her party forgotten. Even at her young age she understood the gravity of what she had just heard.

Laughter was coming from her bedroom, and she hurried to see her friends.

“Your bird was on Lily’s finger,” said Joseph. “He is very tame.”

At that moment Uncle Herbert walked into the room saying, “Lily, Rosa, say good-bye. We must go immediately.”

“But why so early, Papa?” asked Lily, who was enjoying looking at the bird.

“Because I said so—now hurry up.”

Bewildered, Lily stood up, quite annoyed that she had to leave when she was enjoying herself so much.

William came into the room, followed by Magda. “The party is over,” Magda stated. “Joseph and Herta, you must go home immediately. Your parents are waiting for you.”

Gloom settled in the room. Maria, not understanding what was happening or why her parents had ended her party, opened her mouth to complain, but her bitter words of resentment stayed silent as she noticed the look on her parents’ faces—her father’s gray, worry-ridden face and traces of tears still visible on her mother’s cheeks. Maria was shocked into a silence of disbelief. In the past few days, her world was rapidly changing; her normally happy, patient parents had become gray, worried shadows of themselves.

At that point Maria remembered the letters from Mrs. Swartz. “Mama and Papa, can you sign the letters from Mrs. Swartz?”

“Bring them to the parlor,” said her father as he left the room.

Gingerly, Maria entered the parlor clutching the offending letters in her, by now, sweaty hands. Her father, seated at his desk engrossed in a pile of paperwork, waved Maria in. Slowly, she walked toward her father and gingerly handed him the letters. His face was etched with disappointment when he turned his eyes on her. After signing the letters, he handed them back to Maria, without a word of reproach. Guilt and shame washed over Maria in waves, so she hastily took the letters and left the room.

While she was getting ready to go to bed, she heard police sirens piercing the night sky. Maria ran toward her window, and in the distance, she could see a plume of smoke obliterating the street lights. Fear gripped her as she stood by the window watching the mayhem on the street below. She felt movement behind her; turning around, she spotted Fritz in his pajamas, clutching his teddy bear.

Fritz was only five years old, so upon seeing his frightened face, Maria, although scared herself, put a protective hand on his shoulder.

“The noise woke me up, and I was so scared,” cried Fritz.

“It’s okay. Let’s go and find Mama,” said Maria with a shaky voice. At just that time, both of their parents hurried into the room.

Fritz ran toward his mother, who engulfed him in a big embrace and whispered reassuring words in his ear.

Maria felt her father touching her shoulder; she noticed that his hands were shaking.

Mother gave them each a glass of milk and some cake, then they sat for most of the night huddled together on the couch. Overwhelmed by tiredness, Fritz fell asleep, safe in arms of his mother.

When she awoke the next morning, Maria found herself lying on the couch with blankets carefully laid on top of her.

“Good morning, Maria,” the voice of her mother came to her.

Still fuzzy from sleep, Maria grumbled, “Good morning, Mama.”

“Shall I make you a boiled egg?”

“Yes, please, Mama,” replied Maria as she headed for the bathroom. While in the bathroom, she heard commotion coming from the street below. There was a lot of shouting, and then she heard a piercing scream. Petrified, Maria ran out to find her mother and father worriedly looking out of the window. She squeezed in between them to see Mrs. Jacobs lying on top of her husband. The cobblestones were spattered with blood.

“I have to go down and help them,” said William as he hurriedly left the room.

“Please be careful.” Mother’s voice trailed after him.

Maria, anxious by now, peered through the curtains and saw her father carry Mr. Jacobs inside. He returned shortly to take bandages and a first aid box. Without answering Mother’s questioning gaze, he retreated downstairs to Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs’ apartment.

Fritz, ready for school with his satchel already on his shoulder, said, “Maria, we will be late for school again.”

“Maria, you must look out for you brother,” said Mama, “I am sure that no one will bother you on your way to school.”

As they approached the corner of the building where Herta and Joseph lived, Maria was surprised to see that they hadn’t waited for her. Later, Fritz spotted Joseph just turning around the corner near the school, and Maria shouted for him to wait. Joseph carried on, as if he hadn’t heard her. Herta, who was walking slightly in front of Joseph, glanced back, but carried on walking. Angry by now, Maria shouted louder but was still totally ignored. Fritz, not understanding any of it, happily skipped toward his kindergarten classroom, while Maria made her way to her classroom.

As she sat down at her desk, Maria noticed that Herta was not sitting next to her, but had moved to sit with Gerda. Maria blinked back angry tears, not understanding why her best friend was ostracizing her. During recess, she noticed Gerda

and Herta talking and laughing together. Very hurt, Maria walked over to them and tried to join their conversation. Herta was silent and looked almost embarrassed, but Gerda pushed Maria, who fell, grazing her knee.

“She doesn’t want to be your friend anymore!” screamed Gerda.

Humiliated and hurt, Maria tried to keep tears at bay, so she hobbled to the restroom. Her knee was red and swollen, and she felt so so alone. She sat down in one of the stalls and burst into tears. The last lesson of the day was with Miss Swartz, who looked at Maria with disdain. “Did you bring the letters from your parents?”

“Yes, Miss Swartz,” whispered Maria, handing her the letters.

“Why do you always look such a mess?”

Embarrassed and humiliated, Maria tried not to cry.

“Tomorrow you will have to stay again to do the lines.”

“Yes, Miss Swartz,” whispered Maria.

At last the school bell rang, announcing that it was time to go home. The children all rushed out. Maria turned to look for Herta, who promptly turned away. Disappointment and disbelief flooded Maria; she just couldn’t understand Herta’s behavior. Her best friend since kindergarten suddenly ignored her, without even trying to explain why. Dejected, Maria sat on the bench waiting for Fritz to emerge from his kindergarten class. The children passed her by, some running, some skipping, and most of them shouting, glad to go home, but there was no sign of Fritz. Quite concerned by now, Maria went to the back of the building. Immediately, she spotted Fritz slowly walking toward her. Maria was shocked. His face was bloodied, his shirt was hanging, with torn bits out of his short trousers, and the handle on his satchel was broken. He was quietly sobbing, the tears leaving streaks on his bloody and bruised face. Rage pulsed through Maria; the questions stayed silent on her lips. “How can anyone do this to a little boy? He is only five years old.” She clasped his hand tightly and slowly they started to walk home.

On the corner there was a large queue outside the bakery; people were waiting for bread, as there was terrible shortage. Maria spotted Gerda and some boys from her class and, trying to avoid them, crossed the street. Unfortunately, it was too late, Gerda spotted them and whispered something to one of the boys. Maria, with her head down while clutching Fritz's hand, pulled him toward her as the first object hit her on the back of the head. The rotten tomato slithered down her back and with a muffled plop, landed by her feet. Soon the whole assortment of rotten fruit was aimed at them, the majority of which hit their target. Their clothes were splattered with the remains of fruit and vegetables. Maria, still tightly holding on to Fritz's hand, started to run. Blinded by tears, they came across Joseph, who was standing with two other boys near the entrance of the building. Relieved to see him, Maria pulled Fritz in Joseph's direction but stopped abruptly, as she noticed the look of pure hatred in Joseph eyes. She heard a muffled thud and saw the egg hitting Fritz squarely in the face, the impact knocking him down. The smell of rotten egg was overpowering. By now Fritz was loudly sobbing as Maria tried hard to wipe his face and comfort him. There were more eggs, tomatoes, and some stones thrown in their direction, so Maria hurried Fritz toward their building.

As she turned around, to her horror, she saw Herta clutching a handful of stones, ready to throw at them. Shock and disbelief propelled Maria to drag her crying brother into their building. Their mother's face registered pain. She grabbed both of them and held them tight. She didn't ask anything; she just held them.

Later, while Mother was washing Fritz, Maria noticed her red and swollen eyes. It seemed to Maria that lately, Mother was always upset or openly crying, while their father was withdrawing more and more into himself. Her happy, joyful parents had vanished; instead they had become quiet, worried shadows of the people they used to be.

Each day was a struggle, as Maria and Fritz encountered constant insults and sometimes violent outbursts by their

peers. The teachers usually looked the other way. With a heavy heart, Maria's parents stopped them from going to school. William tried to educate the children at home, the best that he could.

Days passed in uncertainty and misery. The food was sparse, and lots of Jewish businesses were burned and looted. One evening while the Levy family was sitting in the parlor after a sparse dinner, there was a knock. With surprise, William opened the door to Herbert, his brother. His normally pink, smiling face was gray, and there was deep sorrow in his eyes. They all sat quietly in the parlor until the silence was eventually broken by Herbert.

"We are leaving tomorrow. We have all of our savings, and we are emigrating to America, and you should leave too. Think of your family," said Herbert.

"We can't leave. My patients need me. Even though I cannot practice in the hospital anymore, there are people who are desperately ill. I am sure this madness can't go on for much longer," replied William.

Maria noticed that her mother's eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"We will miss you so much," whispered Magda, as she hugged her brother-in-law.

Maria walked into the parlor. Noticing her, Uncle Herbert smiled and beckoned her to him. "I have a present for you and Fritz," said Uncle Herbert smiling. He produced from his pocket two bars of chocolate, which was almost impossible to get at that time.

Maria's eyes widened in joyful surprise, "Thank you so very much," she said, taking the offered bars.

Soon after that, Uncle Herbert left. Upon his leaving, the room became still and the sounds muffled.

Fritz, who was engrossed in his book, turned when Maria came into his bedroom. "I have a chocolate for you from Uncle Herbert," said Maria.

He was merrily biting into it when their father called them. Fritz, with traces of chocolate still around his mouth, followed Maria to the couch where their parents were.

“We will be all right; I will do anything to protect you,” whispered their father. They sat embraced together for a long time.

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