SEPTEMBER 1, 1939

"It's time you heard the whole story."

Over the years Max Steinberg had told his grandson only bits and pieces of what had happened to his family on that day nearly six decades ago. Now, less than 48 hours before Aaron would have to say goodbye, the two of them sat together in the kitchen in Tel Aviv, sipping lemon tea just the way his mother taught him to brew it.

"Cut the slice of lemon very thin, paper-thin, that way the juice seeps right into the tea," he remembered her saying. "Careful, the knife is sharp, keep your fingers away from the blade."

It was hard to believe that there was a time when the biggest danger for Max was nicking his finger with the blade of a knife.

"It was a Friday, the first day of September, 1939," he began. "It was my ninth birthday."

September 1, 1939: Even now, 58 years later, he could still feel the way it had begun, a languid, late summer day in Cracow, full of eager anticipation, for his mother had been teasing him for days about the presents that might be in store for him. That morning she looked beautiful in a daisy-colored smock that showed her tapered legs and slim ankles. Often in the morning she left her long hair loose to curl down her back, it was a brilliant, inky black against the yellow of the dress; later when she went about her housework she would take it in both hands and twist it into a knot high upon her head.

Early that day Max had gone out into the back garden in bare feet when the dew was still thick upon the grass to watch their cat Arturo patiently stalking the bluebird that came every day to drink from the bird bath; he savored the delicious contrast between the moist grass that cooled his toes and the sun that even at 7:30 a.m. was warming his neck and ears. After breakfast—a freshly baked roll with butter, a glass of milk, slices of apple, cored and peeled the way he liked it—his mother gave him an extra birthday treat, a slice of her poppyseed cake. He'd taken it out into the garden to sit there in sun-dappled warmth, reading his book, sipping tea and crumbling the cake into little pieces before putting them in his mouth.

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Max's father, also named Aaron, was born in a small Russian village just across the border from Poland. Before his first birthday the family moved to Lublin in eastern Poland, barely 20 kilometers from his birthplace. The youngest of six children, Aaron was ten, and the only child still at home, when his mother died.

His father Yakov, a widower with a bad heart, could barely scrape together a living. He had some modest skills as a tailor, though none as a businessman, and he scrounged here and there for assignments to make work shirts and trousers, poor clothes for poor people.

"Jewish poverty in Poland was not to be believed," Max explained to his grandson. "The Poles would all the time make comments about rich Jews. Growing up, my father never knew any. Here and there was a merchant or factory owner in a big house, the kind of a fellow who had servants and who traveled to Italy or France, but for most Jews travel meant a horse-drawn wagon to the next town to sell something or to visit a sick relation. These Jews were too poor to own more than one suit of clothes. They were lucky if they ate meat once a week, on Shabbos."

Some couldn't even support their own children. Shortly after Aaron's bar mitzvah, his father said, "I cannot keep you anymore," and apprenticed the 13-year-old to a distant cousin, Yitzhak Fein, the wagon maker.

It was the second decade of the 20th century, and as more and more cars appeared on the streets of Lublin, their owners would take them to Yitzhak Fein's workshop to repair dented fenders and broken lights or to fix flat tires. Aaron began tinkering with the cars; soon he became adept at repairing the engines as well as the chassis. At age 17, rather than settle for the pitiful wage that Yitzhak was offering, Aaron struck out on his own.

He opened his own auto repair shop in Cracow, a much bigger city than Lublin. Three years later he was doing well enough to marry Shoshanna Klein, the youngest daughter of a well-to-do grain merchant. They had three children—first two girls, Ilana and Ruthie,, and then Max. As the business prospered, Aaron signed a lease on the two-story house with the sunny eastern exposure. It sat on its own little plot where they grew onions, peas, peppers, mint and sage.

Late in 1938, when the threat from Hitler could no longer be ignored, Aaron sent the girls to an uncle in Birmingham, England. Max didn't go with them.

"Mother couldn't bear to part with me, so she kept me home with her and poppa," he said.

Thus his sisters were safe in England on September 1, 1939. That morning his mother greeted him with hugs and kisses. The day was doubly festive, not only for Max's birthday but also for the approach of the Sabbath, when Aaron always came home early to the aromas of challah baking in the oven and chicken soup simmering slowly on the stove. During the morning Max sat with his book in a shady triangle of grass under a chestnut tree, the air redolent with the aroma of pink nicotiana. From time to time he closed the book and daydreamed of birthday surprises. He felt

connected by invisible bonds to the trees and flowers, to his parents, to schoolboy friends, to his sisters whom he missed so acutely.

In years to come he would think back on those few hours of euphoria, amazed at the innocence of it. Toward noon Shoshanna turned on the radio and heard the news. She did her best to keep it from Max, but when Aaron came home an hour later, she ran to meet him.

"It's war," she shrieked. "The Germans have invaded."

Aaron had already heard, but he pressed her for details. Shoshanna had had more schooling; her Polish was better than his and she could understand English. For hours she sat by the radio, switching between the Polish government station, which played the national anthem over and over, interrupted now and then for news bulletins that were portentously vague, and the BBC, whose Berlin correspondent reported, in ironic tones, the German lies about how the Poles had provoked the attack. When it was time to light the Shabbos candles she made to turn off the radio.

"No, leave it," Aaron said.

"But it's the Sabbath."

Max would never forget his father's answer: "Preserving life is more important than the laws of Shabbat. It's right there in the Gemarrah." Aaron didn't know where in the Gemarrah; in truth his study of Talmud had ended almost before it began, when he'd been plucked out of the rabbi's *cheder* to be apprenticed to Yitzhak Fein. But when he said life and death he knew what he was talking about.

Max finally got his birthday presents that Friday: a handsome blue woolen suit, his first, plus an unexpected treat, a crystal radio set that he was to assemble himself—with Aaron's help. There were hugs and kisses; Max remembered Aaron smiling and saying, only half jokingly, that in another year Max would be 10 and could begin to help him in the shop: "It's never too early to learn how to work hard," he said. But despite the laughter at his father's jokes and the merriment of the birthday celebration, all three of them, Max included, had this sense of deepening gloom, as if thick mattresses had been spread end-to-end over their heads, blocking all light.

At twilight that evening the sky was streaked with a breathtaking medley of yellows, oranges and pinks but the sun dipping to the west was a telltale of what the day had wrought; its fleeting gasp of red was like a trail of blood suspended in the firmament. Shoshanna took a deep

breath, lit the candles and covered her face as she chanted the blessing. When she dropped her hands Max saw her eyes wet with tears, saw her body shake until Aaron encircled her in his arms.

The Polish army was soon broken, and two weeks later the Russians invaded from the east, dividing Poland into German and Russian zones. There was chaos as some of the Jews tried to flee while others huddled together with their extended families, trying to reassure one another that it was safe to stay, that somehow life would go on.

"On that first day my father's mind was made up," Max recalled. "He said, 'If we stay the Germans will kill us.' Other people thought we were crazy, but over the next two weeks father managed to find a buyer for his business—at a distressed price, yes, but better than nothing. He used the proceeds to buy jewelry and gold coins. We had a Model T, and the day after the Russians invaded I remember this running back and forth from the house to the car carrying clothes, food, father's tools, even a few pieces of furniture."

Aaron piled Shoshanna and Max into the car and set out for the Russian frontier. The roads were clogged with cars, horses, oxen, dusty, beat-up farm trucks, a procession of every type of vehicle that had ever been manufactured. Those who had no transportation walked, tugging suitcases behind them, balancing baskets of clothing and household items on their heads. The pace was painfully slow, and they'd barely gone 25 kilometers when they ran into a German checkpoint.

'The Germans ordered us out of the car, lined us up and checked our papers," Max said. "When they saw that poppa's birthplace was Russia they pointed us east, into the Russian zone. 'Without the car,' the German lieutenant said. 'The car stays here.'"

Aaron started to protest and the lieutenant swung the butt end of his rifle, catching him above the right eye and opening a gash that was soon thick with blood.

"Scram, get out of here before we shoot all of you," the lieutenant shouted.

With blood pouring from his temple, Aaron instructed Shoshanna and Max to quickly remove from the car only the things that were necessary. Clothing, he insisted, as much as you can wear or carry. "You'll thank me when the Russian winter comes."

They also took blankets, towels, utensils. The "special items," those were Aaron's words for jewelry and gold coins, were already in the money belts that the two parents were wearing. It all made for a heavy load as they set off on foot.

That September was a warm one in Eastern Europe. They were moving in the heat of the day, with no shelter from the merciless sun. Within a kilometer Aaron stumbled and fell, sick from inhaling the thick dust and from the odor of the blood that oozed down his cheek.

Shoshanna pleaded with him to stop and rest, to look for a doctor.

"A doctor? Do you think we'll find one here, making house calls by the side of the road?"

Hearing the argument between his parents, Max kept his thoughts to himself. Already he was an uncommonly independent child, the kind of child who always finds the solution to a problem. When Aaron told him what kind of clothing to take, Max quickly pawed through his possessions and came away with two pairs of trousers, some underwear, socks, a pair of long johns, two shirts, a wool sweater his mother had knit, his winter coat, scarf, hat and gloves—all this while Shoshanna was wringing her hands over the fine clothes she must leave behind.

They started walking again, and three kilometers further east they came upon Yosef Halevi, a prominent physician in Cracow. At home you could wait a week to see him. But here on the dusty road he cleaned Aaron's face with alcohol and cotton pads, gently felt the bones in the face and checked the eye before pronouncing that there was no damage to sight.

"In my office I'd put stitches on that ugly cut," he said. "Here it'll just have to heal on its own. You can blame the scar on the Germans."

The doctor's car had also been confiscated but he had managed to secure a horse-drawn cart, and he invited Aaron, Shoshanna and Max to climb in. In a half hour they came upon men in uniform, Russians, not Germans. Keep moving the soldiers told them, and pointed the way.

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They crossed the border into Russia three days later, a ragtag, swelling mass of foot-weary Poles, Jews and Gypsies. Soldiers herded them to an army transportation base at the edge of a wheat field. The weather was dry and hot, and as if the dust from their march to the border weren't enough, all day along trucks and half tracks shuttled in and out, transporting men and equipment, filling the air with coarse cinders. Days later Max could still feel how the cinders clung to his clothes and stung his eyes.

After several nights in a dirt-floor barracks that smelt of horse manure, they were trucked to a local rail spur. There they waited for hours until a train arrived. They were bundled into the cars, which had a single row of narrow wooden benches up and down each side; the refugees gave

the seats to women nursing infants and to old men and women too weak to hold themselves upright. Everyone else stood for hours upon hours or squatted on the filthy floor.

When they asked where they were going, the answer from the soldiers was a collective shrug.

"East," said one.

"Stalin was a genius at solving problems quickly," Max explained. In this case the problem was hundreds of thousands of refugees from the fighting in Poland: Poles, gypsies, Jews, refugees from what he called a corrupt and decadent capitalist society. Who knew what kind of a threat this human refuse posed to him? So Stalin shipped them all to Siberia.

"We were lucky," Max said. "He could have solved the problem the way he solved so many others." Seeing Aaron's confusion, he offered his ironic smile. "What, you never heard of Stalin's famous saying—whether or not he actually said it? 'Death solves all problems. No man, no problem.'"

Stalin had had thousands of Polish officers and soldiers shot, disposed of former rivals like Trotsky by assassination, executed once-trusted generals after show-trials and slaughtered millions of ordinary citizens. He wielded death like a blunt instrument to cow would-be enemies into submission. But in 1939 these Polish and Jewish refugees were spared, Max explained, not out of sympathy, but rather because their death would have served no larger purpose of intimidation or control. Why kill them when they could be worked like slaves?

"What was it like, that trip east?" Max asked the question and then proceeded to answer: "Days and days in foul rail cars with almost nothing to eat." There were no toilets on the train and you either had to relieve yourself from the swaying bit of platform where two cars strained at their couplings or wait for one of the infrequent stops that the train made, adults and children alike dashing for the bushes by the side of the tracks.

For most of the trip adults sat or stood in stunned silence. Mothers rocked babies in their arms but even so the shrill cries of the infants rose above the clatter of the steel wheels on the rails. Now and then at a stop in some tiny town, peasant women in their babushkas would cluster along the train selling pirogis, apples or homemade donuts. With the rubles he had, Aaron bought them food. The taste of the baked dough, still lukewarm from the oven, had brought home to Max just how hungry he'd been.

Eventually the train came to the end of the rail line. They climbed down and under the direction of a sergeant began to walk.

"Where are we going?" Aaron asked.

"Chorsh. You're going to Chorsh."

"What is Chorsh?"

"You'll see soon enough."

A woods road opened before them, its mud base churned to the consistency of peanut butter by the passage of carts bearing enormous loads of logs. After they had walked for 45 minutes they heard voices and around the next bend came upon a line of some 50 prisoners marching three abreast, in chains; at every 20 paces there was a guard with a long rifle pointed at the feet of the prisoners, ready at any moment to shoot the legs out from under them. In the lead was an officer, a foul-smelling cigarette dangling from his lips; instead of a rifle he was carrying an automatic weapon.

The prisoners had shaved heads and a gaunt, malnourished look but they were still menacing, full of sullen fury at where they'd been and where they were going. A prisoner with the yellow eyes of a dog turned and waved his manacled right arm in the direction from which they were coming. "Chorsh," he screamed, as if the camp were a person and not a place, "fuck your mother, Chorsh."

With these curses as an overture, Aaron and Shoshanna stumbled into the camp, half walking, half carrying nine-year old Max between them.

Chorsh was a series of log frame barracks, snuggled up to an endless pine forest. The exterior logs of the buildings were blackened and pitted by weather. The odor of human excrement wafted toward them from the row of privies to the rear of barracks.

"Aaron!" This single exclamation told Max exactly what Shoshanna was feeling. He would never forget her shriek of exhausted despair at the moment of entering this God-forsaken place. As the tears rolled down her cheeks, his father squeezed his hand, steeling him to be strong. Max looked at his mother, trying to understand what had happened. Less than a month earlier, she'd been smiling and joking with him; she'd worn a light summery perfume and looked beautiful in her stylish clothes. Now her hair was clumped and forlorn, her face ravaged by worry, her voice hoarse from weeping.

Shoshanna had grown up the pampered youngest daughter in a comfortable household; as Aaron's business prospered she'd been able to feed her family well, to indulge herself with a

new dress, a new blouse, a bracelet, a couple of times a year. Why leave, she'd argued; why give up the life they knew to face exile, hunger, misery?

But Aaron had overridden her objections. With his own parents long gone—his mother in her early 40s, his father by age 55—he pleaded with his in-laws to leave now.

"Terrible things are coming. Hitler will do what he said."

Shoshanna had watched, frozen in place as her father laid his hand upon Aaron's strong shoulder. "I understand if you want to go, but we are staying," he'd said.

Her tears flowed now as she stood in this desolate Siberian camp, certain that her father had been right and her husband wrong. They were standing on the assembly ground, an irregular field of dried mud; not a blade of grass, not a weed, not a shred of paper marred its dismal expanse. To the left she saw the headquarters of the ranking officer, a mess hall, the barracks for the guards. This building had a neater, more cared for look; a coat of white wash had been applied to its exterior. Farther away, in the most isolated part of the clearing, was a large rectangular enclosure. Its high fence, topped with barbed wire, surrounded the decrepit barracks that had housed the convicts, the chained men they had encountered on the track to Chorsh.

They themselves would not be kept behind barbed wire. That afternoon, after they'd slung their pitiful bundles of clothing and possessions inside the barracks, a bearded captain addressed the assembled refugees as they sat on the ground, many of them sobbing as they realized how far they had traveled and how hopeless their prospects.

"Welcome to the Soviet Union," he said with a smile, and it was impossible to know if he was serious or joking. "There are no fences and no barbed wire around this camp and if you want to leave there is nothing to hold you. But remember this: in any direction where you could dream of going, there is the Soviet Union. Whatever you can imagine, the Soviet Union is bigger than your imagination."

When one of the Jews asked whether they would go back to Warsaw when all the fighting was over, the captain's reply crushed them with its pithiness.

"You must forget Warsaw. You will never see Warsaw again."

Later his father would explain to nine-year old Max what it all meant: "We're prisoners here, even if it's not like a jail with cells and bars. The Soviet Union itself is the prison, and it's so big there's no escape." And he reminded Max that though the contingent of guards was small—a couple of dozen men responsible for hundreds of prisoners—they had weapons.

"Don't ever make them angry," Max remembered his father saying. "They're just as unhappy to be here as we are. It only takes a second for one of them to kill you."

The next day Aaron and the other men were marched to a clearing in the forest and there, with axes and saws, they began to cut down trees, hitching the load to horses who dragged them over hundreds of yards to the tributary of a river, to send them flowing east. That was their job; every day they went out to the same work, no matter the weather. By early November when the river was frozen, the logs were heaped up at the collection point in ever growing piles until the May thaw.

The work was exhausting even to Aaron, a burly man who could lift 100 kilos, his arms and chest toughened from manhandling car doors, tires, engines. But many of the others were tailors or peddlers or teachers, bookkeepers or rabbis. After two hours some of them sank to their knees, spent, weeping tears of frustration. The foreman of the work crew was Feodor, a giant of a man with arms like saplings, his hair cut so short that it looked like pepper flakes sprinkled across his shaved scalp. One minute he was scowling and yelling at the prisoners or cursing their weakness, and the next he was laughing at their situation and his.

"Who was it who sent me these Jews with their soft hands and soft hearts, people who didn't even know a tree grows in a forest?" he joked to Aaron in the first week. Sometimes he let the men sit down against a tree trunk, to have a sip of water and regain their breath.

"It doesn't do me any good if you drop dead here, it's too hard to dig in this earth to bury you," he said.

Of course, said Max, remembering his father's stories, in a winter's day with the temperature at minus 30 Fahrenheit, not many trees could be cut. The dry, intense cold sapped the will and strength of the men to work. They moved slowly, taking care to wrap exposed flesh in order to lessen the chances of frostbite. The cold became a world of its own: Saw blades wore out and snapped; axes were dulled; supplies and replacement tools took forever to arrive. When Feodor grasped Aaron's mechanical abilities, he came to rely on him to keep their rudimentary equipment in operation, whether it was sharpening blades or repairing the harnesses that were forever snapping as the horses struggled forward under the heavy loads

The women and children huddled in the camp in whatever warm clothes they had. The women worked at repairing and stuffing mattresses, sewing camp clothing, peeling potatoes and vegetables. The meals were never enough: a slice of black bread three times a day, a bowl of

gruel in the morning and afternoon; soup, sometimes with some fish bones or very occasionally a faint taste of meat, like an exotic, precious spice, in the evening. There was no butter, no fruit, no meat, no sugar, no coffee.

Nine-year old Max complained sometimes angrily, sometimes tearfully, that he was hungry, always hungry. What made things worse was the awful sameness of their life. The captain was right, the camp had no high fences and no barbed wire, but in every direction there was endless forest or frozen plains.

When Aaron asked his grandfather what he did all day, Max said, "We went on with life. My mother, who was well educated, taught me and a dozen other children Yiddish and Polish and Hebrew, gave us lessons in math, drew maps on scraps of paper to teach us geography; we read from the few books that people had managed to bring with them."

Once or twice a week a truck would arrive out of nowhere, bouncing over the snow-covered dirt track to unload its cargo of food and supplies. The camp guards would bribe the driver to sneak in vodka, and at night Aaron and his family could hear the sounds of drinking, arguing and fighting over cards, the only pastimes these guards had. They too were imprisoned by the Soviet Union.

Everyone lost weight but there was, mercifully, little disease; the severe cold killed the germs. After the spring thaw there was mud everywhere, and with the mud, black flies and mosquitoes as big as small birds. Still, their diet improved. The refugees were able to supplement camp food by planting potatoes and onions; now and then in the soup they could see knots of gristle or a chicken bone with a few shreds of meat still clinging to its blanched surface. After the interminable blackness of the winter, the extra daylight was a rare gift. One mild spring evening when Aaron, Shoshanna and Max sat outside, on newly sprouted grass, listening to a balalaika that another refugee had managed to obtain—with bribes many things were possible—Aaron recited the words that blessed God for creating light.

"It's what we have to be thankful for," he said. "The sun that comes up every day, the warmth that it gives us, the fact that we are alive." Shoshanna, embittered by the long confinement, said he was a fool for resorting to prayer, as if God had any bounty to bestow on them.

Not that Aaron was resigned to their fate. Max recalled how his father looked that spring: so thin you could see his ribs, but with spring-loaded arms and legs and muscles and black eyes that burned with the will to survive. His father had always been strong, agile, inventive. In the camp he

found ways to befriend one of the sergeants in charge of food and supplies, sometimes making him a gift of a coin or two, sometimes showing him a simple card trick with which to amuse his comrades. The reward could be time off from a work detail or even the miraculous appearance of a few thin carrots or a wizened apple that Aaron would wrap in his shirt and bring back to Shoshanna and Max. The three of them would take turns nibbling at the apple, as if it were rich crème brulee in a Parisian restaurant.

Aaron made it a game. "How small a bite can you take, Max? Let's see how long we can make it last."

"Your great-grandfather taught me something I've never forgotten," Max explained to his grandson. "Even if you can't change conditions, you can change your attitude."

A year and a half went by and then it happened: June 22, 1941, Hitler invaded Russia. In a matter of weeks the Germans had pushed the Red Army back hundreds of miles, menacing the major cities, putting the survival of the Communist regime in peril. Stalin was desperate now for alliances with the capitalists he had scorned, the British, the Americans—and the Poles. Within weeks Stalin signed an agreement with the Polish government in exile in London. The Poles in Russia, treated as possible enemies, were now potential foot soldiers in the war against Hitler.

One day that summer, a Russian officer showed up at Chorsh with startling news: Aaron and his family and hundreds of others could go. Anyone who could serve in a newly constituted Polish army was given transportation and rations. The others were free to fend for themselves.

Aaron and Shoshanna had had enough of the endless Siberian winter. Like hundreds of thousands of Poles and Jews who'd been interned in the camps, they headed southwest toward Uzbekistan. It was an enormous, often deadly exodus. Trains were infrequent and unreliable; when there were no trains the refugees walked over vast distances, suffering through freezing nights and punishing windstorms. Often they went days without anything to eat but stale bread or rotten vegetables. Exposure, disease and malnutrition killed many thousands.

When the survivors finally arrived in Uzbekistan, many found themselves "volunteered" to the kolkhozes, the collective farms. Aaron got sent to a marble quarry a few kilometers outside of Tashkent, where they put him in charge of the ancient digging equipment.

Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan was as bleak as any Russian town except for the weather. That November it was mild, spring-like. At first Aaron and Shoshanna were astonished at

their good fortune. The winter would be easy; no more frigid nights, no more days when the sun shone brightly on the snow but gave less warmth than a flashlight in a meat locker.

The quarry foreman lent Aaron a few rubles and directed him to a place to live, a dirt street on which were built a row of mud huts, excavated into the clay beneath to form a cave-like lair. They claimed an empty hut, number six, a dank hovel that smelled of wild goats. There was no electricity, no indoor plumbing

Shoshanna, exhausted by their journey of 5,000 kilometers, felt as if they were being imprisoned once again, this time underground.

When she complained to Aaron, he laughed. "What's the alternative? To walk back to Poland to be murdered by the Germans?"

Even here in central Asia the news traveled—of Jews herded into the ghetto in Warsaw, of tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews made to dig long trenches before being forced into their own graves to be machine-gunned to death by the S.S.

Shoshanna found work as a seamstress, repairing dresses, making shirts. Max walked two kilometers to the nearest school; his knowledge of Russian quickly surpassed that of his parents. Food was scarce and the two jobs barely paid enough for bread, the makings of soup and sometimes, a cup of milk for Max. Aaron, gaunt and exhausted, caught a cold that he could not shake; at night Aaron could hear his furious coughing.

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No one knew how the epidemic started; some blamed the itinerant gypsies who traveled back and forth between Moscow, Tbilisi, Tashkent and Tehran, peddling carpets, spices, pots and pans. The first cases were among workers living in factory housing where filth and lice were rampant. Two of them fell ill, the next day six, the next day 11. Then it broke out in an elementary school, killing children, teachers, the principal. Soon the epidemic was everywhere, in the factories, fields, shops and offices, in the schools and parks. People would show up for work and a few hours later they would be stricken as if by the hand of God, they would fall to the ground, delirious, clutching their heads, burning with fever. Many hunkered down in their huts, afraid to venture out.

The symptoms of typhus were always the same: severe headache, raging fever, cough, muscle pain and chills, a rash that began on the chest and spread outward. For three days Aaron showed up at the quarry, joining an ever-dwindling band of workers. Shoshanna pleaded with him to stay home, but Aaron said, "I can go to work and we can eat, or I can stay home and we'll

starve." Finally the quarry shut down for lack of workers, and Shoshanna joined an enormous bread line, arriving every morning at 11 a.m. and coming home in mid-afternoon with a quarter loaf of black bread. If a woman on the bread line fell to the earth, sick with the typhus, workers with face masks would cart her off to quarantine while the rest of those on line inched forward.

"What choice did they have?" Max recalled. "If they wanted to live they had to eat."

A week after the epidemic started, Max woke to find his parents in bed, too weak to get up. His mother was shivering and feverish, his father delirious. He found a scrap of bread and brought it with water to his parents, but they couldn't swallow; they lay on the straw mattress and moaned with pain.

By mid afternoon Max knew he had to do something. Asking directions in his fluent Russian, Max found his way to the door of the medical clinic in the city: a bare room with no medicines, practically no supplies and no doctor. There was only a nurse, an Armenian woman in her 50s, shrunken and birdlike, but with alert black eyes. Something about this skinny 11-year old seemed to touch her. After hearing Max's story she asked, "Are you alone? Is there no uncle or aunt, no older brother or sister?"

"Nobody," Max said. "Please, can you come?"

On the way she pestered him with questions: how long had they been in Russia, how was it that they came to be living in Tashkent.

"When the Germans came to Poland, papa said we had to leave because the Germans would kill us."

"Why?"

"Because we're Jewish and the Germans don't like Jews."

She'd brought a few provisions, and when she saw how Aaron and Shoshanna were, delirious, starving, she set about boiling a few cupfuls of herbs and grasses.

"When did they eat something last?" she asked, kneeling by the beds to feed them the broth, spoonful by spoonful.

Max wasn't sure. A day or two ago, he said.

"And you?" she asked. "Did you eat something today?"

"A piece of bread and some tea."

"How much bread?"

Max held his fingers an inch apart to show her.

"Wait here," the nurse told Max. "I'll be back."

She returned in a half hour with some barley, a few potatoes, a handful of beet greens. She boiled up a barley and potato mush and spoon-fed it to Shoshanna. The effort of opening her mouth and swallowing seemed to take all the air out of her, but after a few spoonfuls her appetite got the better of her weakness; she sat up and fed herself.

Aaron took a few tiny sips of water but after the first food entered his stomach he vomited a green brine that smelled like swamp water. Max cleaned up the mess while the nurse kept at it until she had fed Aaron a cupful of mush. It was almost dark when Aaron propped himself up against the wall behind the bed to croak, "Do we have it? The typhus? Can you take our son away so he doesn't get sick?"

"I don't think you have it. You have influenza, a bad case, but if you eat and drink you should survive."

She turned to Max. "That's your job, to feed your parents."

She left Max the pot of mush, telling him to make sure they drank water every few hours and promising to be back tomorrow.

The next morning Shoshanna was able to get out of bed. Aaron drank tea and finished some mush, though the effort exhausted him. The nurse returned with a stethoscope and after listening to Aaron's chest she frowned. His breathing was labored, wheezing.

"Pneumonia," the nurse whispered to Shoshanna. "He has to drink liquids. There's fluid in the chest; he needs to bring up the phlegm." There was no medicine, nothing but hot tea and herbs.

All day Aaron's coughing continued, growing more and more rasping. At night he seemed to shrivel up, too spent even to cough. By early the next morning he was dead.

A rabbi in Tashkent arranged burial in the Jewish cemetery. Exhausted by her ordeal Shoshanna sat on a low stool in the hut during the shiva mourning period, barely able to exchange a word with the visitors who came to pay a condolence call.

The last day when everyone had left and the two of them were alone, Shoshanna clutched Max to her for a long time without saying a word. He could feel her chest rising and falling, could feel the sobs that started low in her stomach and lurched upward, shaking her upper body against his. The two of them rocked back and forth like this for many minutes.

"We're going to be okay, mama, we're going to be okay," he told her.

"How?"

"How? I don't know how, but it's going to be okay."

Two days later, with the epidemic ebbing, they reopened the schools. Max had two jobs now: being a pupil, and being his mother's caregiver and protector. After class he did whatever he could do earn a few kopecks, chopping wood, loading wagons, digging holes, repairing fences. The goal was simple: to survive.

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Three and a half years passed. On a warm day in May 1945, Max was in school when the principal hurried into the classroom and clambered onto a desk, startling the pupils.

"It's over," he shouted "the war is over."

Max, who was 14, remembered feeling in that moment that he'd been an adult half his life. He and Shoshanna could finally leave the Soviet Union, this vast prison of a country. They would return to Poland where all their relatives had been gassed or shot or starved to death, and once they saw this with their own eyes, saw how a thousand years of Jewish life in Poland had been eradicated in the brief, bestial rule of the Third Reich, they would buy forged papers and make their way to Czechoslovakia, Austria and Italy. And finally they would reach Israel in time to help defend the new state in its war of independence.

He looked at Aaron, slim and strong, half a head taller than Max himself, on the verge of taking the oath that would mark the beginning of army service. Aaron was speechless, overwhelmed by the story he had just heard. Max reached over to cup Aaron's cheeks in his hands.

"I'll never forget standing at the railing of the ship that brought us to Israel," Max said. "It was first light, half an hour before landfall. I asked myself the question that you might be asking: how? How did I survive?"

His voice grew so soft that even at a distance of inches his grandson strained to hear.

"Then I realized it didn't matter how. The question was why. And that's when I told myself."

He waited. "Told yourself what?" Aaron asked, his tongue suddenly loosened.

"That I would not waste this life. That whatever happened, I would not waste this life."