

## INTRODUCTION

*The Story of Blima: A Holocaust Survivor* is a true story. It tells of the experience of Blima Weisstuch, a Jewish girl in Poland, between the years 1936 and 1947.

To a reader today, those words—Jews, 1940s, Poland—may not suggest anything particular. But to someone who lived through those years, the words evoke shudders of horror. For during that era, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party were rising to power in Europe. As Blima herself says, “[The Nazis] had some plan they talked about in these smoke-filled clubs, a plan for the country, the world. A plan which did not include Jews.”

In order to understand the nightmare that overtook Blima and her family, some background information is helpful.

In 1936, when the story opens, much of Europe was in the grips of an economic depression. Millions of people were out of work. In Germany, conditions were particularly harsh. The country had been on the losing side of World War I, and it was broke from waging war. To make matters worse, the treaty that ended the war demanded that Germany pay some of the Allies (the countries that had fought against Germany, including Britain, France, the United States, and Russia) large sums of money to compensate for the suffering the war had caused. In addition, the treaty forbade Germany from establishing another army. All of these elements came together to make the German people feel bitter and hopeless. Humiliated, hungry, angry at the world and uncertain of the future, they looked for a leader—and someone to blame for their troubles.

As a result, when Adolf Hitler began talking about his plan to restore Germany's pride and prosperity, people were ready to listen. And when he suggested that the Jews were responsible for many of Europe's problems, his audience was happy to have a target for their anger and frustration.

Why did Hitler blame the Jews for Germany's problems? He was tapping into a vein of anti-Semitism (meaning "hatred of Jews") that

had existed in Europe for centuries. Anti-Semitism was (and unfortunately, still is) both a form of prejudice and an expression of resentment and even jealousy.

Over the years, in part because of anti-Semitism, many European Jews had chosen to live in communities with other Jews, where they could practice their religion and customs together. Some of the Jews dressed differently than other Europeans; they observed Old Testament dietary rules called “keeping kosher”; they spoke Yiddish (a language related to German but including words from Hebrew and other languages). All these things led to bitter accusations against the Jews—that they were “clannish” and considered themselves superior to the *goyim*, or non-Jews, or that they were practicing secret rituals and even witchcraft. Anti-Semites also liked to remind people that, according to some interpretations of the New Testament, Jewish leaders participated in condemning Jesus to death. Calling Jews “Christ-killers” added fuel to the fires.

Jews were also resented because of the perception that they were financially better-off than many other Europeans. In general, this was a false perception—most Jews were just as impoverished as their neighbors. But because the Jewish culture had always emphasized learning

and education, a number of Jewish people had become prominent in business and the professions. Anti-Semites encouraged their followers to believe that the “greedy Jews” were somehow responsible for their own poverty.

So this tradition of anti-Semitism was a handy one for Hitler to exploit for his own benefit. The Nazi philosophy was based largely on the idea of Germans being a “master race.” “Germany above all” and “Germany for the Germans” were the Nazis’ rallying cries. Hitler promised his listeners that he would make Germany “racially pure,” thus restoring it to greatness.

In order to make his promises reality, Hitler developed a systematic plan to persecute the Jews. Nazis attacked Jewish businesses, breaking their windows and humiliating their owners. Jewish communities were sealed off and Jews were forbidden to leave. (The sealed communities were called “ghettos,” a word that has entered our American vocabulary.) Jews were forced to wear a yellow six-pointed star—the Star of David—to publicly identify them.

In 1941, Hitler’s top associates introduced what they called the “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem”—what we now know as the Holocaust. The solution was simply, and horribly, this: all of Europe’s Jews would be exterminated. It was to help bring about the “Final

Solution” that Blima Weisstuch, age 25, was snatched on a spring day from the street in front of her parents’ house.

Many Jews were transported directly to death camps, where they were murdered by being gassed or shot. Others, like Blima, went to work camps, where they were used as slave labor until they died of starvation, disease, or exhaustion. Some met an even more hideous fate. They were chosen as subjects in the Nazis’ medical experiments, in which Nazi doctors tested the human endurance for such things as being frozen, poisoned, or operated upon without anesthesia.

Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust. Gypsies, gay men, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the mentally ill, the retarded, and other people the Nazis considered “inferior” were also sent to the concentration camps, where millions died or were killed outright. No one knows for sure how many people died in the Holocaust. Generally accepted estimates, however, are these: 6 million Jews, 3 million non-Jewish Poles, up to 800,000 Gypsies, up to 300,000 disabled people, about 25,000 gay men, and 2,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses.

As the Allied armies defeated Germany throughout 1944 and 1945, they liberated concentration camps across Europe. Tragically,

many of the prisoners found there were too weakened by disease and hunger to survive, and many thousands died in the weeks after liberation. Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau were some of the most infamous of the camps; you will find their names in Blima's story.

So there in a very small nutshell is a story of the what, where, and when of the Holocaust. What has not been addressed here is the biggest question of all: *How?* Whatever excuses were made, how could an entire nation accept the idea that millions of their fellow human beings—people who were simply going about their ordinary lives—should be rounded up and slaughtered as if they were rabid dogs?

One small bright light in the midst of all this horror is that fact that *not* all Germans (or people in other Nazi-occupied countries) turned their backs on their victimized neighbors. In Blima's story you will meet Gizella, a kind-hearted Catholic who helped her in the labor camp, despite great personal risk. You will also read of a Christian family who hid two young Jewish girls in their home for the duration of the war. There were thousands of non-Jews—their numbers are unknown—who risked their lives to hide Jews, help them, and even smuggle them out of Germany.

Still, the hideous fact is that the majority of Germans, as well as Nazi collaborators in other European countries, did *not* raise a hand to stop what was happening. After the war, many said that they were not aware of the horrors occurring within the concentration camps. It may be true that ordinary citizens did not know the exact details of what was happening. But as one looks back at the historical evidence, it seems clear that people did not know because they did not want to know. Jews and other persecuted people were disappearing in large numbers; the camps were highly visible; and Nazi leaders had publicly promised, again and again, to rid Europe of its “Jewish problem.” It did not take a great deal of imagination to figure out what was going on in places like Dachau and Auschwitz.

Which brings us back to the question: How could such a thing happen?

Millions of words have been written trying to explain the grotesque slaughter that was the Holocaust. After sorting out all the history, excuses, and theories, one thing seems clear: Human beings are capable of incredible cruelty to one another once we manage to deny our common humanity.

When I stop thinking of my neighbor as “Alan” and begin thinking of him as “a Jew,” or

“a Muslim,” or “a foreigner” or “a member of another race,” it is easier for me to be unkind to him. From there, it’s not such a big step to think of him as a thing, not a person—a sort of subhuman who does not feel love and friendship, who does not experience hope and despair, who does not deserve to dream and plan and live in peace the same way I do. And then, if he and his family vanish one night, it’s not so hard to think, “It’s not my problem. It’s not as though it happened to people like me.”

And that is the great value of a story like *The Story of Blima: A Holocaust Survivor*. Sometimes, the enormous nature of a catastrophe is too much to comprehend. Who can really grasp the idea of the murders of 6 million Jews? But in this story of one young Jewish woman, Blima Weisstuch—a daughter, a sister, a friend; a woman with the hopes and dreams common to all humanity—a reader can experience the reality of one of history’s greatest tragedies.

## PART I



## BEFORE THE STORM

### Chapter 1

“My name is Blima,” I tell the young girl at the counter, handing her a box of fine round rolls; “it means ‘flowers.’” The girl says nothing but quietly reaches up, holds the box of rolls against her chest for a moment, and skips off, her long braids bouncing behind her.

I love talking to the children who come into the bakery each afternoon when school is done. Their coat pockets holding coins from their parents, they walk proudly into the shop and look over each row of baked goods. There are long tan sourdough breads dripping flour like snowflakes, dozens of cookies winking at them with chocolate and prune eyes, and fat jelly doughnuts puffing red bubbles through their centers. Then each child

makes a great show of deciding and points at the showcase. Sometimes, if I am lucky, they talk to me. These boys and girls are *goyim*—Christian children, not Jews like us. They are curious about the short, dark-haired Jewess behind the counter. They ask why the bakery is closed on Saturdays, what the narrow peg by the door (what we called the *mezuzah*) means, and why my head isn't covered by a scarf, like so many of the women they see. I, in turn, ask about the way they worship, why their Jesus is considered a savior, and what foods they give up for Lent—questions I would never dare ask their parents. The children answer generously. And in this way, we learn from each other.

It does not make me proud to say that this is the closest I have come to an education. Here in Poland in the year 1936, I left school after the eighth grade. I am now 20, and most girls my age, younger even, are already promised in marriage, and some even have one or two children. Although I too have a boyfriend, I am too busy at the shop to fill my head with thoughts of marriage. Aunt Rachel makes sure to remind me of that each morning just before she slides the last of the steamy baked goods onto the shelf and goes into the back room for her nap. Not many other

young people could have put up with her as well as I do. I guess that's why Mama has chosen me, instead of my sisters, to work for her.

I don't much care for the way Aunt Rachel shakes her toothpick at me when she is making a point. Worst of all, she won't let me have any of the wonderful poppy seed muffins we sell because of a shortage of poppy seeds in our Polish city, Dombrowa. So I grow accustomed to eating the black bread, which isn't so bad even without butter, even if it is one or two days old and the moldy parts have to be cut away.

Aunt Rachel isn't really so bad, either. After all, she does let me eat the coffee cake crumbs that stick to the counter at the end of the day, and she does teach me how to make the proper change, and to tie a neat sailor's knot to close the white bakery boxes. Besides, she is my mother's sister, so what can I do?

I stand on my tiptoes and peer through the window at the far end of the shop. With the day nearing an end, half of a sun blinks like a golden eye behind the mask of a gray cloud. It is as if God Himself is coloring all of Dombrowa a melancholy purple. Soon the street lights will shine on each corner, and mothers will be hurrying their children to the table, while young couples giggle and whisper

as they walk to dance halls in town. I quickly untie my apron and place one thick piece of black bread in a bag, along with an end piece for Masha, our family cat. As I am putting on my coat, the bells on the glass door sound, signaling my sister Adele's arrival.

"Blumke!" my sister exclaims, using my pet name. "So I am waiting outside and going to freeze from the cold already. Let's go!" I button my coat and say good-bye to Aunt Rachel, who glances up from her newspaper. Pointing her toothpick at me, she reminds me to lock the door.

When my sister Adele and I walk down the street, I think we look like two princesses. Certainly, I never feel that way alone. In fact, I most often want to sneak into the corners of my house and observe everyone's comings and goings like a quiet bird. But when I am with Adele, my favorite sister, her magical presence spreads to me. At these moments I feel, if not superior, at least as if I am somebody. I try to keep step with my sister's long strides as I rush alongside her. She shakes her head and laughs.

"I tell you, Blumke, you are slow, slow, slow!" she scolds.

I scowl in protest. "So who works as hard

as I do in this family?" I say. "You certainly do not."

"Well, of course, you were always the *best* child," she replies, giving me a sidelong glance and laughing again. But I can never be upset with Adele for long. She is simply too endearing, too beautiful. My affection for my younger sister covers any envy that might be in my heart.

I glance at her lovely round face. Even without her powder and cherry rouge, Adele is stunning. She has piercing chestnut-brown eyes, not pale blue ones like my own, and hers are shadowed by long, dark lashes. Her nose is a little upturned dot, not bold and prominent like mine and that of many other Jews. The mouth is embraced by full jewel-red lips which seem always parted in laughter. And her skin has an ivory sheen which glows free of any imperfection. Small wonder that last year she won first place in the local beauty contest.

We cross the wide road quickly, careful to avoid the cars that carelessly zoom down the street. Sometimes young men stick their heads out the window and whistle or shout suggestive remarks at us as we hurry along in our matching long brown coats with lamb collars.

“They always think we are twins,” said Adele, kicking her long-booted legs higher as a wolf whistle sounds behind us. I snuggle my chin deeper into the warmth of my collar. How much I wish I were a twin to Adele. But no, the fates had not been so kind. My brother Froyim is my twin. Even under my heavy coat, I feel goosebumps rising up my arm, just thinking of him. Froyim—the yellow-haired lizard who was a head taller than I even at birth. Of all my brothers, it is he who looks most like our father. I suppose he thinks that gives him the authority to lord it over us all, and me especially. I constantly hear, “Blima, where are you going?” “Blima, don’t be out too late.” “Blima, watch out for the boys, they are all snakes, you know!” Wherever I go, it seems as if Froyim is walking in my shadow.

“Did you hear that one, Blumke?” Adele’s musical voice shakes me out of my daydreams.

“Hear what?”

“Why, that tall boy over there, the one with the checkered cap,” she says, pointing her chin slyly toward the left.

“Do you think I care what that boy was saying, or what any of them say, for that matter? Adele, remember that we are respectable girls. At least I know that I am.”

“Oh, we all know how good you are, Blumke. And if we forget, we have Mama to remind us. Blumke is the *best* child!” she mocks, but her chestnut eyes twinkle merrily, without a hint of malice. Before I can protest, she continues, “But tell me, are you so good, so respectable with your friend Smulke?”

I can feel the heat of a blush rising up my cheeks.

“Of course I am. You know very well that—” but before I can finish speaking, Adele removes one delicate hand from her fur muff and boldly places it on my bosom.

“Why, you are!” she howls as she gives each breast a firm pat. “You are still binding them!” Again, I can feel the heat rising, this time up to my earlobes. I bite my lower lip to stop myself from crying.

“Really, Blumke, you would think that you are a Chinese woman in the nineteenth century. Only instead of binding your feet to keep your femininity, you are binding down your breasts to look like a man. This is Poland, and it is 1936, Blumke! 1936! Tell me, how do you tie them, with Aunt Rachel’s baker’s cord?”

I swallow hard before I can answer. Only Mama and my sisters know of this embarrassing action, which I began four years ago when

I turned sixteen. None of them understand how it feels to stand only four feet nine and have heavy breasts that point out half a foot as if to shout, “Here we are!” They don’t know what it is to feel the eyes of men crawl over your chest. Nor can they guess what it feels like to squirm uncomfortably as male friends, cousins, even strangers reach out boldly to glide fingers over my breast as if it were one of the loaves of bread displayed in Aunt Rachel’s shop.

“Never mind why I do it, Adele,” I say, as I feel the warmth in my face slowly fade. “You just be glad that you don’t have such problems. Besides,” I add, grabbing her arm as we cross another busy street, “your mind shouldn’t be on me or men, or anything but helping baby-sit our nieces tonight.”

“Ah, yes, Blumke, you are so right,” she says with a smile. “You are always so right, and always so *good*.”

I sigh. If Adele only knew the times—the many times—when I wished I hadn’t been quite so good.