

Finding Home

‘When Dad told me that we were leaving Germany to take a ship to the other side of the world, I struggled to understand what that meant.’ Abe smiled at his grandson Joshua.

They were sitting in the study of Abe’s home in the wealthy suburb of Toorak. Two walls were covered with bookshelves filled with fiction and historical works, all of them sorted in alphabetical order. A third wall of windows overlooked a plush green courtyard full of magnolias, Japanese maples and hanging baskets, and the fourth was covered with Bergner oil paintings from his Holocaust series.

‘It was exciting to be going on a luxury liner, but I was scared,’ Abe said, his eyes widening in reminiscence. ‘We didn’t really know where we were going, or how we’d cope when we got there. All we knew was that we had to get out of Germany.’

‘How old were you?’ Joshua asked, his voice cracking to a high, thin child’s pitch. Joshua wore a rumpled white shirt, tan shorts and an old pair of runners with the laces untied. His wild brown hair needed trimming and his blue eyes peered out through black-rimmed glasses that were too large for his narrow face.

‘I was twelve. And still today, at ninety, I can remember the thrill of boarding a luxury liner, the *St Louis*, at Hamburg, combined with fear of the unknown. My mother was concerned about taking such a long journey by herself with me and my

sister. I can still see her anxious frown, and the way she gnawed at her lip.'

'But you had to get away from the Nazis, right?' Joshua asked, his eyebrows arched.

'In the years following the rise of Hitler in 1933, ordinary Jewish families like ours had no doubt about the increasing dangers we were facing. Jewish properties were being confiscated, synagogues and businesses burned down. And then there was Kristallnacht in November 1938. My father was a Polish citizen. When he was deported from Wandsbek back to Poland my mother decided it was time to leave.'

'I never knew I had a Polish great-grandfather,' Joshua said quietly.

'It was a terrible time. After Kristallnacht the Germans argued that the unwillingness of other nations to admit Jewish refugees justified their antisemitic policies. The past still haunts me.'

'How could it not? Joshua said, leaning over and patting the papery skin of his grandfather's hand.

'And yet, for much of my adulthood I thought my survival depended on keeping the past and its darkness locked away. I hid from the past because I feared I'd be swallowed up by it all. So, I worked hard to keep that pain buried. But by choosing not to face the past I realised I was choosing not to be free. I had my secret, and my secret had me.'

'What do you mean, your secret had you, Zayda?'

‘Let me put it another way. I realised that when we force our truths into hiding, secrets become their own trauma, their own prison. Far from diminishing pain, if we deny ourselves the opportunity to accept past trauma, it becomes inescapable. Freedom lies in learning to embrace what has happened. It means we must muster the courage to dismantle the prison, brick by brick. Do you see what I mean?’

‘I think so,’ the boy said.

‘There’s a difference between victimisation and victimhood. Victimisation comes from the outside. From a bully, for example. By contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us, but how we respond to misfortune or evil. It makes us into our own jailors when we choose the confines of the victim’s mind.’

‘Yes, I can see now,’ Joshua said. ‘So what happened after Kristallnacht?’

‘We lived in fear for six months, and then my mother had had enough. She decided we were leaving. Apparently my father pleaded with her to wait until he could get back to Germany from Poland. But my mother insisted on leaving.’

‘She did the right thing,’ smiled Joshua.

‘She tried to,’ Abe nodded. ‘I have an image of my father, as I had known him my entire life, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, tape measure around his neck, chalk in his hand for

marking a pattern onto expensive cloth, his eyes twinkling, ready to burst into song, about to tell a joke ...'

A smile spread across Joshua's face.

'He wanted to be a lawyer, not a tailor. But that was a dream his father discouraged. Every once in a while he would express his disappointment.'

Joshua studied his grandfather's face for a moment. 'It must have been difficult to leave without him.'

'Very,' sighed Abe. 'The day we left I felt as though I would vomit. I'm sure my mother felt dreadful too, but she felt we had to go. So with those visas for Cuba she had bought in Berlin, ten German marks in her purse and another 200 hidden in her underclothes, we headed for Hamburg.'

'You and your sister were lucky that your mother had such foresight and courage,' smiled Joshua, pride evident in his voice.

Abe nodded. 'The whole family came down to the bahnhof – the railway station – in Berlin to see us off. We were all afraid that we'd never see each other again.'

'You were fortunate,' said Joshua. 'You managed to get out.'

'But I never did see any of them again.' Abe sniffled. 'Over twenty aunts, uncles and cousins. All gone. And we were such a close family.'

Abe shut his eyes and leaned back in his chair. 'I still miss them terribly.'

‘What about the voyage?’ Joshua asked, to distract his grandfather.

‘As I said, we left Hamburg for Havana, Cuba, on the 13th of May 1939. We were lucky. We were three of the 937 passengers on board. Most were Jews fleeing from the Nazis. The plan was to stay in Cuba until we could enter the United States.’

‘So, when you boarded the boat you must have felt safe at last,’ Joshua said.

‘We found out later that the ship’s owners thought we might have trouble disembarking in Cuba,’ Abe said.

‘And they kept it a secret?’ Joshua asked, adjusted the yarmulke on his head.

‘We knew nothing about it. As the coast of Germany disappeared over the horizon, we thought we were safe.’

‘But you weren’t?’

‘We weren’t,’ sighed Abe. ‘The US State Department, Jewish organisations and refugee agencies were all aware of the problem once we arrived in Cuba, but we, the passengers, were kept in the dark. We held landing certificates and transit visas, so we thought we were safe. We didn’t know that the Cuban President, Federico Laredo Brú, had issued a decree before the ship sailed that invalidated the landing certificates.’

‘What? Why?’ asked Joshua.

'We didn't know it at the time, but before the ship sailed there was a bitter battle within the Cuban government.' Abe closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the chair. 'Turns out the conservative Cuban press demanded that the government stop admitting Jewish refugees.'

'But why?' Joshua asked with a frown.

'You have to remember that the 1930s was the decade of the Great Depression. Cuba was struggling economically and many people resented the Jews the government had already admitted into the country. There were over two thousand of them.'

'Because of jobs?'

'Smart boy,' smiled Abe. 'Because they competed for scarce jobs.'

'So, it wasn't antisemitism?' asked Joshua.

Abe shook his head. 'The real world isn't that simple. Even before the *St Louis* sailed there was an antisemitic demonstration in Havana with 40,000 people. A one-time president of Cuba apparently said, "Fight the Jews until the last one is driven out."'

'Fools,' Joshua muttered.

A cold breeze lifted the curtains.

'*Shver tsu zayn a Yid*,' sighed Abe.

'I know that one ... "it's hard to be a Jew" – Yiddish, yes?'

'That's right. Still today we encounter prejudice, subtle and explicit. Remember, antisemitism wasn't a Nazi invention. It's been around for thousands of years. Growing up, I believed it was safer not to admit I was Jewish, that it was better to assimilate, to blend in, to never stand out. It was difficult to find a sense of identity and belonging.'

'I'm sorry, Zayde,' sighed Joshua.

'Not your fault, bubbe,' Abe replied. 'Anyway, the director-general of the Cuban immigration office was accused of selling landing certificates. He racked up a personal fortune of between half a million and a million dollars, and when the scandal broke he resigned in disgrace.'

'Was Cuba your only choice?'

'More or less. By early 1939, most countries had imposed quotas limiting the number of Jewish refugees. Palestine was not an option because the British were about to pass the White Paper blocking Jewish immigration. So, we saw Cuba as a temporary transit point on the way to America. And officials at the Cuban embassy in Berlin were selling visas for about \$200 or \$300 each. That's about \$3,000 to \$5,000 at today's prices.'

'How was the voyage?' Joshua asked.

'For many of the us younger passengers, and our mother I think, the apprehension and anxiety soon faded as the coast of Europe disappeared over the horizon.'

'How did you spend your time?'

'I shared a cabin in the lower part of the ship with my sister, your aunty Rita. There was a girl named Anna who noticed me one day. I saw her looking at me every time I came to dinner. She was my age with wavy red hair and freckles. She smelt so good, like fresh air. Eventually I plucked up courage to speak to her. Each morning I looked forward to spending my time with her. We'd walk around the deck together holding hands, chatting and occasionally swimming in the ship's pool. Our relationship meant everything to me.'

'That sounds nice,' smiled Joshua.

'It was. In the darkness and chaos of uncertainty, Anna and I provided light for each other. Each day we talked about our future. There was a dance band and a cinema where the adults went when we kids were in bed. And we ate a variety of food that we rarely saw back home.'

'So, you were treated well?'

'Under orders from the ship's captain, Gustav Schröder, the waiters and crew treated us politely. It was a stark contrast to the open hostility we'd become accustomed to under the Nazis. He even allowed Shabbat prayers to be held – and you know what?'

'What, Grandpa,' Joshua asked, his face expectant.

'He gave permission for the portrait of Adolf Hitler hanging in the main dining room to be taken down during services.'

'Wow,' Joshua marvelled. 'He sounds like he was a decent man.'

Abe nodded. 'Everyone seemed so happy. We kids were told by our parents that we were now safe from harm. I heard people say, "We don't have to look over our shoulders anymore."'

'So, what happened when you got to Cuba?'

Abe grimaced. 'When we reached Havana on the 27th of May, I was on deck with my sister and mother with suitcases packed and ready to disembark. But when the Cuban officials, all smiles, first came aboard, it became clear that we weren't going to dock and wouldn't be allowed to disembark. I kept hearing the words *mañana, mañana* – tomorrow, tomorrow.'

'And then what?' asked Joshua.

'After the Cubans left, the ship's captain announced that we'd have to wait. That's when I knew something was wrong. I felt numb. Water carts were delivered to the ship and in the heat people began pushing and shoving to scoop a pail of it.'

'That sounds awful,' said Joshua.

'Ultimately, the Cubans admitted twenty-eight passengers who had US visas or were valid third-country passengers. As for the rest of us, an American attorney named Lawrence Berenson met with the Cuban President Brú to try and negotiate additional entry permits. But Brú refused and ordered the ship to leave Cuban territorial waters. So, the *St Louis* sailed north toward Miami.'

'What a heartless thing to do!'

‘If my memory serves me correctly, one other passenger was evacuated to a hospital in Havana after attempting suicide. But the Cuban government refused to admit anyone else.’

‘So, what did you do?’

‘It became a big news story. Even though the US newspapers were sympathetic to our plight, only a few journalists took the risk of suggesting we be admitted to America. When we arrived off the coast of Florida, US authorities also refused us the right to dock. Captain Schröder had no option but to turn back towards Europe. We were crushed.’

Joshua shook his head. ‘I can’t imagine ...’

‘A pall settled over all of us. As the ship headed north-east across the Atlantic, I kept asking my mother whether we were going back to see our grandparents. My mother just shook her head in silent despair. People wandered about the ship in tears. One man even slit his wrists and threw himself overboard. If I close my eyes, I can still hear his shrieks and see the blood.’

Joshua’s eyes filled with tears and he swiped at them with the back of one hand.

‘The worst part was that we were sailing so close to the Florida coast we could see the lights of Miami. Some passengers cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for refuge, but he never responded.’

‘Really?’

'No,' sighed Abe. 'The American government decided to refuse us entry. A State Department telegram they sent to us said we'd all have to wait our turn in the immigration queue for visas.'

'I thought Roosevelt was a friend of the Jews,' said Joshua. 'Why was he being so mean?'

Abe shrugged. 'America was still in an economic depression. Unemployment was around 17 per cent.'

'Is that high?'

'Very,' nodded Abe. 'Anything above 5 per cent is not great.'

'So, allowing immigrants into the country would have been unpopular,' Joshua mused.

'One magazine poll put popular opposition to immigration at over 80 per cent. Antisemitism was also very high in America at the time. There was a Catholic priest named Father Coughlin who had a radio show that was broadcast throughout the country. He used to read portions of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion on air to millions of his listeners.'

'Protocols of who?' Joshua asked, puzzled.

'It's an antisemitic fiction that claims there's a worldwide conspiracy amongst Jews to dominate the world.'

Joshua snorted. 'I can't believe it!'

'Believe it,' Abe sighed. 'America had a quota system that allocated visas by country. The annual quota for Germany was around 25,000, as I recall. It was filled several times over. There was a waiting list of several years. So, there was no hope for us. Roosevelt was too smart a politician to do something so unpopular.'

'Shocking!' said Joshua.

'It was what it was,' shrugged Abe. 'Earlier that year, Congress killed a bill that would have enabled 20,000 Jewish children to enter America over and above the quota.'

'Not even children?' asked Joshua.

Abe's shoulders heaved in another shrug. 'It wasn't only us. Two other ships carrying Jewish refugees sailed to Cuba around the same time. Like us, they were not permitted to dock. One sailed back to France while the other managed to finally unload its passengers in the Panama Canal Zone, which was governed back then by the US. Most of them eventually made it to America.'

'What about you? Did you end up back in Germany?'

'Thankfully not. After an American Jewish relief organisation put up a cash guarantee of half a million dollars, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Britain each agreed to accept passengers. Anna's family and mine were the lucky ones who made it to the UK.'

‘But the Germans later conquered France, Belgium and Holland,’ said Joshua. ‘What happened to the people who settled there?’

‘After May 1940, they were in trouble,’ said Abe. ‘Some of them ran and some went into hiding. Only about half survived the war.’

‘Wow, what a story!’

‘And, as they say, the rest is history. As you know, Anna and I eventually married, had two sons and you are one of our five grandchildren.

‘At least something good came out of that whole mess,’ smiled Joshua.

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