

GIDEON



Chester Aaron



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*For Tsvicke and
Ghatzkel*

ALEVASHOLEM

DO YE HEAR THE CHILDREN WEEPING, O MY BROTHERS...
...THE YOUNG, YOUNG CHILDREN, O MY BROTHERS,
THEY ARE WEEPING BITTERLY!
THEY ARE WEEPING IN THE PLAYTIME OF THE OTHERS...

Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
"The Cry of the Children"

PREFACE

I write this for you: my four children, my seven grandchildren, my four-month-old and six-month-old great-grandchildren.

I write this for you because you have to know about me. And yourselves.

You, my children, my grandchildren, have heard very few of the details of my childhood and youth. Details filtered through boring little bits of gossip as you were growing up.

You know, of course, I was, am, Polish. You know I was born in Warsaw.

That is almost all you know about me.

So, as I sit here, prepared to write, I wonder where I should begin. Before or after I entered the ghetto?

Do you, I wonder, even know the meaning of the word *ghetto*?

I have decided. After.

For good reason.

My life before I was twelve has lost significance. Those twelve years had ended so quickly, so completely, that, like many children in Warsaw, I think of myself as having been born inside the ghetto walls...

CHAPTER 1

I am fourteen, living in the ghetto.

I have lived in the ghetto since November 1940.

Over the weeks, months, years, the will to survive has occasionally weakened, but it has never died.

Along with that will to survive there was, during those years, much simple good fortune.

My hair, for example. It has always been straight, always the color of hay. When I was a child, before the war, my mother and grandmother competed with each other to best describe the blue of my eyes. Sky blue, ocean blue, the blue of a violet, of an iris.

I never looked like a Jew. In those days, that could only be fortunate.

There you are. Now you know.

Why didn't I ever tell you?

That, I think, is one of the reasons I have written this for you. But I am not being honest.

I have not written this just for you. I have written it for myself as well.

Now, this moment, as I begin writing, the first scene that rises before me occurred in July, 1942. Before the uprising.



There is a cluster of Jews at the gate near Tlomackie. German soldiers force the Jews to take off their clothes and dance. Other Jews nearby are commanded to sing and applaud. I stand among them. Outside the gate, a group of Poles has gathered to observe the entertainment.

For eight months I have been escaping the ghetto and going to Aryan Warsaw (called this because all Warsaw outside the ghetto had been “cleansed” of Jews). I have been meeting with One-Eye and his gang since April. We—the gang and I—have an alliance that profits both them and us, the Jews in the ghetto. I am scheduled to meet with One-Eye in an hour.

A soldier pushes into the crowd and grabs a man whose hair had obviously been shorn recently, in the last hour or so. A few twisted curls still cling to his collar. The skin where there had been a beard for fifty or sixty years is much lighter than the rest of his face. Recent razor cuts on his chin and neck are still oozing blood. His panicked attempt to save himself has only succeeded in drawing attention to himself, in provoking the anger of the Germans.

They hurl the old man at the dancers, knocking several down. The old man's body slides across the cobblestones. The soldiers jerk him upright, and a young German officer with red hair and freckles orders him to dance. The old man balances on one foot. *Beg*, the officer demands, *beg your master*. The old Jew lifts his nose into the air, and he whines and wriggles his hands. When the Poles laugh and applaud, I force myself to laugh, too. I have long ago learned how essential it is to accept humiliation in order to survive.

Soldiers appear from the side streets and from behind us. And four trucks.

I have been confronting such crises daily, almost hourly, ever since I started leaving the ghetto. My luck, my cunning, my sharply honed reflexes have always saved me. This time, I have delayed seconds too long. With the other Jews, I am packed into the trucks. A few Poles have been swept up as well. They protest. They are not Jews. They hate Jews. They have always hated Jews. The Germans ignore their pleas.

There is little correspondence between age and survival instincts in the ghetto. I and those other children who have survived possess a greater store of knowledge and devices for survival than most adults do.

Reaching into my pocket, I remove my armband, which defines me as a Jew. During the next several minutes, I rip the cloth apart with my nails and force the fragments into my mouth. By the time the trucks stop, I have

eaten the entire armband. Now my counterfeit papers and the silver medal of the Virgin Mary around my neck should satisfy the Germans that I am a Catholic.

When we reach Szczesliwice train station, the soldiers begin yelling, pounding heads and shoulders with rifle butts, firing into the air, driving us out of the trucks and onto the platform of the *Umschlagplatz*—the collecting station—and into the cattle cars. Other Jews, brought earlier, are already in the cars. Women and men faint, but our bodies are packed so closely together, the unconscious victims are unable to fall to the floor.

I feel fresh air on my legs. The grating! Such openings were built into the walls of these cars, near the floors, so the confined cattle could receive enough air to survive their journey to the slaughterhouses.

A woman next to me—one of the Poles who has screamed her hatred of Jews—has turned blue, almost purple. She has stopped breathing but remains upright.

I fight to a stooped position, use my knife and fingers. After ten or fifteen minutes I have the grating out of its frame. It takes several minutes to writhe and slide to the floor, to double myself up, to get my head through the opening. I push with my feet against the legs of the Jews around me and squeeze my body, inch by inch, through the hole. When I fall, I let my body roll.

The train slows. There are several shots. A burst of shots. Many bursts. For a moment, I

regret my escape. Because I have escaped, the Germans are shooting other Jews. *Survive, Gideon...at any cost...*

Will they be saved if I surrender? No.

Often at such moments, when I have doubts, when I begin to falter, my father's voice seeks me out, as if it is always waiting to be needed. *The important thing, Gideon, is to survive. In any way, at any cost, survive. By surviving you can not only fight back, you can carry the story of what is happening in this ghetto. The world must know. You and others must tell. You are of no use to our people dead.*

I jump up from the cinders. Ahead and behind me, the guns are still firing. I run and hide, regain my strength, and run and hide again.

I find a farm, and the peasants help me. While I eat their bread and soup, they talk about how bad things have become. Ah, but everything will improve once the Jews have been wiped out. Then the Germans will leave Poland. When I tell them what has just happened, that I have almost been taken with Jews to be killed, that several Poles had also been killed, they shake their fingers at me. I am, they warn me, very young, very innocent. I should have known that all I had to do was to show my medal to the soldiers. They would not have bothered me. They're only after Jews, thank God. And what was I doing in the ghetto anyway? Ah, my parents and my priest have sadly neglected my education.

With a final warning to stay away from the Jews, the peasants give me directions back to Warsaw. They also give me more bread. And a few zlotys, in case I want to buy some cheese.