Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Milkweed

Written by

Jerry Spinelli

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Dear Reader:

Why did I write this book? (Readers will want to know, my publisher said.) A fair question.

In one of my earliest memories, I am sitting on the floor staring at a picture in a book. The picture shows a heap of bodies. I turn the page this way and that, seeking a proper orientation. I am bewildered. In my short life there is no reference point for what I see.

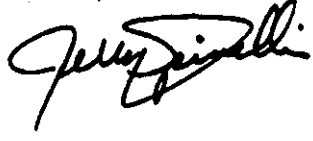
The events that became known as the Holocaust have touched me ever since. And yet for a long time I hesitated to write of it. Did the world really need another Holocaust book? And even if it did, who was I to write it? What credentials did I have? I was neither Jew nor survivor nor survivor's relative. All I had was a ticket stub from *Schindler's List.*

Then I came to see that I had every right to presume. Because I cared. And had I not been telling young writers for years: "Write what you care about"?

And because I am people, and in the end, in the book, that's what they are too – Misha and Uri and Janina and Uncle Shepsel and Tata. They are more than Jews and Holocausters and orphans. They are people. Like those in the picture.

How could I *not* write this book?

Sincerely,



Jerry Spinelli, 2003

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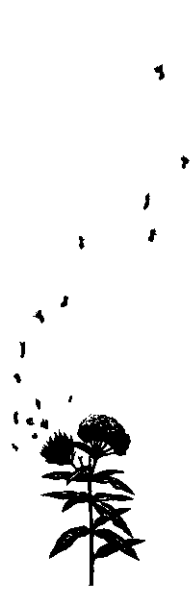
Remembered:

Bill Bryzgornia
and
Masha Bruskina

Smuggling was carried out through holes and cracks in the walls...and through all the hidden places unfamiliar to the conquerors' foreign eyes.

– February 26, 1941
Scroll of Agony:
The Warsaw Diary of
Chaim A. Kaplan

1



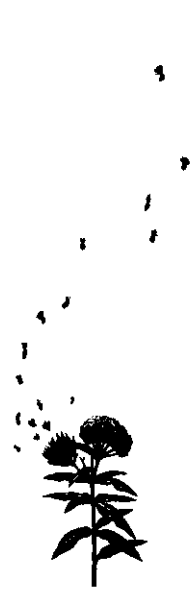
MEMORY

I am running.

That's the first thing I remember. Running. I carry something, my arm curled around it, hugging it to my chest. Bread, of course. Someone is chasing me. "Stop! Thief!" I run. People. Shoulders. Shoes. "Stop! Thief!"

Sometimes it is a dream. Sometimes it is a memory in the middle of the day as I stir iced tea or wait for soup to heat. I never see who is chasing and calling me. I never stop long enough to eat the bread. When I awaken from dream or memory, my legs are tingling.

2



SUMMER

He was dragging me, running. He was much bigger. My feet skimmed over the ground. Sirens were screaming. His hair was red. We flew through streets and alleyways. There were thumping noises, like distant thunder. The people we bounced off didn't seem to notice us. The sirens were screaming like babies. At last we plunged into a dark hole.

"You're lucky," he said. "Soon it won't be ladies chasing you. It will be Jackboots."

"Jackboots?" I said.

"You'll see."

I wondered who the Jackboots were. Were unfooted boots running along the streets?

"Okay," he said, "hand it over."

"Hand what over?" I said.

He reached into my shirt and pulled out the loaf of bread. He broke it in half. He shoved one half at me and began to eat the other.

"You're lucky I didn't kill you," he said. "That lady you took this from, I was just getting ready to snatch it for myself."

"I'm lucky," I said.

He burped. "You're quick. You took it before I even knew what happened. That lady was rich. Did you see the way she was dressed? She'll just buy ten more."

I ate my bread.

More thumping sounds in the distance. "What is that?" I asked him.

"Jackboot artillery," he said.

"What's artillery?"

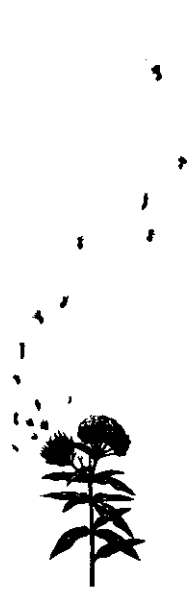
"Big guns. Boom boom. They're shelling the city." He stared at me. "Who are you?"

I didn't understand the question.

"I'm Uri," he said. "What's your name?"

I gave him my name. "Stopthief."

3



He took me to meet the others. We were in a stable. The horses were there. Usually they would be out on the streets, but they were home now because the Jackboots were boom-booming the city and it was too dangerous for horses. We sat in a stall near the legs of a sad-faced gray. The horse pooped. Two of the kids got up and went to the next stall, another horse. A moment later came the sound of water splashing on straw. The two came back. One of them said, "I'll take the poop."

"Where did you find him?" said a boy smoking a cigarette.

"Down by the river," said Uri. "He snatched a loaf

from a rich lady coming out of the Bread Box."

Another boy said, "Why didn't you snatch it from him?" This one was smoking a cigar as long as his face.

Uri looked at me. "I don't know."

"He's a runt," someone said. "Look at him."

"Stand up," said someone else.

I looked at Uri. Uri flicked his finger. I stood.

"Go there," someone said. I felt a foot on my back, pushing me toward the horse.

"See," said the cigar smoker, "he doesn't even come halfway up to the horse's dumper."

A voice behind me squawked, "The horse could dump a new hat on him!"

Everyone, even Uri, howled with laughter. Explosions went off beyond the walls.

The boys who were not smoking were eating. In the corner of the stable was a pile as tall as me. There was bread in all shapes and sausages of all lengths and colors and fruits and candies. But only half of it was food. All sorts of other things glittered in the pile. I saw watches and combs and ladies' lipsticks and eyeglasses. I saw the thin flat face of a fox peering out.

"What's his name?" said someone.

Uri nodded at me. "Tell them your name."

"Stopthief," I said.

Someone crowed, "It speaks!"

Smoke burst from mouths as the boys laughed.

One boy did not laugh. He carried a cigarette behind each ear. "I think he's cuckoo."

Another boy got up and came over to me. He leaned down. He sniffed. He pinched his nose. "He smells." He blew smoke into my face.

"Look," someone called, "even the smoke can't stand him. It's turning green!"

They laughed.

The smoke blower backed off. "So, Stopthief, are you a smelly cuckoo?"

I didn't know what to say.

"He's stupid," said the unlaughing boy. "He'll get us in trouble."

"He's quick," said Uri. "And he's little."

"He's a runt."

"Runt is good," said Uri.

"Are you a Jew?" said the boy in my face.

"I don't know," I said.

He kicked my foot. "How can you not know? You're a Jew or you're not a Jew."

I shrugged.

"I told you, he's stupid," said the unlaugher.

"He's young," said Uri. "He's just a little kid."

"How old are you?" said the smoke blower.

"I don't know," I said.

The smoke blower threw up his hands. "Don't you know *anything*?"

"He's stupid."

"He's a stupid Jew."

"A *smelly* stupid Jew."

"A *tiny* smelly stupid Jew!"

More laughter. Each time they laughed, they threw food at each other and at the horse.

The smoke blower pressed my nose with the tip of his finger. "Can you do this?" He leaned back until he was facing the ceiling. He puffed on the cigarette until his cheeks, even his eyes, were bulging. His face looked like a balloon. It was grinning. I was sure he was going to destroy me with his faceful of smoke, but he didn't. He turned to the horse, lifted its tail, and blew a stream of silvery smoke at the horse's behind. The horse nickered.

Everyone howled. Even the unlaugher. Even me.

The pounding in the distance was like my heartbeat after running.

"He must be a Jew," someone said.

"What's a Jew?" I said.

"Answer the runt," someone said. "Tell him what a Jew is."

The unlaugher kicked ground straw at a boy who hadn't spoken. The boy had only one arm. "That's a Jew." He pointed to himself. "This is a Jew." He pointed to the others. "That's a Jew. That's a Jew. That's a Jew." He pointed to the horse. "That's a Jew." He fell to his knees and scrabbled in the straw near the horse flop. He

found something. He held it out to me. It was a small brown insect. "This is a Jew. Look. *Look!*" He startled me. "A Jew is an animal. A Jew is a bug. A Jew is less than a bug." He threw the insect into the flop. "A Jew is *that*."

Others cheered and clapped.

"Yeah! Yeah!"

"I'm a horse turd!"

"I'm a goose turd!"

A boy pointed at me. "He's a Jew all right. Look at him. He's a Jew if I ever saw one."

"Yeah, he's in for it all right."

I looked at the boy who spoke. He was munching on a sausage. "What am I in for?" I said.

He snorted. "Strawberry babka."

"We're all in for it," said someone else. "We're in for it good."

"Speak for yourself," said the unlaugher. He came and stood before me. He reached down and fingered the yellow stone hung around my neck on a string. "What's this?" he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"Where did you get it?"

"I always had it."

He let go of the stone. He backed off to arm's length. He wet his finger with spit and rubbed my cheek. "He's a Gypsy."

There were gasps of wonder. The others leaned forward, munching, puffing their tobaccos.

"How do you know?"

"Look at his eyes. How black. And his skin. And this." He flicked the yellow stone.

The smoke blower said, "You're a Gypsy, ain't you?"

It sounded familiar. I had heard that word before, around me, in a room, near a wagon.

I nodded.

"Get him out of here," said the sausage muncher. "We don't need Gypsies. They're dirt."

The smoke blower laughed. "Look who's talking."

The one-armed boy spoke for the first time. "Next to Jews, they hate Gypsies the most."

"There's a difference," said another. "Everybody doesn't hate the Gypsies, but there's nobody that doesn't hate us. Nobody is hated close to us. They even hate us in Washington America."

"Because we boil babies and eat them for matzoh!" someone growled scarily.

Everyone laughed and threw food.

"We drink people's blood!"

"We suck their brains out through their noses with a straw!"

"Even *cannibals* hate us!"

"Even *monkeys* hate us!"

"Even *cockroaches* hate us!"

Words and laughter and bread and sausages flew through the tobacco smoke and the horse's legs. Hands reached for the pile. Golden bracelets flew and jars of jam and tiny painted animals and fountain pens. The flanks of the horse flickered as they were pelted. A white-and-purple glass fish bounced off my forehead. The fox fur flew. One boy paraded wearing it about his shoulders, kissing its snout.

And then the stableman was coming and shouting and we were running, and outside we scattered like cockroaches and I ran with Uri and the thumping explosions were louder and the clouds in the sky were brown and black.

We ran through streets and alleyways to the back of a small brick building. Uri threw open a wooden hatch, and we plunged into a dark, cool cellar. Uri pulled down the hatch, snipping off the daylight, then he flipped a switch and a bare lightbulb burned among the cobwebs in the ceiling.

Uri pointed upward. "It's a barbershop. The barber went. He left everything. I'll show you tomorrow."

The cellar was a home. Carpets covered the floor. There was a bed and a chair and a radio and a chest of drawers. Even an icebox.

"Tonight you sleep on the floor," he said. "Tomorrow I'll get you a bed."

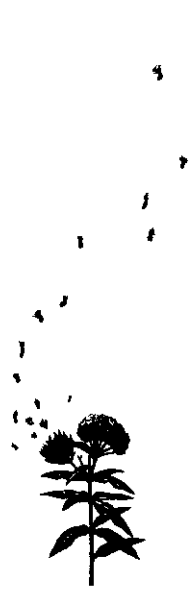
The explosions stopped, or maybe I just couldn't

hear them anymore. We ate bread and jam and slices of salty meat.

I said, "What am I in for?"

He did not look at me. "You heard. Strawberry babka. Eat."

4



When I awoke the next morning, Uri was gone. He returned dragging a mattress. It was small, about half the size of his, but plenty big enough for me.

I lay down on it. He jerked me to my feet and snapped, "Not yet." He hauled me outside.

We walked to the shopping district, where the big stores were. Except some of them were not so big now; the bombardment had left them crumples of brick. Looking down the street, I saw spaces where stores should be. Like broken teeth.

We went behind the stores, to alleyways of trucks and trash bins and staring cats. Uri said, "Wait here." He