

doesn't have to linger in the village. The house is the first one, right at the very edge. Just a few meters to go and he will have left the village safely behind him. What does he think as he walks away?

Perhaps he had frowned upon his daughter's friendship with a Polish boy. Perhaps, though, as the noose pulled ever tighter, his wife had said, "But, Moshe, that's the very thing that could save her life. The boy loves her. Go and ask them to take her in."

So he went . . . and now he is returning. "The answer is no."

But Ciwia lived on in her young lover's helpless heart. That first love was never forgotten. His daughter actually knows her name, all these years later. And Danuta added, "My own mother wanted children so she took my father in. She made room in her house, her bed, her body for a man she didn't love, for the sake of the children she wanted to

have. And if she hadn't, well, I wouldn't be here. But for the sake of the lost love, the girl his father would not save, my father never made room in his heart for anyone."

And now we hear them clearly, the footsteps retreating into the night. Those footsteps have been walking unceasingly for seven long decades. They walked into the room where we sat, a small group of women under the darkening sky. And when we parted, the footsteps followed us home.

Those footsteps walk across Poland, across Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine. Their muffled tread leads into the forests of Belarus, they traverse the byways of Europe. Other steps join them, and more, and more. Listen: They are walking into the darkness, those footsteps of a people for whom all roads were closed.

"This story was given to me," explains Jennifer Robertson, "by Joanna Brańska, art historian, author of *Na Dobry Rok Badźcie Zapisani* (1997, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw), a study of pre-war Jewish greetings cards. A member of the Polish-Israeli Friendship Society, Dr. Brańska also managed Café Eilat, where cultural events took place and where she often received artifacts from the time of the Holocaust, exactly as I have narrated. I simply created the characters and setting around this true story."

Jennifer Robertson

Inside the Sewing Machine Drawer

Joanna ran a small café in Warsaw devoted to Jewish things: musical events, art exhibitions, poetry readings, and so on. She had set up a small display case.

"It's a memory store. I wanted to gather small, everyday objects from a vanished world, ordinary things that have become extraordinary because the people who owned them have vanished from the earth. Like this, for instance . . ."

She showed me a curved metal object, a container of some sort.

"It's a *mezuzah* case," Joanna explained. "It would have been fastened to the right side of the front door. Most Jewish homes in Poland had one and you can sometimes see the marks on the woodwork of pre-war buildings that show you that this house once belonged to a Jewish family."

So then she told me the story of the *mezuzah*.

She had received a letter from a small town in western Poland, a rambling letter with uncertain punctuation, from a woman called Maria Grabowska:

"I heard about you on the radio. Mother and I

were repatriated from the east at the end of the war. We had to pack up in a hurry, but she managed to take her sewing machine. She put it in a handcart along with whatever food she could get hold of, bundles of bedding, pots and pans. She put my little brother on top. I walked alongside with a sack across my shoulders—I was almost seven. Mother trundled that cart along to the train. I'd never been in a train before, but I can tell you, it wasn't exactly luxury: We travelled in a cattle truck. Do you know how we survived? Some people in our truck had brought their cow. Every time we stopped, which we did quite a lot because the train kept getting checked—they pushed the cow out to graze, and we all got busy scraping out the evidence of the cow from our truck. But we had milk, straight from the cow.

"You may be wondering, what's all this got to do with the sewing machine? Well, inside the sewing machine drawer, Mother had put a small metal object. I don't know exactly what it is, but it's something Jewish. Mother felt that it must be important because the lady who gave it to her asked her to look after it carefully. So Mother tucked it away. She kept hoping the people it belonged to would come back and claim it, but no one ever came. When Mother passed away, I didn't want to throw it away, either. But now I'm getting on and my kids for sure will just chuck it away. 'That old metal thing, there's no use keeping that,' they'll say. They'll chuck the sewing machine out, too. 'Old-fashioned,' they'll say. 'You can buy electric ones nowadays.' But I don't want to break faith with something my mother promised so long ago. So I decided I would write to see if you could advise me what to do."

Joanna told me that she had written back and offered to travel across to western Poland to see Mrs. Grabowska. Then it turned out that Maria Grabowska had to visit her sister-in-law in Warsaw, so it was decided that she would come in herself with this souvenir from another time, another place.

She arrived, breathless with haste and apologies, a small, stout woman with patchy face powder, reddened lips, and greying hair escaping from a severe-looking hat. Joanna helped her hang up her coat and ushered her towards a table beside the display case. Maria took off her hat and pulled out a powder compact to survey her flattened hair.

"Oh, dear me, I'm so sorry I'm so late. I never thought it would take so long."

"Well, you've come a long way. Never mind, you're here now. Tea? Or coffee? Or perhaps something cold to drink?"

"Tea, please." She was rummaging in her bag and pulled out a crumpled plastic bag, which she unwound with much rustling. "Here it is, the thing my mother kept so carefully for so many, many years . . ."

She laid the small, oblong piece of metal on the white tablecloth.

"A *mezuzah* case!"

"Is it? Jewish families used to have them at the entrance to their homes, didn't they? I think I can remember them from the small town where I grew up, but I'm not sure. It was so long ago. Mother said some people touched it as they entered or left the home, but she didn't know why. Kind of like a holy water stoup, but of course it wouldn't be, would it, holy water, I mean . . .?"

"No," said Joanna, almost mechanically. "May I have a closer look?"

"Of course, of course, that's why I brought it. Here." Maria pushed the *mezuzah* container across the cloth and Joanna cradled it carefully in her hand.

"So," she said slowly. "This is what your mother kept in her sewing machine."

"That's right, tucked away inside the little drawer. I used to love that drawer when I was small. I'd always be pulling it in and out and peeking inside."

"Do you remember what happened? You said someone gave it to your mother?"

"That's right. It was Mrs. Goldfarb. She was the doctor's wife."

"And where was this? Where did you live?"

"Oh, you won't have heard of it. It was a small town near Lwów. Of course, that's in Ukraine now."

"But in those days . . ."

"Oh, a right mixture." Mrs. Grabowska stirred sugar into her tea. "Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Armenians, two or three Czech families, too. The Goldfarbs were Jewish, of course. My mother used to do dressmaking for the family and sometimes I'd go along to the house with them. They had a nice, big house. Of course, I have only the vaguest memories. Sometimes, I seem to see a house with a feel of space and, oh, I don't know, comfort maybe, and sometimes I think it's just because Mother has told me about it and I can't really remember at all."

"But when the war began, the Russians came, and then, in 1941, the Germans. . . . I was only four but I remember it quite clearly. You know, they show films about the war nowadays, but I never watch. I remember soldiers with big boots and guns

and harsh faces. And motorbikes. To this day the sound of a motorbike makes me feel as though I'm standing at the edge of a big black pit. . . . Horrible."

"Horrible indeed," Joanna agreed.

Maria Grabowska sipped her tea. "That's how it was for all the Jewish families. They wiped them out. Then, two or three years later, the Ukrainian nationalists came for us. They call it ethnic cleansing now. But by the time we were repatriated, as they called it, sent off in those cattle trucks to western Poland, the war was over and there were no Jews left in our little town. None at all. And there had been a synagogue and kosher shops and a school for the boys. A *cheder*, it was called. It was just one small room, which opened off the street. We used to go past the *cheder* on our way to market and see the boys, all with their caps on, crowded together, reciting long passages of the Scriptures by heart in Hebrew. Some were no bigger than I was then, three or four. Imagine killing little boys and their teachers just because they studied the Bible! It's the same God after all, isn't it? At any rate, that's what they say now, when it's too late. When they've all disappeared. They didn't say it then, but my mother did and she brought me up like that, you know."

"Is that why Mrs. Goldfarb gave your mother the *mezuzah* case?"

"Perhaps. I've never really thought about it. She came and knocked at our door. Mother opened it, and it was Mrs. Goldfarb. She was in a big hurry. She said, 'I've come to say goodbye. We're going away, but we don't know where to, nor for how long. We have to be ready by noon.'"

Maria's blue eyes filled with tears. She searched in her bag for a handkerchief, blew her nose, and continued.

"You can imagine what a good person Mrs. Goldfarb was if she still found time to rush out and say goodbye to her neighbors."

"Yet she'd brought the *mezuzah* case with her, which must have meant she knew. . . ."

"She knew. And yet she didn't know. She told Mother something about going into the forests. 'Perhaps they want us to fell trees,' she said. But the elderly, the children? Perhaps, too, she brought Mother that case because she hadn't anything valuable left. The Russians had stripped their home, you know, because they were a bit better off than the others and lived in a bigger house. They made the Goldfarbs live in one room and quartered soldiers in the rest of the house, and when they went away, they took Mrs. Goldfarb's silver and nice

table linen, my mother said. Then the Germans came and they took all the Jewish families away. And we were left with this . . ."

Her gaze went across to the *mezuzah* case, which Joanna had laid back down on the table. But the scene replayed across the old woman's inner eye had taken place a lifetime—a deathtime—ago. And Joanna saw it too: two women standing in a low-ceilinged room. Sunlight filtered through the leaves of yellowing lime and poplar trees and fell in patches on the earthen path outside the little wooden house. A slight breeze rustled the leaves. It was a golden autumn day with just a hint of chill, but Mrs. Goldfarb wore a felt hat, a thick coat with a warm jacket underneath, and several layers of clothes under that; and on her stockinged feet were sturdy shoes.

"My husband's father built our home," she said. "I came here as a bride. My children were born here. And now it's time to leave."

"Your husband delivered my babies, little Janek and darling Maria."

"She's a credit to you. We love it when she comes round. Came, I should say."

And then there was silence. Maria said she had never forgotten the way that the golden autumn day had become anxious, tense. A dog barked, a deep-throated bark from the jowls of a brute trained to kill. A motorcycle roared through the sleepy square of a little town and Mrs. Goldfarb bit her lip, half turning towards the door.

"I must go . . ."

Perhaps the Polish seamstress said warmly, "Go well, dear Mrs. Goldfarb, you and your family. I'll keep this safe for you until we meet again."

Whatever she said, she had kept faith, and so had her daughter after her. They had kept the *mezuzah* case. It lay on the white tablecloth, a small piece of decorated metal from another time, another place, and yet now for all time and for every place.

Joanna looked at it again. "Thank you for bringing this to us, Mrs. Grabowska, and thank you for sharing the story. I shall be proud to display this for you—and for Mrs. Goldfarb and her family."

"Oh, yes, please. I'm glad I brought it to you. It would have been terrible to have thrown it away. It's a little act of memory, isn't it, that means the dear Goldfarb family hasn't been forgotten."

"That's what it's all about."

She helped Maria with her coat and saw her out.

"So that's the story of the *mezuzah* case," Joanna told me, and she gave it to me to hold.

How many other hands had touched this metal

after it had been nailed in place on the doorframe of the Goldfarb home? And what had Mrs. Goldfarb done with the precious parchment when she unscrewed its container?

"So many unanswered questions!" Joanna sighed, putting the *mezuzah* case back into her display cabinet. "The rabbi of Kobryn said, *Only when you possess knowledge do you know what you were lacking.*"

She smiled and left me to think this through. Maria Grabowska and her mother had known neither the name nor the purpose of the object they had kept so carefully. Nor had the Goldfarbs known what awaited them in the forest from which they never returned.

The *mezuzah* case, emptied of the scroll with its eternal commands but preserved in a Polish woman's sewing-machine drawer, had kept faith beyond the mass grave and the slow drift of leaves falling from thickly clustered trees. Now it rested behind glass, mute witness of the time when the noise of shooting had ceased, the last motorcyclist had roared away, and the little town had been pronounced racially clean.