

PROMPT: The protagonist is a Jewish child who is being smuggled from Warsaw Ghetto by the Polish Resistance. Write about their escape and their final hours in the ghetto as they says goodbye to their family. What are the character's thoughts and emotions? How do they interact with other characters in the narrative? What does the character see and hear?

A Prayer for the Future

It was freezing, and my arms and legs ached with cold. My teeth chattered as I tucked my hands under my armpits for warmth. My feet felt like blocks of ice, frozen stiff in my thin, threadbare shoes. Most of the houses were abandoned, destroyed by air raids and emptied of Jewish inmates who had been deported. It was quiet and dark, very late at night, but still dangerous. There could be Nazi soldiers or Jewish police patrolling the streets. They would report us if they found Żegota resistance operatives in the Warsaw Ghetto.

My mother and I stared with dread at the empty coffin. It smelled like death, rotting and decayed, though maybe that was my imagination. It was pitch-black, like a foul gateway into the pits of hell.

"You're lucky you are small enough to fit," said the Żegota fighter who had come here to rescue me. He was a young, handsome man, his face hard and lightly bearded. He carried a gun, but his eyes were very kind. They reminded me of my brother Izaak. "Say your goodbyes to your mother," he added. "My comrade will be here soon. We cannot delay long."

I looked at the coffin again, my heart seizing in my chest. He had said I was lucky to be so small for my age, but all I could feel was a terrible, wrenching fear. How could I lie down in that thing? What if this coffin got mixed up with a real one and taken to the cemetery? Then I would be buried alive...

My mother read the terror on my face, and put her hands on my shoulders. "It'll be alright, Chaya," she said. "You won't feel a thing. When you wake up, it'll be safe. You'll have food and you'll be warm..."

I looked up at her. Her face was sallow and thin, skin tightly drawn over the angles of her cheekbones. Her clothes were worn and torn, stained with dirt and far too thin for winter. I could feel her hands trembling where she held me.

I swallowed, hating to see what the war had done to her. She had already lost so much—not just her looks and her health, but also my father and brother. They had been both deported on the trains last week to who knew where. Now, she was losing me too.

She was not the woman I remembered, the one who would make latkes for Sabbath, and kreplach for Yom Kippur, and soft matzah balls for Passover. They were always accompanied by her signature over-salted chicken soup. She wasn't the best cook, but even the memory of her cooking still made my mouth water. My aching, empty stomach rumbled. I should have appreciated what I had back then.

My mother looked pained when she heard my stomach growling. She brushed a lock of hair out of my face, her eyes brimming with tears. "You will have food soon, my darling," she whispered. "Irene Sendler is a good, kind woman. She will take care of you."

And what about you? I wanted to ask. *Who will take care of you, mama?*

Suddenly, we heard footsteps nearby, and I jumped with fear. But then an older man rounded the corner, scowling, and I realized it was the other Żegota fighter.

"We're out of time," he said sharply. "There are patrols two streets away."

The younger resistance fighter nodded grimly and held out a sedative for me to take. It would knock me out when I got into the coffin, so I wouldn't be conscious enough to panic, or move and accidentally make a noise.

My mother took it with a shaking hand, and held it to my lips. "Drink," she said.

I did. The liquid was bittersweet on my tongue. She helped me climb into the coffin and I lay down, staring up at her through the open coffin lid. The world was already hazing out a little, but I was still conscious, still able to hear.

"Her name is Chaya Kowalski," my mother said, her voice desperate. "She is ten. And I am Daniela Kowalski, and my husband's brother is Abraham. He is a partisan fighter. Make sure you tell them; someone has to know who she is—"

"We'll write it down," the older resistance fighter said reassuringly. "Irena always keeps the records safe."

"What are your names?" my mother asked. "How will I find you, after the war?"

"It's safer if you don't know, but do not fear. Żegota will find you."

Those were the last words I heard before the coffin shut over me with a soft click. The silence was deafening, drumming against my ears. I couldn't hear any voices from outside, but it didn't matter, because I was already slipping away from consciousness. My limbs felt weighed down and heavy. My last thought before I drifted asleep was a prayer—*Mama, I love you. I hope we both live.*

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