



TURNED AWAY



THE World War II Diary
of DEVORAH BERNSTEIN

BY CAROL MATAS

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Is it wrong to be happy?

Daddy says that's a "big question" and that I am always asking big questions. "Couldn't you ask me why leaves turn yellow in the fall, or something easy?" he asked me at dinner tonight.

I had come home from ballet class full of happy feelings. Mrs. Roberts had actually praised my pirouettes. I couldn't believe it! Praise from Mrs. Roberts, as you know, dear diary, is as rare as rain in Winnipeg in December. I waited for the streetcar, floating on air. But when I got home and flopped down on my bed, the first thing I saw was Sarah's letter, lying there on my pillow where I'd left it when I hurried off to class. How could I have forgotten Sarah's plight, even for a few hours, and allowed myself to be so happy? Her letter makes me feel like crying. But I know that soon I'll feel happy again. Is there something wrong with me?

I am going to paste her letter in here so I don't lose it and so she becomes part of us, dear diary. And since this is my first entry in a brand new diary, I think it's a good way to start.



2 rue d'Andigne,
Paris, France
November 1

Chère Deborah,

I know that there is no use living in the past, but I can't help but remember our wonderful last visit. We were children then, four years ago, but so happy and carefree. And when I think that perhaps we could have found a way to stay with you in Canada, I find myself crying. Remember when we swam at Winnipeg Beach? Remember Adam throwing us up in the air so we'd splash into the water? Remember playing baseball with Morris and his friends and me picked last, so I cried? To think that was my biggest worry then. Remember Rachel and Adam getting in trouble because they went to a party and stayed out too late? And remember us walking with the entire family at sunset along the beach, the white sand soft beneath our feet, the dunes rising like soft pillows around us, the sky orange and red and purple and the two of us holding hands? And the corned beef sandwiches we ate at Oscar's — ten feet high!! And the hot dogs and chips from Kelekis. My mouth waters just thinking about it. Food is so scarce here. Do you still go to Kelekis now that you live in a different part of the city?

I'm very glad that your mother was so brave all

those years ago and travelled from France to Canada to see the world. And I'm so glad that she and your papa met and that she stayed in Canada. Otherwise we would have no relatives there and no hope! I know that sounds selfish, but at least with you working to get us over there we can live in hope. Without hope what is there? Strange how different my papa and your mother are, especially when they are brother and sister. Papa is so reluctant to do anything out of the way. Rachel takes after your mother, though, not my papa. Me, I'm afraid I'm more like Papa.

I dwell on the past in this letter because I dread telling you what the present is like. To live under the rule of those who hate you, pass them in the street and know they despise you simply because you are Jewish, it is hard to bear, day in and day out. We live in fear, a vague all-encompassing fear that is hard to describe.

I told you about the thousands of Jews who were rounded up in August, many of them lawyers. And we are beginning to hear such strange rumours about what is happening to the Jews who are taken away. But I will not even repeat them. They are surely just that, rumours by people afraid of what might be in store for us.

Papa is still trying to get us visas to come to Canada and he says your parents are working hard on that front and that we must not give up hope. I

will keep hoping. Why does Canada not want us, that's what I don't understand. Surely Canada needs more people like Papa. And I'm sure Maman could be useful as a teacher there, correct? And Rachel is clever and I'll be a great pianist and since Maman spoke English to us when we were young, we don't even have accents — well, barely — and therefore, we'd be excellent citizens. She always says she did it because she believed it was good for our brains to speak many languages, but how fortunate it may turn out to be.

Well, I'll try to write again next time Papa sends a letter to your parents, even though you must now dread receiving my letters, as they are so full of gloom. I know! For my next letter I'll try to think of all the good things — perhaps that will help me to look on the bright side.

Keep me in your prayers. You will always be my dearest friend and cousin,

Sarah

Last week Mommy told me that a month ago the Germans blew up eight synagogues in Paris. That same day she showed something, a paper, to Daddy, but wouldn't let me see it. I overheard her saying that she translated it from one of the French newspapers. I found the scrap of paper on a side table in the living room a few days ago. I'm going to paste it in here

too. Because later when I tell my children they simply won't believe me that such awful things could have been said, will they?

Death to the Jew! Death to meanness, to deceit, to Jewish wiles! Death to the Jewish cause! Death to Jewish usury! Death to all that is false, ugly, dirty, repulsive, Negroid, cross-bred, Jewish! Death! Death to the Jew! Yes. Repeat it. Death! D.E.A.T.H. TO THE JEW! For the Jew is not a man. He is a stinking beast. We defend ourselves against evil, against death — and therefore against the Jews.

You can see why I worry about being happy, dear diary. I mean, after reading this you'd think I'd never crack a smile again and yet, one happy afternoon and all my cousin's suffering is forgotten. And all the hatred directed against her — and if I admit it, me, because I'm Jewish too. And it's not only my cousin Sarah. What about my very own brothers? I have Adam in England to worry about, and Morris in Hong Kong. Maybe there *is* something wrong with me. Maybe I'm heartless!

LATER

At dinner I asked Mommy and Daddy what they were doing to get Sarah and her family over here. They said that they have called the people at the Canadian Jewish Congress and that they were told

that the Congress is working as hard as they can to get Jews over here. Sarah's letter came tucked into a larger envelope with a letter from Uncle Nathaniel addressed to Mommy, and I think they are using Uncle Nathaniel's information to help them convince the authorities about the plight of the Jews overseas. And of course Daddy has written the prime minister. Daddy explained to him all about our family in France and told him what good citizens they would be if they were allowed to immigrate, and pleaded with him to be generous — as we know Canadians are. So far though, it seems as though our government just doesn't care. I can't understand that. How can they *not* care? I feel like writing the prime minister myself and asking him why they don't like Jews. Maybe I will!

Daddy has told Uncle Nathaniel to pretend he is Christian and to try to get a visa that way, but Uncle Nathaniel says things are not that desperate yet. I read them some of Sarah's letter and asked what could be more desperate? Daddy said, "You must understand, Devvy, that your Uncle Nathaniel was a judge on the high court in Paris until he was fired because of being Jewish. He only travelled in the most elite circles of society. He simply doesn't believe that a *gendarme* would have the gall to arrest him. I hope he's right."