

Only a Satchel

I watch with pride as Reuben stands confidently in front of the congregation reading from the Talmud. It is uncanny: his demeanour, his mannerisms, his strong voice, all are Jacob. Brought back to life. He would be ninety now. Of course, Reuben's voice is still higher pitched, the jaw a little weaker, but in a few years... Oh, he is a fine- looking boy, Reuben. I admit he is my favourite grandchild. Wrong perhaps, to make such distinction, but he is the only boy. That's not to say I am not proud of the three younger girls: smart, sassy and going places. But I cannot help it. He is the embodiment of my father whom I had for such a short time. I idolised Jacob. And Reuben reminds me every day of him. He has the same eyes, the same aquiline nose of my father and grandfather, though they passed me by. My nose is shorter, my eyes smaller, deeper set and my skin paler from my mother's side. By some genetic quirk my DNA whirled sufficiently to express Jacob's ancestral traits in my firstborn, David, and from him, in Reuben. It is a source of joy to me, as it is, I know, to my mother, now reaching her ninth decade. There is no other monument to Jacob, except this fresh vital spirit, this new embodiment of Leszai genes that is Reuben.

For months Reuben has approached his Bar Mitzvah with enthusiasm, taking the responsibility for Shabbat prayers, applying himself avidly to his schule studies and his community work visiting Bath Sheba residential home. He plays chess and dominoes with the old men and the piano of an evening. How mature he is for 13. Sentiment is not my scene, but today, the affixation of the Telfillin to Reuben deeply affected me: those little black blocks symbolising the flight from Egypt. Our family has seen many flights over the centuries, so many flights. But flight is not always due to persecution on grounds of faith. There are other grounds: the desire to speak the truth, the need to stand up for human rights. I pray that Reuben will never know the terror of escape under darkness for any of these reasons, nor the confusion of a refugee camp, nor the fear of abandonment in an alien land, nor rootlessness, nor

the loss of an irreplaceable parent. Boston has been good to us, a cultured city in a democratic state, Massachusetts, the state where the Pilgrims landed. The Land of the Free.

My thirteenth birthday was very different from Reuben's. Fifty years ago there was no possibility, no time, for a Bar Mitzvah. There was no rejoicing, no presents, no cake. Father had returned from the University pale-faced. Our family sat round the table as my father wept. Sarah and Naomi fled to their bedroom, unable to bear the sight of normally good-humoured Papa weeping on my mother's shoulder. A student had been shot dead: one of my father's engineering students, apparently one of a group trying to get in to Broadcasting House to make a speech. Thousands had demonstrated outside the Parliament house. I had difficulty piecing together events from the disjointed account my mother coaxed out of him, but I gleaned enough to feel that rise of fear from my belly which became a familiar companion over the next weeks. My father was talking of repercussions, the danger of friendships, of associations, of 'meetings.' He said the effect of the Manifesto read out by Peter Veres to the mob and broadcast on Radio Free Europe would be profound. Mother asked what Uncle Peter had actually said. Father only replied,

'A Manifesto for new rights, for democracy, for freedom to join the United Nations, to be ...' and then he fell silent, the only time I ever saw him emotional, speechless. I knew Uncle Peter was no longer a politician: he was a writer, President of the Writer's Union.

'Why was he speaking?' I asked.

'Because someone has to. We have little fuel, scarce food since the poor harvests. The Russians are taking everything we have. No one cares.' Father shook his head. 'It was a brave, but dangerous speech.' He sighed.

Mother put the girls to bed early. The parlour door was closed. We sat in the kitchen by candlelight. The power was off again. At calculated irregular intervals there came dark-suited grey-haired men, casually dressed younger ones: academics, writers, business men, students, all breathless in their haste climbing the stairs, all anxious not to draw attention to themselves on the way.

Discussions were heated. I saw Uncle Peter open the door to take a tray from Mother, smiling reassuringly at her as he backed into the room. The door did not completely close but lay slightly ajar.

The power returned. Mother tried putting on the television. We were lucky to have such a luxury: many didn't. But the programmes finished early; the news bulletin mentioned nothing of the dead boy wrapped in a Hungarian flag and the crowds down by the Danube. The people were not meant to know. Even Radio Free Europe was silent. We did not know what was going on. But these men in the parlour knew. I strained to hear.

'Gero will not let it go.' One voice I did not recognise. But I knew who Gero was: the hard-line Communist Party leader. Another said a word I didn't understand. A new swear word, perhaps? But I understood its meaning. I glimpsed the speaker through the door: a man paces, suffused and spitting angrily that 'Kruschev is no better than his predecessor.' Another's assertion that the students had toppled Stalin's statue caused laughter; some light relief in the smoky room. Various plans were discussed. Then I heard father's voice, loud and strong.

'There are hard times ahead but there will be no progress if we do not carry on. The secretariat will meet again tomorrow.' The door opened, the men spilled out, doffing hats at Mother, hovering in the kitchen before leaving singly, several minutes apart, going down the back stairs. The last to go were my father's closest friends: Peter and Michael. And Imre Nagy, who looked over at me before turning to my father.

'Perhaps we should meet elsewhere next time. Think of your family, Jacob. You have done much, but we will manage.'

Mother shook her head and quietly said 'No. It is because we have children that we must...'

Father took her hand. 'Rebecca backs me all the way. This is important.'

'They may come for us,' Imre's face was sorrowful. 'The Poles have not succeeded, we may not either. Opposition in politics is perilous now.'

'Don't worry, Imrenyk, I have made arrangements should the worst happen.' Jacob embraced him. I never saw him again. He held leadership only briefly before his flight, to the Romanian Embassy

from where I now know, the Soviets abducted him. It was two years before they executed Uncle Imre. It was only hours till they came to Budapest. They had been waiting for an excuse.

They came very early next morning: 2am. It was a Sunday. I hadn't slept much, wondering how I would know if father's 'the 'worst' was happening. My brief drift into slumber was disturbed by noise in the street below. We lived three stories up on the Pest side, in a University flat on Andrassy Avenue. My mother prized our situation, but that day it was not a location to be coveted. Already there were protesters in the street making for Heroes Square. Russian tanks were rumbling, and the screeching of metal was deafening, echoing off the buildings. I saw a young man waving a fist at a tank, standing before it. The tank continued. The boy disappeared under the relentless giant's ridged wheels. The tank following it swept him up, carrying the lifeless bloodied body on out of my field of vision. He had been a young man, only a few years older than I. The screams and heart-stopping sound of gunfire drew me back from my vantage point. There were now other frightening noises from within the flat itself: a crashing: wood splintering. Through the door I heard Mother's scream of anguish. In the hall my half-dressed father was being dragged outside by two muscular men in belted raincoats, woollen scarves and hats, well protected from the bitter autumn chill. Father had neither jacket nor hat, standing collarless and bare-footed in his un-laced shoes. He went with them quietly, whispering to Mother and winking at me. So brave.

'You know what to do, Rebecca.' He managed a brief kiss. His captors looked on in disgust as she wept, uncontrollably, into her dressing gown sleeve. The shattered door hung jagged as they pushed him out. He was gone.

Politics meant nothing to me, but I knew this was the worst it could get, that now my father's politics were indeed perilous. My only education in the ways of the world had been from school: the dogma of the great philosophy of Communism from blessed Mother Russia. And from schule: the teachings on the prophets, the glory and vengeance of God. I was roused, wanting vengeance, but knew I was powerless. Angry, but afraid, very afraid.

Mother composed herself and sat me down with Sarah and little Naomi, brought from their rooms by the noisy intruders. Naomi sat wide-eyed. Sarah sobbed.

‘My precious ones you must each pack a little bag. Father has gone to explain a few things to the... police.’

A chill enveloped me, those men weren’t regular police, they were AVH, Államvédelmi Hatóság, our brutal Hungarian secret police. But Mother was brisk, business like, resorting to the efficient mode developed in her many years as a teacher. In control again.

‘We have to leave on a little trip, children. Father made plans for us with Uncle Michael. He will be here for us just after tea.’ She smiled at the girls. Her expression for me was different. Obscure.

I was cross. ‘But why do we have to go?’

‘The Russians are taking over, Samuel. They do not like our demands for freedom. It is too dangerous to stay. You will obey your father.’

‘But what about Papa?’ asked Naomi, anxiety ageing her seven-year-old face.

‘He is strong darling. And brave. He knew this might happen. Let us just be calm. You must all pack your satchels this morning with some things, only the essential things, you’ll need. But first let’s have some more rest as we may not get much tonight.’ She gathered up Naomi and Sarah, returning to bed.

The cold wind whistled through the house, for I could not shut the shattered front door to keep out the icy October blast. It was not yet 4am. We all huddled back to bed and lay down for a few hours. The girls I think, slept a little. I lay alone, rigid under my quilt, wondering when father would be back. I must have dozed for it was nine when I woke with a start: I was now the man of the house. That had been my mother’s silent communication in front of the girls. I had to be strong for them.

Michael arrived later to hurry us from the rear of the building. Dusk had fallen. He had been unable to get petrol for his car despite his prominent position as a doctor, so he led our unhappy little group on a circuitous route to Keleti railway station. Until we boarded the train, I did not know we were leaving the country. More luckily than many, we had passports from previous trips to Vienna and

Paris. Michael, who was not our real uncle, just a school friend of father's, was immensely agitated, hanging out of the train door until two figures hurried towards us: Miriam and Judith, his wife and daughter.

I watched my beautiful city fade into memory as the train gathered momentum, not knowing when or if ever, I would be able to return. Nor if I would see my father again. The girls were singing a little song with Judith. How lucky they were, thinking this was a game, somehow wiping the memories of last night. But I felt nothing would ever be the same again. I was leaving my school, my friends, my piano, my music teacher, my life of peaceful belonging. I momentarily felt anger that my father had caused this. Then I saw my mother's haggard face. And felt guilty.

The train was crammed with humanity, sweaty and rancid with fear and families. It took hours to get to Vienna. Michael had managed only some bread and a few apples. My mother had a flask of water and some potato cakes. I have no idea of the weather during the journey, it might have snowed. My mother had urged us to wear many layers of clothing. Naomi had laughed when mother put her in two petticoats and two dresses. I was stifled in the train with my layers of woollens, but when we had to run past a check-point in the city, I had thought how wise she was: it was easier running if you were wearing extra clothes, rather than carrying suitcases. I had thought it unlikely anyone would know who we were, but Michael pointed out that we had tell-tale passports and those heavy-set, heavy-gunned soldiers with cruel, coarse, Eastern faces already might have lists. Our names may be on them. Uncle Peter had bought all the train tickets. Mother had given him forints from the notes previously sewn into her jacket lining. I was beginning to realise how resilient she was. There had been no tears since we had set off.

Vienna looked quite different from the last time I had been there. The crowds were dense, even though it was the early hours of the morning. We huddled together in a corner while Michael got tickets for Graz. He was delighted to find an open food stall with cakes and sandwiches. And so we had a feast. It made us realise what we had been missing; months of privation, yet we were considered well-off. How bad it must have been to be a child in a poor house. How much worse might it become.

Graz was a beautiful town on a river, and there were already Red Cross people on the platforms. We were taken to a large hall, I think at some church. A hotel might have been possible, but they were very expensive for us and my mother reminded me our meagre money was worth little in Austria and we had to make it last until we could meet our relatives. She did not say which relatives, or where our destination was.

Next morning Michael took Judith and me aside. He laid it on the line: there was no going back in the foreseeable future. We had no way of knowing what had happened to my father although the kind Red Cross lady said she would try to find out. Michael was filling in forms for visas; we would have to go to the US embassy for an interview, but we were being considered political refugees. Both our families had relatives in Boston. We would become Americans.

Fifty years ago. A lifetime. A migration from oppression. A flight leaving behind a hero. But I would have preferred a father who came with us. Heroes are for books, not families.

Judith sits beside me in the Country Club. The children and grandchildren are dancing. She has not asked me to. She knows where I am as I sit staring ahead. Pulling my hand into hers she smiles at me fondly, the way she did in that train when singing songs to distract Sarah and Naomi. I had never looked at her before, or indeed many other girls, music was my pre-occupation. Until that Monday morning. The emotion of the day became embodied in that smile, the warm reciprocation of shared, but controlled, distress. It was some years before I realised how lucky we were to get out before the border closed, and even more years till I acknowledged we had a love, a common bond. We are migrants from a distant land of plenty that was pillaged and oppressed until brave men repeatedly stood up for their rights. But by 18 we were married. There was some parental disquiet that we were too young. But in many ways, we were old. In any case, eighteen is a lucky number to Jews. The tradition is such that Reuben's Bar Mitzvah money gifts will likely be dollars in multiples of 18.

Tonight when the seudat mitzvah is over, I will give Reuben my present. It is the only thing I have which belonged to my father, his Torah, the five books of Moses written on the flight from Egypt.

I only brought it, a clean shirt, a pencil, a notebook and two pairs of socks in my satchel. My mother left it to us to decide what was important. I have become a professor now, like my father before me, but in music, not engineering. Also, unlike my father, I hope to have a tombstone. But my most fervent hope of all is that my grandson never has to flee in the night with only a satchel. No one should.