

Excerpt from the novel

## ***Little Violinist***

by

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### ***Chapter 16***

There was a problem with the coming rebellion. Day by day more and more workers disappeared. We heard that they were marched to Birkenau, never to be seen again. A number of the stronger, more skilled workers were pulled from the factories and fields and forced to work on reconstruction on the other side of the camp, inside the gates. Within a matter of weeks, these men turned the old gas chamber into usable bunks and built more offices for the officers. With the inside construction, these prisoners were able to steal tools to be used for the revolt. But after the construction was complete, just like their predeceasing fellow prisoners, these same men disappeared, never to be seen again. Nonetheless, the rebellion was going to happen, and we eagerly anticipated the day and time selected by the leader of the Maccabees.

We believed God was with us. The old gas chambers were gone and the ovens in the crematorium no longer worked. Not only had we accumulated tools, a group of gifted masons marched the four-mile, round trip trek daily to Birkenau to construct several new concrete buildings. These buildings were assumed to be bunkers to protect soldiers from bombing or an armory for dangerous weapons, according to the men building them. And the daily commute allowed our masons to communicate with the Sonderkommandos of Birkenau—the prisoners responsible for removing the bodies in the gas chambers and burning them in the incinerators. These brave men worked as communications between the rebels in Birkenau and the rebels of the main camp at Auschwitz, and provided more tools and homemade weapons for our heroes for the day of revolution. Our revolts would be synced. And I marveled at the memory of Kaz's words—that I would signal the rebellion with the power of my violin.

There was a stirring in the camp well before sunrise. We felt an awakening. The hopes of rebellion brought life today—I could see it in the eyes of the prisoners, a twinkling of inspiration and wonder. Bach’s *Cello Suite No. 1* played in my head as we prepared for the day, a glint of hope arising within me from such a song and the memories of my dreams, and I remembered playing it on the violin for Arthur, although my version was a few octaves higher from the original piece. I had joy. A supernatural joy—and that joy seemed to be shared by some of the others surrounding our block. Perhaps it was because God proved to hear our prayers, offering us courage. Perhaps it was because the blood red sun revealed herself this morning in the Eastern sky as the men marched to work. We breathed in anticipation and exhaled prospected optimism. We would make history. We would prove God’s faithfulness. Today would be ours.

Kaz chose Handel’s *Dead March from Saul* as we watched our brave brothers disappear into the horizon. It was a beautiful piece and so appropriate for today. It was easy on my sprained wrist as well, although I barely felt the pain anymore.

Rehearsal was better than usual. Although our chamber was smaller with the disappearance of Vee, and the new hospitalization of Emmy our cellist (who was named Emanuel), we were tight, and we sounded full. My mind kept drifting to the thoughts of my dream of Heaven and of Amos. Still, I played well enough that Kaz didn’t correct me or try to reel me back in. And I swore, the sky was bluer than I remembered it, especially for winter. It was as if someone removed a dark filter from our eyes.

“What is your aspiration?” Kaz asked me, his face giddy like a boy.

“Pardon?”

“It’s okay, after today, we’ll be able to dream again, Joshua. What do you want to do with your life... when you grow up?”

The question caught me off guard. I had never thought about it. The freedom to dream of a future was stripped from us as we entered the gates of Auschwitz. “I don’t know.”

“Be thinking about it,” he offered with a queer smile. “It’s time to wish.”

It had been hours but felt like minutes. We stood by the fence, Kaz now on the double bass to make us sound complete. The musical selection was a beautiful yet contrasting dark and light orchestral piece by Chopin—*Marcha Funebre*. Kaz counted us in and our instruments came

to life. He was such an amazing bassist. I truly had no appreciation of the double bass until I watched and listened to him play such a deep, rich, melody with perfect technique. I was so amateur in his presence. I could feel his emotion in the song through the intensity of his tone, volume, and vibrato. As we reached the bridge—a hopeful, soft, melody led by the violin—I couldn't help but feel swept away in expectation and valor as I played it. We were musical warriors.

As we dipped back into the dark melody of the song, the first group of marching men appeared in the distance and approached the fence with swiftness, followed by the next group of prisoners, and then the next, closer together than ever before. Anxiety swelled in my chest as we continued to play, proudly watching the captives, who understood our current piece was a sign that the rebellion was still planned. A different song would have signaled a retreat to the planned surprise attack.

Soldiers lined the gate pointing their rifles towards the rows of prisoners as our men reached the camp. I had never seen them hold their rifles in such a fashion, nor had I seen so many at the fence, but perhaps it was because I never bothered to look at them until now. My attention had always been drawn to my instrument or to the actual laborers walking from the fields.

Kaz watched the men out of the corner of his eye and cut our song short. He nodded to me, played his two introductory notes and I created the melody to Mendelssohn's *violin concerto in E minor Op. 64*.

The men in the first pack of prisoners slowed down their pace, the men in the back speeding up simultaneously, purposely closing the spacious gap between the groups, moving to the melody of my song. It was surreal to watch the rebellion form in such a fashion, and what an honor to be used by God in such a manner. As I reached the 12<sup>th</sup> measure, I lifted my eyes to see our Jewish brothers pulling the weapons from their striped pajamas and shouting with a violent war cry, sprinting to the unsuspecting uniformed men and attacking them with makeshift weapons.

“Keep playing!” Kaz warned me.

It was difficult to focus on my surroundings while playing such a challenging piece, especially as I heard the sounds of guns firing, men shouting in violence and agony, soldiers yelling in panic, and alarms screaming over the camp. The constant sounds of shattering glass and fire popping and raging behind me turned my attention to the center of the camp, where

homemade rebel bombs destroyed many of the blocks, especially towards the entire center of the camp. We were at war with our captors and appeared to be successful.

Soldiers darted from every corner of the camp, frenzied, their weapons lifted, shooting anyone who appeared suspicious along the way to the entrance gate, where over a two hundred brave rebels were trying to force their way out to freedom.

One by one I watched my Jewish brothers fall, either suddenly surrendering to the force of a bullet in the head or body, or a by a blow from a baton of a zealous guard, the entire scenario appearing as if it was a staged play, matching the rhythm of the gunfire to my concerto tempo on the violin, the fire in the camp exploding with crescendo in agreement to the masterpiece. I couldn't help but to continue to play, getting lost in the music, escaping the cold reality that the rebellion was failing, and we would soon all suffer the consequences to remind us of what happens when we try to revolt. I was so consumed with the romanticism of this monumental moment that I felt numb and compassionless even as my eyes glazed over the dead, bloodied bodies aligning the fence.

As I reached the Allegro on the violin in the solo and played the trill notes, the last few rebels were caught with blows to the body, dragged into the camp, and then honored with bullets to the head in front of their friends, the metal gates closed forever behind them.

The crazy man with missing teeth was one of the leaders of the rebellion near the front of the line, and he and I locked eyes seconds before a bullet pierced his temple. I could've sworn he looked peaceful as soon as the object entered him, and I couldn't help but remember seeing him in conversation with Amos the night before. Perhaps he met Jesus.

Kaz slowly placed his hand over the bridge of my violin to make me stop playing, and I lowered my instrument, my chest heaving in fear, my breathing difficult, as if I was trying to breathe underwater, unable to inhale the dusty oxygen. I surveyed my surroundings. Over a hundred men, a hundred of the Jewish rebels, were on the ground, lifeless, their bodies and faces painted in crimson and dust.

I watched in fear as more soldiers approached from the other side of the camp, their guns lifted by protocol, their commanding, harsh, threatening shouts demanding us to do something in a language few of us understood. One of the soldiers pointed his gun and fired at me and I fell hard to the earth, the sprain in my wrist reminding me of its existence. I wasn't shot. I looked to Kaz and neither was he. I was grateful.

I heard the sounds of a faint whimper near us. I peered around anxiously and saw the splintered viola on the ground, a bullet hole right through it. Fresh blood stains covered it in red. A body was a few feet away from the instrument. I glanced to our violist and he looked back to me, fear permeating from his eyes as he clutched his chest with his bloody fingers. His legs spun in circles like a swimmer trying to tread under water as if he was managing the pain through movement.

I felt useless. I wanted to help him, but if I moved, I chanced being shot. I continued to watch him as his legs finally slowed to a stop, along with his whimpering and quick, shallow breathing. I looked to his eyes again and he was gone. He stared at me vacantly.

Soldiers ordered us off the ground and forced us into a block with many other surviving prisoners. It was pitch black and we saw nothing—but we heard the rustling of soldiers frantically securing the camp from rioters and rebels, while some worked on putting out the fires. We heard a soldier shouting to another after peeking in our block, and someone translated that he suggested setting our block on fire with us in it.

Nothing would ever be the same. I knew it in my spirit. I wondered if the rebels in Birkenau were successful—and at such a thought, rapid gunfire rang through the courtyard, and I shuddered at the memory of the men I saw lined up against the wall, seconds before the soldiers pulled us into the block.

As the gunfire rested in the quiet sky, we held our breaths and counted the seconds, waiting for our block to catch fire or for a soldier to come inside and shoot us. Those seconds turned to minutes. Those minutes turned to an hour. At the end of the hour, we stopped panicking. And as soon as we stopped panicking, two soldiers came into the block and shouted orders. I was terrified at my lack of understanding of the German language. But I was thankful they didn't shoot us, not just yet.

With shouts of rage by the soldiers, the men in my block were forced to line up at the fence. Some of the men were crying, some were complaining in anger, and some were fighting from going to the fence—and those who fought were shot. We assumed we would all be shot, like the men before us at the fence.

Soldiers lined up in front of us, hoisting rifles in the air, prepared to shoot. This was the end. The rebellion would cause the entire camp to die—or at least those of us close enough to the actual rebellion as it happened. Someone shouted a command and I winced, expecting gunfire. Instead, headlights from several jeeps came to life, exposing us all from the dark. Another

command was shouted and out of nowhere, water hoses that appeared as snakes wiggled in the hands of several soldiers, a thick stream of water hitting us hard, feeling much like a thousand swords piercing us in the cold night, some of the prisoners falling against the electric fence, several of the men becoming electrocuted. The water torture lasted for some time before they stopped and rushed us back to our blocks, where death was imminent for many in by morning, with the combination of respiratory issues, wet clothes and frosty night temperatures. Amos would have his hands full, if he was still alive. I hoped he was.

*Another excerpt from:*

## ***Chapter twenty***

Several soldiers took the group of women away and led them to the undressing rooms. I stayed under the birch tree and closed my eyes, trying not to think about the memory of being inside and the strange smell of chemicals that encompassed the room. I lowered my violin to rest my broken rib. I peered into the distance and saw Warden Mandel. Behind her was another group of women heading towards me, all of them less than an hour away from their imminent death as well.

As they trudged through the grass, I lifted the violin to my chin, which was nearly impossible with the ache in my side. I started with a short, somber piece by Tomaso Albinoni and closed my eyes again, avoiding eye contact, terrified to see them cry. Although I tried to be lost in my own little musical world, I could feel the strong presence of the women around me. I opened my eyes and several of them were staring at me. And while they were all battered and bald, they were all beautiful to me, most of them with kind eyes. They were not much younger than Mom. Oh, how I wished my mother would have been in this camp instead of the other one. Perhaps she would still be alive.

Much like the first group, some of the women were crying while others held each other. It amazed me how people handled life, or perhaps death, differently. With less than a thousand breaths remaining in their mortal bodies, some of the women appeared scared or angry, expressed with a terrorizing, bitter scowl on their faces. Others, as I said before, looked

emotional, lost, and were helplessly crying. And still, there were a few women who actually showed joy on their faces, despite their circumstances. They rested in a spirit of calm. Happiness emanated from them. Even with bald heads, dirt-covered faces, and meatless bodies adorned with frumpy prison-issued dresses, some of these women glowed, radiating beauty through their smiles. And their joy was coveted and contagious. I wanted to be close to them.

I closed my eyes again, thinking of one of the women who offered me a sincere smile. A few seconds later, I felt a tapping on my arm. I opened my eyes, shocked to see the same beautiful woman standing in front of me.

“You play very well. Are you from Hungary?”

I shook my head, no.

“Can you play us Brahms, Hungarian Dance?”

I nodded my head, yes. “Do you play?” I asked.

“I played the cello,” she answered. Her voice warmed me. It was a combination of mother and sister, but with a Hungarian accent. It was soft and sweet like honey. She smiled again, and I took it in like sunshine.

I licked my dry lips, poised myself, pushed through the pain as I lifted my elbow, and started the dance in G minor.

By the fourth measure, I opened my eyes to see the lovely woman grabbing the hands of her friends and leading them in a dance. I couldn't help but smile at the sight. This woman radiated something the camp so desperately needed, and her life would end too soon. As I reached the bridge halfway through the song, I watched her gather more friends like an activity director in a nursing home, inspiring and encouraging life into the dying as she prompted other women to join in her dance. By the time I reached the melody again, her encouragement spread from a few to fifty, and then to a hundred. By the end of the song, her contagious spirit and joy had hundreds of women dancing and giggling to my performance of Brahms. The song ended on G and like I was taught by Arthur, I conditionally lowered the bow and bowed. It wasn't until the bow that I remembered my rib again.

The women cheered their approval with applause and laughter. It was a revival of sorts. And as I was taking it all in, the doors opened to the undressing rooms and the soldiers escorted the women into the building, rushing them in like cattle.

In less than a minute they were all gone, and I was alone again.

I collapsed in the grass for a moment before the next group arrived and let my face fall into my hands. The tears flowed uncontrollably. I was overwhelmed with pleasure and sadness at the same time. I honestly couldn't describe what I felt. I was a vortex of emotions—rage and joy in a whirlwind. I let my spirit relieve itself through my tears.

In the distance, I saw soldiers coming towards me and I feared crying so publicly, so I wiped my face and stood to play again, my side aching too much to stand. After a stumble and a quick rest, I attempted to stand again, gaining strength by the thoughts of the dancing women and the joy exuding from their leader. It was perhaps one of my most cherished moments.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, attempting to prepare myself mentally for the next group of women. And it was while my eyes were closed so tightly that I sensed that disgusting familiar smell, only to open them again and see the chimneys of the crematorium spewing pewter and black smoke into the air for the first time today. I couldn't help but to think about the women dancing. Perhaps they were dancing in Heaven at this very moment. Perhaps.

I wondered of their ages, seeing women as young as teens, and as old as my grandmother. It was hard to distinguish age without hair. More than anything, I could tell by the wrinkles in the creases of their eyes, or perhaps by their hands. But these were hard-working women whose faces, eyes, and hands showed an age much too mature for truth. Even the teenagers seemed hardened, all youthfulness stripped away upon entering the camp.

My attention was diverted to the men's orchestra who was practicing on the other side of the camp. I could hear horns and woodwinds as well as strings. I desperately wished I could play with them.

"Can you play Bach?" the soldier requested as he headed towards the crema.

I nodded, breathed warm air over my cold hands, and rubbed them together. I coughed hard to get the mucus out of my lungs, picked up the violin and slid the bow across my strings. It was a beautiful adagio and the young soldier smiled at the performance. He suddenly became distracted and I followed his gaze to the group of men marching towards us—prisoners in striped pajamas. Unlike the women, they were cold and formal. There were no tears. There were no hugs or words of affirmation. And there were twice as many men lined up in front of me, waiting to undress, waiting to be gassed like an unwanted pest in a garden, waiting to die. Perhaps close to

a thousand men in all. I was grateful it wasn't more women, and then I felt guilty for my gratefulness.

I finished Bach and moved on to some other famous composers like Beethoven and Mozart. The men were unresponsive and I felt rather self-conscious. It was such a contrast from the women. Still, it was my job to play—my gift to stay alive, so I played. I performed some songs by lesser known composers like Rachmaninoff and Gustav Holst—composers I enjoyed very much but were rarely known by the uncultured. Of course, I also had to perform some pieces by Edvard Grieg. The music seemed to get lost in the faces of the men, so I closed my eyes and played for my own personal enjoyment, still suppressing my coughs because the coughing kept me from playing well and hurt my form, not to mention smarting my ribs.

When I did open my eyes to see the men again, I couldn't help but to think of the women who came before them. How they all shared the same fate, and how they responded so differently. Some of the men had relaxed after a few familiar songs, soothed by the tone of my bow, and they turned to watch me. But because their faces were motionless, I kept my eyes closed tightly. I finished a piece by Jean Sibelius in D minor and opened them again to witness more men watching me play, but only those in my immediate surroundings. Some seemed agitated while others were smiling. Part of me wished the doors to the krema would open already because of my persistent cough and ache in my side, and the fact I felt self-conscious, as these skeleton-like worn men, waiting to die, watched me like a strange side-show attraction.

Perhaps it was the cold, perhaps it was the sickness in me, perhaps I was just exhausted, but I couldn't think of any more songs to play. The harder I thought, the more frazzled my brain became, completely blocking my memory.

What was funny was I remembered a song by Paganini that I had so much trouble playing as a young child with the *col legno* portions of the piece. I would mess up continuously, afraid to look my father in the eye. He would walk around the house rummaging through papers from work and say, 'again' over and over, until I could play them correctly. He wouldn't let me eat dinner until I mastered them. I even remember sitting on the toilet, practicing them. It was the only time I really hated playing the violin.

I started the Paganini song aggressively, attacking the notes like small targets to be hit and conquered, and sighed in disbelief as I glided across the *col legno* portions as if I was skipping rocks on a pond, laughing to myself at how simple they had become. This was perhaps the most difficult piece I had played since being in Birkenau, but I believed it was a

subconscious effort to impress these men in their last moments of life. If I was to be honest, it was killing my ribs by the fast tempo and valiant melody, forcing me to quickly jerk the bow to play such a song. Still, I was having fun and I was afraid it showed on my face.

I opened my eyes towards the end of the piece and relaxed, trying to catch my breath. I was enveloped by a small smattering of applause. It wasn't the exuberant raving of the women, but it was as much as these men were willing to give at such a time, and I felt honored, even if it was only about fifty or so men from the seven or eight hundred of them.

I searched their faces, desperate for approval, desperate for a smile, a gentle nod, a kind word. And as I was searching, the SS opened the doors and the men turned away from me and funneled towards the direction of their final destination.

Except one.

One man stood facing me, perhaps fifty yards away or more, his back to the crematoriums. He was skin and bones like the others. Nonetheless, he was familiar. I had to think how I knew him for a moment, as he was hardly recognizable.

He smiled at me and I returned with a grin of my own. He nodded his approval, bowed to me like a gentleman, and slowly turned around, being swept away in the current of men coming towards him.

"Father," I called out, unable to form the words from my pressed lips, but he was gone.

I could barely move, my knees buckling beneath me as I tried to chase him. I swam through the sea of men who all looked the same from behind, desperately searching for him. "Father!" I cried again in my frantic search to find him, pushing my way through the crowd to the crematorium.

I reached the doors to the undressing room and a kapo grabbed me, his arm hooked around my neck and body.

"You can't go in there!"

"Please!"

"If you go in there, you'll never come out."

"Father!" I cried out, still unable to see him in the swarm of bald, scabby heads making their way down the stairs into the hallway.