

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

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THE AUNT

All our lives, my sister and I had heard about my father's aunt, how she had stayed behind with her elderly parents as her siblings and their families fled towards the Soviet Union at the end of the lull following the first weeks of the war.

A Yiddish speaking Russian soldier had knocked on the door of their wooden house in Ulanow, Poland and said "We're leaving in the morning.

If you know what's good for you, you'll come with us."

My teenaged father urged his parents to leave.

"I didn't want to be anywhere the Nazis were going to be," he later told me.

"Your parents listened to you?" I asked.

"I was working since I was twelve. I had a business, employed two men to make reed baskets."

"But still."

"I had read *Mein Kampf*" he said, "and I believed every word. I believed that if Hitler got the chance, he would kill every Jew."

So, they left.

Six adults and thirteen children.

But Ruchel did not go with them.

She stayed behind.

Ruchel, twenty-seven, unmarried, was the youngest of eight brothers and sisters, a child of her parents' later years.

"I remember her standing there on the side of the road, waving at us," my father's sister once told me. "She wanted to come with us so badly. But she didn't."

"Are you sure that your grandparents couldn't have made the trip?" I asked.

"They would have died on the way or in Siberia."

"When your mother survived the war," I said, "she was one of the few people of her generation left alive. Everyone was gone."

She was silent.

"What was she like?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Ruchel."

"Oh, she was very pretty."

"What color eyes?"

"I don't remember."

"Grandma had green eyes. Did she have green eyes?"

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“I was just a child.”

“Did you ever find out what happened to your grandparents?”

She shook her head.

“How did they die?”

“No one knows.”

“No one?”

“I heard that they died in the street. I heard.”

“What?”

“From starvation.”

“And Ruchel?”

“Maybe Belzec. Maybe.”

For years, my sister and I heard about Ruchel.

Her act silenced us.

Whatever problems we faced, questions we had, the image of Ruchel waving at her departing family made all pale in comparison.

A photograph of Ruchel revealed a young woman who wore her hair in a loose bob. Her expression was determined. It seemed to say, that given the right set of circumstances she would have left Ulanow, moved to a city, created a life for herself, perhaps gone dancing, been held by a man.

“When was this taken?” I asked my father.

“About 1937.”

“She had a nice dress.”

“She could sew.”

“Very modern.”

“She was good in business. She could speak Polish and German.”

“Do you remember her?”

He nodded.

“My grandparents were wonderful people. Whenever I would visit, my grandfather would say ‘Ita, give the boy something to eat!’”

My father, hobbled by osteoarthritis, sat in the sun of his Florida independent living facility and remembered his youth.

I wondered at how arbitrary his survival had been.

“After the war, did your mother ever talk about Ruchel and her parents?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What was there to say?”

We sat silently.

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“The one thing that saved us,” he said slowly, “was that we were always together.”

I looked at my father. I recalled my sister’s phone calls detailing his increasing medical problems. His face was ochre colored, his eyes red rimmed. Purple splotches disfigured his hands. Still, he was remarkably handsome. His eyes, unencumbered by recently removed cataracts seemed more hazel than brown.

“C’mon, Dad. It’s time to go in for dinner. Let me help you.”