

Asterka

I think, on the twenty-fourth of June, 1942, my family is the only family to sit down on Friday evening in the czechoslovakian village of Lezaky to a Shabbat meal, spread luxuriously over the small table in bright bowls and crystal glasses. It is hard for us to find food enough these days for a simple family meal, let alone a Shabbat feast, but Mama has scrounged and scraped to get enough dough to make *matzoh* balls, and they bob around temptingly in a slightly watered down version of the usual thick red soup. There is also a golden braided *challah* loaf, and potato *kugel*, but the table still looks half as full as it usually is. Mama says firmly that it does not matter. What matters is that we- unlike many other jewish families in the big cities- still have the freedom to sit down every Friday and celebrate our faith. Mama is very devout, as is obvious. I am not sure the little ones are convinced, though. My little sisters Salome and Adara are chewing their nails, annoyed that there aren't any potato pancakes. Their impatient seven-year-old fidgeting is shaking the whole table. Mama leans over the table, her face looking very serene in the candle-light, dark curls dripping down around her face in a tumbling frame as she lights the Shabbat candles. It is as if she is forgetting all the horrible things that are happening in the world right now as her trembling brown fingers strike a match. For Mama, religion is her refuge. I wish I could say the same for me.

My name is Ester Polackova, and I am a jew. I would not usually state my religion first in an introduction, but these days it is all that matters. People in the streets don't look at me as Ester anymore, sweet little *Esterka* who used to help them in their gardens and cycle along the *Vltava* with their children. I am seen as my religion, scorned and looked down upon as a filthy jew. But Mama has a point- at least we can still celebrate Shabbat in peace. Our family in Prague cannot even do that anymore.

Uncle Jirka and his new wife Stepanka came to see us last week from Prague, with our little cousins Debora and Hanne. I like Jirka because he treats me like an adult, not like a silly thirteen-year-old girl, and I like Stepanka, because she is pretty, like a delicate blonde doll. But that visit, Jirka was grey and tired-looking, like there was a big rain cloud looming over his thinning hair, and Stepanka was not as perfect and blonde as always, though she had tried hard. I sensed trouble like a bad smell.

"*Strejdo? Teto?* Is everything alright?" I asked at once, anxious.

"All will be, little *Esterka*," Jirka murmured, ruffling my long curly hair and handing me little Hanne, "Don't worry about it. But can we see Mama, please?"

I was banished to the front yard whilst the adults talked in grave voices in the kitchen, and it annoyed me. The thing I like about my family is that I am never treated as an inferior just because I am a child. I had never been sent away from a serious conversation before. I balanced Hanne on my lap as I sat on the veranda, swinging my legs down between the individual poles of the railing.

My seventeen-year-old brother Kolvan was beside me, irritated because he had to look after me.

"I know what they're talking about," he boasted, as we slumped in the heat, "I'm not an idiot."

"Neither am I, and I don't know."

"*That is a matter of opinion, Ester.*"

I didn't really care about the insult. I knew Kol would tell me. He can never keep zipped for long if he has a piece of information he is especially smug about.

"It's because auntie Anicka and uncle Honza were taken to a concentration camp last week. I heard Jirka tell Mama," he said at last, voice surprisingly serious.

"Why?" I was startled. "What on earth have they done?"

"Nothing. They are jews. You know how much trouble that can get them into in big cities like *Brno* where they live"

I pursed my lips, not trusting myself to speak. I had never really been close to stern Honza and snippy Anicka, but I found it so horridly unfair how jews were being punished for nothing. I knew about concentration camps. Camps where they gassed you with poison and worked you to death. I had never told anyone, but I had had a few nightmares in the past about being taken to one in the dead of night. And now...now it was my *family*. It felt so horribly close.

"Why do people have such a problem with jews?" I said suddenly, jabbing Kol in the ribs with my elbow,

"Come on, Mr Know-it-all. Tell me why, if you know everything."

"You can't ask that," he scowled, "I'm a flipping jew."

"Is there no way to stop Hitler?" I said, my voice suddenly a whisper. There was more than a bit of fright in my words- Hitler scared me. His plans scared me. His hatred for me scared me, even though he had never met me. He didn't know I existed but he scared me. He was unstoppable, and I couldn't bear what he did.

Kol paused, as if wondering whether to trust his little sister, then leaned into me, mouth to my ear as he whispered-

"There is a way, Little Sister. One of the boys in the village told me. I'm going to join the resistance."

The resistance. The word itself made me shiver.

"What does this *resistance* do?" I whispered back.

"We blow up Hitler's factories. We destroy his ammunition. We prevent his attacks before they can even be carried out- and then we disappear." Kol's voice was so quiet now I had to strain to hear his last words.

"We never get found, Ester. We never let ourselves get found."

I had wanted a way to stop Hitler, and now I had it. But I felt frightened rather than reassured.

"It sounds dangerous," I said stupidly.

"Of course it's *dangerous*, you squirt! How else do you expect us to defeat Hitler and his bloody moustache-ask nicely? Say: '*Oh please, Mr Hitler sir, but you can't kill those jews because they're our family.*'? Will that work then, Ester?"

I shook my head.

"I just don't want you to die, Kol," I mumbled, "Because you *will* die, won't you, if you get caught! Hitler is ruthless."

"I won't get caught, Ester," Kol persisted.

I still didn't believe he would go off and join this resistance organisation. I didn't think he'd have the bottle. Kol is like that- all empty talk and no action. But when I woke up the next morning Kol's bed was frighteningly empty. I checked under the covers, even though they were neatly made, and under the bed, though it was so full of dustballs it made me cough. He really was gone.

"My son? Where is my son?" Mama shrieked, red-faced, curls a mess down her back as she rushed around like a mad thing.

"Mama? I think he said he's gone to a re- re *something*," I said tentatively. I remembered the word, I just couldn't quite bear to say it. It made it all feel so horribly *real*, and I so didn't want it to be.

"A resistance?" Mama froze, tears coming in gushing waterfalls and staining her brown cheeks, "Oh Kol! Oh Kolvan! My brave, stupid boy!"

She turned and ran into the house, sobbing loudly. I stared outside, wanting to feel the cool wind of the morning on my cheeks. I stared up at the vast blue sky until my eyes watered, and even then I refused to blink. If I stared hard enough, I could make out the faint outline of the moon, pale against the duck-egg sky. And the moon could see Kol- and that made me feel like I was closer than ever to my lovely big brother, even though he could be miles away by now.

2

"Mama, why is the table shaking?"

It is Adara, swinging her skinny legs beneath the table as she complains. I freeze- I think we all do. Adara is beautiful, with honey skin and big blue eyes fringed with long, thick eyelashes, and long wavy dark-gold hair in a pretty plait down the centre of her back, and Mama hardly ever gets cross at her. But Mama is also very firm about Shabbat rules, and that is not to interrupt her whilst she is lighting the candles. And Mama being so orthodox, Adara is sure to get a telling-off.

"*Adarko*, you know the rules. Hush," I say quickly, before Mama can start snapping. But then I realise what my little sister is saying is true. There are vibrations running through the table- I can feel it juddering against my thigh- and every so often it jolts violently, knocking against my shins. We are all probably thinking the same thing- what on earth can it be? Even Mama pauses, hand shaking a little as she holds it still above the third violet candle.

"It won't be anything," she says firmly, but I can tell she is nervous. Her big dark eyes flick around her, as if searching for signs of any danger. There is nothing- or is there? I can now see the shelves are shaking, Grandmother's china rattling against the wood, and the rug jumps about on top of the floorboards. Adara lets out a shriek as a large and very pretty blue-and-white vase shudders violently and falls right off the shelf, smashing at her feet.

"Why is the table shaking?" she squeaks, burying her face in my chest.

"Mama?" I ask shakily, turning to her. Mama's eyes are wide, and she suddenly makes a dive for our old radio in the corner, shoving it beneath the kitchen dresser.

"They mustn't find it," she whispers determinedly, and then seizes Salome by the hand and pulls her up, "Come on, little ones. Let's go and see what it is, shall we?"

Her voice is ridden with fake cheerfulness, but she isn't fooling anybody. We can already hear neighbours screaming as they rush around clutching belongings, dragging their children desperately. As we step further out, I can see why. The horizon is a cloud of horrid ashy smoke, curling along the rooftops and reeking of danger.

Where there's smoke there is fire.

Where there's smoke there is fire! I can see it now, amber flames licking at the walls of every building. It is not just amber- I can see violet and lavender and pink and green, every colour dancing in the horrible fire. How can something so deadly be so beautiful? It's like the fire is full of colours.

I feel a jolt of fear, and realise that we escaped our home just in time. Now the fire is devouring our sweet cottage, and all we can do is watch, holding hands and crying silently. It's been our home forever- it can't just *burn!*

But it has, and I'm left with a question. Why? Why is there fire? And why can I hear booming noises in the distance, getting louder and louder, as if closer and *closer*? I can see fresh spurts of fire, exploding like fountains, and showering us with red hot ashes. What is it? Why can I hear shouting- loud, laughing shouting? "Give up the resistance!" yells a harshly accented voice, and a soldier in a green uniform ambles forward, casually smoking a cigarette, "Give up the resistance, and you will live!" It is an SS soldier- a german soldier, I realise with a horrible sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. My mind registers his words too- *resistance*.

Kol. Kol!

They have found out about the resistance, and are hunting them down. And somehow- somehow- they know that one came from *here*. Our sleepy little village of Lezaky.

If I don't say anything the village will burn.

If I don't say anything, my mother and my sisters all die.

If I don't say anything, we all die.

The flames devour the buildings, drowning out the screams of agony from our terrified neighbours- but my mouth stays firmly closed.

3

I don't know what to do.

We have all been herded by the SS into a small field, women seperated from men. At least me and my mother and sisters are together. I hug Salome and Adara, trying to reassure them, but I can't reassure myself. It is all my fault our home is gone. If I had told the soldiers about Kol they would have left us free.

"Stay in your lines!" a soldier barks. He is tall and thin and sharp all over, like a horrible twisted rake.

"If anyone has any information regarding anyone in this village who is in the resistance, own up now and you shall all go free!" another, fatter, one bellows.

I open my mouth, words already formed inside my mind. But my tongue is too dry. I can't seem to spit the words out.

I can't split on Kol.

Even if we all die.

"Fine, then," the rake says, smiling cruelly, "You have honour, at least. Does anyone know anything about a radio that can send telegrams, that might have been used as a method of communication? If you do, you will save your family and your village by saying so."

I think of Mama desperately hiding our radio. I say nothing.

"Alright, then! You have chosen to defy us!" says Fatty, "We will then defy your wishes. All men above fifteen, to the left. All girls above fifteen, also the the left. Everyone else, middle."

They haven't told us what they are going to do, but I clutch Mama, not wanting to let her go.

"They could kill you, Mama!" I whisper fearfully into her bosom, beginning to weep, "Please, Mama- let me pretend to be fifteen, and stay with you!"

"Don't be silly, Esterka," Mama says softly, "You must look after Adara and Salome. Be good now..."

She's walking away!

"No! Mama!" I scream, but she doesn't stop. I'm not the only one shrieking- all the children below fifteen are yelling for their parents. Adara's fingers are pinching my arm she's clinging to me so tightly, and Salome is white with fear as we gaze after our departing Mama. I don't want to tell my sisters, but something inside me fears this may be the last time we see her walking and alive.

"Come on, Sal, Dar," I say quietly, "Wave to Mama and then do as the big man said. We need to go to the middle."

"Why? I want to be with Mama!" Salome says quickly, face screwing up. I recognise the tears and whisk her up in my arms, half-pulling half-carrying her to the group of children that huddle miserably in the middle of the field. The sky is darkening steadily, now a dusky violet colour, and we all shiver in the cold evening wind. The icy air makes my cheeks smart, and I'm still in my best silk Shabbat dress.

A man is approaching us, holding a gun, aswell as a strip of paper with shades of yellow and blue all over it. I'm too frightened of getting shot to turn to look for Mama in the crowd of late teenagers and women, even though I want to more than anything. I hug my sisters hard instead, trying to find a scrap of comfort in their shivering bodies.

"All, line up in an orderly queue," the man barks sharply, and immediately grabs hold of the nearest little girl- Ineska, who is small and five years old, with apple cheeks, curly fair hair, and big blue eyes that fill with tears as the man grabs her roughly. We all watch, interested to see what will happen. The man holds the colour-pallet paper-strip to her snowy curls, then against her big sky-blue eyes, before finally opening her mouth and looking at her small, pearly teeth. Then he adjusts his grip on her so it is more gentle, and steers her to the ;left of the queue.

I realise what he is doing. Kol told me about germanalisation when he was still at home, not blowing up bridges. A chill runs down my spine as I realise what is going on- the man is checking to see if children are blonde enough and blue-eyed enough to pass for german aryan children.

"Ineska here is lucky," he tells us, straightening up and grinning down at us in a creepy way, "She will be adopted by a new family in Germany, and have a lovely life. Only the best of you will be chosen for that. The rest will be sent away."

"Sent to where?" a boy with dark curly hair asks. We all shiver- none of the rest of us would be brave enough to confront an officer. The boy is Jirak Svenovec, and he is one of the most daring boys in Lezaky- but I see fear behind his hard grey eyes. Jirak has a protective arm around his little sister Denisa, and his arm is actually shaking. Neither dark-curled Jirak or long-haired Denisa have blonde hair or blue eyes. He needs to know what will happen to them- to Denisa.

"Like I said, they will be sent away," the man sneers horribly, seizing dirty-blonde Eliska by her tiny wrists, "Come on now, no dilly-dallying. The sooner you move along, the faster you can get to your new homes." What he doesn't seem to realise- and what no one wants to say now, not even Jirak- is that we can never have a home like Lezaky. He- him and his nasty nazi comrades- burnt down our home right before our very eyes.

4

I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Me and Salome and Adara are through- we passed the test, thanks to Papa's aryan genes. We have been gently helped into a taxicab, and the windows are painted over in an odd grease so we can't see out of them. They are handling us gently but I think we all feel like prisoners.

I think of Mama as men fasten my seatbelt like I'm a baby of three, and her dark, curly hair and big brown eyes. She won't have passed, not even a chance. But she- did the women the men ordered to line up away from us even have to do the awful test? I didn't see it. I just saw men surrounding them in a fierce circle, guns ready incase any woman tried to escape the ring.

"Where is *Maminka*? I want her..." Adara whimpers, laying her head on my lap. I stroke her ringlets- golden-blonde, thank goodness. At least we won't die, I think to myself. We've been treated okay and no one has hurt us and...

I look across the field as the cab-door is flung open to push in another snivelling child, and hear the sudden *crack* of a gunshot. I feel my heart weaken and flutter in sympathy for who tried to escape and didn't make it- but then I hear more cracks, more gunshots. How can so many women be trying to rush free at once? I can hear screams now, and my heart pumps now-cold blood into my veins as the truth creeps over me.

They are shooting them, kicking the dead bodies into a huge pit, piling body ontop of body ontop of body, before pushing forth the next unlucky female to get shot in the breast. I feel tears blur my vision and my heartbeat is irregular- I have to get across and save Mama! It is idiotic, and I'm almost certain it won't work- but if we die, at least we can die together.

"Mama! MAMA!" I shriek, struggling to undo my belt. As if on a silent cue, cool hands clamp over my mouth and grasp my arms so I can't move, I can't go anywhere...I am stuck, and Mama is still in the crowd, waiting patiently for her own death- if she's not already dead, dumped in a pit with tens of other bleeding, floppy corpses.

"Calm-hush, please hush," someone whispers into my ear, smoothing my hair, but I flinch away. I don't want my hair touched by a man who has been involved in burning down my home and killing my mother.

"Please let me get to my mother," I rant between sobs, "I- you can shoot me too, I'll die with her, I just want to get to-"

"Now stop spewing nonsense, little girl," a new, quieter voice hisses poisonously in my ear, "Do this for the little ones at least. Do you want your little sisters to see what we are doing to the she-dogs of your stupid little village?"

I freeze, twisting my neck to see the tall, rod-like soldier crouched by my seat in the cab.

"No," I whisper shakily.

"Then your Mama was put in a nice big bus with all the other mamas," the man says, voice an almost inaudible whisp, "And she is safe- she is fine. They all are, and you will be able to see them all son. *Very, very soon.*"

"But why are you doing this?" I spit, face burning up with red-hot fury, "Why are you killing the innocent women and men of our little village, which has never done anything to you?"

"Oh, so you think, little *Esterka*," the man hisses, "But your little 'harmless' village holds secrets more dear to the heart of a true Hitler supporter more than his family, he love, his own pride and dignity. It holds more secrets than you will ever know..."

The door is closing now. I struggle to push it open but everything seems blurred and slow all of a sudden, like I'm under some sort of spell. I am vaguely aware of something pointy being driven into my arm, and voices that don't make sense echoing in my brain- Adara crying, Salome shaking me but I can't feel it, only see her hands moving excruciatingly slowly...

Then I hear her voice- Mama's, ringing clear as a bell in my mind. It's not echoed like the rest, but crystal clear and sounding just like mama. Not the scared last-night-fire version, but the old, cheerful version, who desperately wanted to keep our family together and loving each other even when Kol vanished off to his resistance group.

“Ach, my Ester,” she smiles, her face beautiful and rosy, smile wide, “You have got quite a bump. You will have a bruise by tomorrow. I will bind it up for you...”

“Thank you, Mama,” I murmur, but I’m suddenly sleepy again and I wake up in a strange bed I’ve never slept before in in my life.

“Where am I? Mama?” I call. The room I am in is pale-pink in colour, with a floral theme for curtains, bedsheets and padding on the fancy chair at the Vanity table. It’s not my style at all- I just want to be home...

“Oh, Ester!” Arms are thrown around me, and I hear the familiar squeak of Adara’s voice. It is cracked with emotion and tears as she pours a torrent of words into my ear. Half of it I am too dozy to understand, but I get the end-

“You said Mama, Ester. But Mama isn’t here. Oh Ester...” she breaks into fresh sobs, “Mama is dead! They shot her in Lezaky, at home, and took us to Berlin. They injected you with medicine so you would be too sleepy to try and escape again. We have been taken to the house of the Blumenfelds.”

“The Blumenfelds? Why? Who are they? They aren’t long-lost aunts and uncles, are they?” I ask, baffled, rubbing my still-pounding temples.

“Oh Ester. We have all been taken to houses, families around Germany,” Adara says softly, gently, as if she is the big one and I am the little sister who needs soothing, “We are not in Czechoslovakia anymore. They have to look after us and be...be our new family. They gave Salome to the Freimans next door...”

Her voice wobbles at the loss of her twin, even if Sal is only next door.

“And we have Wiebke Blumenfeld and Paul Blumenfeld and their daughter Lilan Blumenfeld. We- we are not Ester Polackova and Adara Polackova anymore.”

She starts to cry for what must be the fifth time since I’ve woken up.

“We are Elizabeth Blumenfeld and Adriana Blumenfeld now.”