

PROLOGUE

The young reporter came into the old man's room. It was bright, clean, and comfortable with bright sunshine beaming into it. Pictures of Israeli tourist sites hung on the walls. A Danish throw rug lay between a single bed and a nearby easy chair. Hanging from the wall opposite was a swinging pedestal with a small television. It was aimed at the bed. Off on a far side were two doors. One was a sliding door for a small clothes closet. The other obviously led to a bathroom. The air had the antiseptic odor of a well-used retirement home.

The reporter took in these sights as she waited for the resident to be wheeled in from the bathroom. Eventually, her patience was rewarded when a wizened man showing all of his 87 years was wheeled in. Lines wrinkled a face that almost buried his eyes. His ears sprouted the coarse hairs of age. A cotton bathrobe drooped over the old man's shoulders to look almost like a shroud. From its hem line sprouted two thin legs clad with cheap pajamas. His feet were shod with felt slippers. Extending from his sleeves were two mottled hands with thick blue veins. The little finger of his right hand was missing at the first joint.

The old rabbi looked at the young girl quizzically.

"Yes?" he asked in accented Hebrew.

Replying in Polish, "*Rebbi*, I know it's been a long time since you've used Polish, but my Hebrew is not very good. Could we use it instead?"

"Of course, and now I remember, you're the newspaper reporter who wants to interview me, although I don't know why. My life is nothing special."

"I rather think not, *Rebbi*. You're an unsung hero in Warsaw, and it's time your bravery becomes known."

Time seemed to weigh heavily on the old man's back, but while waving his hand absently, he sighed as if to say, "Go ahead."

Picking up her recorder, the reporter turned it on and placed it where questions and answers could be heard by the machine.

"For the record, you are Lech Karnski? You were born in Warsaw in 1922 of musical parents?"

The old man's eyes looked towards the ceiling as though towards heaven as he tried to recall people who had long ago disappeared from his life.

"Yes," he replied.

The reporter continued, "You are now a *rebbi*, but once you were one of the most ferocious warriors both during the Warsaw Uprising and most of the wars of Israel. My real question, what led you to becoming an almost saintly man of peace...an outspoken opponent of war?"

The old man's eyes now stared straight at the young girl as if trying to understand why such a question would be asked. Seeing no answer in her face, he turned back to his past as if to find it in his memories. Finally, he replied sadly, "Atonement."

"Atonement? What have you to atone for? Your life has been a monument to righteousness."

Now, the Rebbi smiled for the first time as he replied, "Young lady, you're still young and haven't yet had time to sin. But, one day, you'll discover you're old and see how every day becomes an occasion to repent of your sins. Such is my life now."

The girl sat back and relaxed as if to invite the Rebbi into telling his story.

Chapter 1

How did I become a man of peace is your real question. The answer is through atonement of debt that remains unfilled even today.

When I was your age, or even younger, my life was quite ordinary. My parents were both musicians living a quiet life in Warsaw on an elm-shrouded street. It no longer exists now, but those trees gave shade to passers-by and created a cool tunnel for the cart vendors hawking their vegetables and wares during the heat of the day. Cars and trucks were still uncommon in those days making for a slower, more quiet life. Parents heard their children play quite easily then.

Our family lived there as all Jews had been living for generations: very quietly. Life for us in Poland, as elsewhere, was the history of a minority suffering and flourishing according to the political and economic turns of their rulers. Consequently, they saw themselves as being relatively weak and forced to negotiate for their lives. Negotiating takes patience and acquiescence to inequalities between themselves and others. But, each round of bargaining was made in hopes of something better than what had existed before and for something better to come in the next round. Doing so allowed them to flourish and become a large community of 3 million people. Our hopes became buoyant with the signing of the Versailles Treaty for it promised full rights of citizenship to all minorities. Perhaps our centuries of waiting for something better were finally to be fulfilled.

But, then catastrophe hit in the form of an invasion that turned these hopes on their head. We Jews, who had survived by negotiating when we could and enduring when we must, met a person who was interested in neither. Simply put, we were totally unprepared for a man who wanted only to take our lives. As a consequence, those of us who survived learned hatred coupled with rebellion, and as Absalom's example taught us, this only brings tragedy. Thus it was with me, and what follows is my story and its days of atonement.

As I said, my parents, Ira and Sarah Karnski, were musicians. My father was a violinist for the Warsaw Orchestra while my mother taught music as she attended to her children.

My older brothers, Frank and Jacob, decided early to enter the export business. We had cousins in America who sold luxury goods to people rich enough to pay the high import tariffs levied on such items. Thus, a natural fit seemed to exist for both families.

My younger sister, Frances, was assumed to marry a nice Jewish man and have nice Jewish children for our family. Actually, she was a good pianist who probably would have become a teacher like her mother.

As for me, I loved the flute, and wanted to join my father in the orchestra. Little was I to know how it would save my life. But then, between my talent, my mother's instruction, and my father's connections at the orchestra, my life's future seemed secure.

Our family was not particularly religious; in fact, we hardly kept a kosher kitchen. But, we attended *yeshiva* simply because Poppa believed we would get a better education there than at a public school. But, all of this was to become irrelevant on 1 September 1939.

It was 8:30 in the morning when Poppa Karnski burst into the kitchen yelling, "Momma, turn on the radio!"

Momma turned from her morning's dishwashing wondering why her husband was so excited. He normally spent his mornings at the concert hall practicing, but she did as she was told and immediately the announcer's voice told her why Poppa was so excited: "...the war news is bad. German forces are killing our brave soldiers with new weapons called *panzers* that are simply overrunning our horse mounted cavalry. However,..." With that, Momma turned off the radio to ask, "My God, what does this all mean?"

Poppa replied, "It means we have to get the kids together and decide."

With that he went to school and demanded his children be let out so he could plan for the war. Momma just sat down and wept as she turned on the radio again to hear more news.

Shortly thereafter, the Karnski family was gathered in their kitchen where all important decisions were made. The war news was being discussed everywhere and everyone was simply at a loss: "Poppa, what does this mean...Where will we go...avoid the war...Emily's brothers killed...are we going away...don't want to go...why...Damn Krauts, lemme at 'em..."

At that, Poppa rapped sharply on the kitchen table until everyone was silent. After all, he had been the pillar of the family for years, and now, his guidance was needed as never before.

"Frank, you'll be doing no such thing as taking on the Germans. Getting killed does not solve our problems. We'll do exactly what people have done for centuries during war: stay calm and stay put."

Jacob spoke up sharply, "Poppa, I believe your advice is excellent, but Frank and I do have a choice."

"And what is that?"

"You know we have always planned on going into business with the Levins. Well, what better time than now to do so?"

A long pause ensued with this remark until it was interrupted by Momma's sniffles as she said, "Poppa, this is breaking my heart at the thought of our family being torn apart, but truly, I do believe Jacob's thoughts are best. America is far away and obviously we all can't get there...but...if at least some of us make it...then...our family will live on."

Francis wailed, "Momma, are you saying we're about to die?"

Momma took her daughter into her bosom and rocked her gently while shushing her just as she did with all her babies. Poppa hugged them both as he thought about what his wife just said.

Are we about to die? God help us. We don't want anything other than simply to live simply.

Finally, he turned to his older boys and offered to each his hand as he said, "This morning when I awoke, I felt truly happy. Our family was intact, our futures were bright, and our lives were filled with love. Now, three hours later, all is changed. But, yes, Momma is right. You two must go...now. Who knows? Perhaps even an hour will be too late."

With that, quick hugs were given to all, and without even a lunch, Frank and Jacob left home. Their plan was to reach Dansk by night fall and catch whatever freighter was sailing.

They took with them every zloty in the house. Everyone else just sat stunned without the ability to talk in the vacuum of their departure.

Fortunately, Frank and Jacob did leave because the German's *blitzkrieg* moved faster than anyone could imagine. Within days, they were in Warsaw. Loudspeakers were everywhere shouting, "The German Third Reich comes as friends. Our purpose in coming here is to bring you the best of Arian culture and economic prosperity. All citizens are therefore ordered to stay in their houses. Anyone violating this order will be shot on sight."

Over and over this message was repeated for the next twenty-four hours. Francis covered her ears and howled, "If I hear that stupid message again...Oh, I don't know...but enough already. I understand it."

Momma and Poppa consoled her with their words: "Yes, yes, little one. We know. But, we must be patient. Even the Germans will become bored with it and then it'll be turned off."

Their words were true; however, a few days later, the Karnskis had a visitor dressed in a military uniform who simply unlocked their apartment door and walked in. Behind him was their landlord who refused to look at his tenants. Behind him were two tall, well armed soldiers standing silently by.

"This is the Karnski family?"

Momma replied with a trembling voice, "It is."

"Good. You have two hours to vacate this apartment. The Third Reich has need for excellent quarters for its forces and Jews cannot be permitted to stay in them at the expense of our soldiers."

With that simple announcement, this family was thrown out of their home of twenty-five years. When asked where they should go, the officer simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "That is not my concern. Now, go."

Carrying their suitcases filled with clothes, important documents, music scores, and instruments, they said goodbye their home, never to see it again. Fortunately, Momma had some cousins nearby where they trudged looking for help.

Calling through the door, Momma cried, "Gertrude, it's Sarah. Please open up. We've been evicted from our home and we need shelter."

A rattle of door locks and chains ensued and the door was open. Aunt Gertrude was obviously in shock. Behind her was her own family of three young children as well as her sister's family of two children. The husbands were not at home yet. With them, an apartment of 800 square feet was being obliged to accommodate a total of thirteen people. Momma just wept as she saw what was greeting her.

"Gertrude, I'm so sorry...I had no idea..."

"Sarah, I have no idea where we'll all sleep, but I guess we'll make do."

"Meanwhile, Lech, run to the concert hall and tell your father what's happened and he is to come here."

Lech walked out onto the street like a zombie. His steps were simply leaden.

For the life of me, I can't understand or accept what was happening. Ten days ago, my life had order, and now, it is chaos. What, dear God, is happening?

As Lech approached the concert hall, he saw his father leaving by the stage door. His face was ashen and like his son, his gait was wooden.

"My God, Poppa, what's happened?"

"I just lost my job. Jews are not allowed to play in the orchestra. Oh yes, I was also ordered to have yellow Stars of David sewn immediately on our clothing to show our Jewish backgrounds."

With that, the two men just held each other on the street and cried.

In all my life, I have never seen Poppa cry. Momma, yes, but never Poppa. Yet, here we are, grown men crying.

Father and son then headed to Aunt Gertrude's house while Lech explained how their home was lost. Poppa hardly seemed able to hear the words. Along the way, as they passed through their neighborhood where friends had invited them to tea before, these people now turned their eyes as they passed on the street.

We are lepers...outcasts...shunned.

When they got home, Aunt Gertrude's husband, Abe, greeted them. He was also in shock. Poppa and Uncle Abe shook hands as they went into the living room. There wasn't room in the kitchen where they would have normally discussed crises.

"Abe, I'm truly sorry to impose on you like this, but...but...I just don't know..."

"Ira, I don't know either. Of course, you're welcome here. Relatives need to stick together. But, now what?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't even know how I'll be bringing food home."

"Why?"

"I just lost my job. Just like that."

"Oh God."

As Lech observed this discussion, he thought, *All of us kids are in total confusion. As the eldest, I know something needs to be done, but, at seventeen, I'm just a kid accustomed to my parents' direction...I just don't have a clue. The younger children, fortunately, are so young, they don't realize what is happening. Being forced together like this simply means an opportunity to play with their cousins.*

In the aftermath of the shock, the families grew resentful. Keeping their tempers among the cousins was a constant struggle—even for the youngsters. Momma and Aunt Gertrude were constantly being called upon to settle spats. Often times, Uncle Abe and Poppa would settle in different parts of the apartment and gather their kids around them so some semblance of separation and quiet could ensue.

Outside, however, another resentment grew. It was sullen, angry, and mean. Neighbors who had once been friends now avoided the Karnskis like the plague. In turn, the Karnskis would say "Oh yes, I understand. They don't want the Germans to know they were once associated with us." But, that could only go so far as a platitude. Still, by avoiding one another, the Karnskis kept their anger under control.

The Germans were something else. Because of their Star, every Jew was always being called out for inspections.

"Kike, come here."

"Yes sir. How may I help you?"

"By being dead I suppose. But let me see your papers."

Bare hands in the winter searched for dog-eared identification booklets. When presented, the soldier would then demand, "Where are you going? Do you have permission?"

"Yes sir. Thank you for asking. I'm going to the bakery."

"It's a gentile one?"

"No sir. We understand the rules and are glad to obey them. It's a Jewish bakery."

Or:

"Hey, Jew Boy.

"Me, sir?"

Looking around, the soldier laughed with his friends, and said, "Do I smell anything else foul around here?"

"Yes sir. Of course, sir."

Or:

"Old man, why aren't you dead yet? Better watch out or we'll be coming for you."

Or: simply a shove into the street with a warning, "Keep your eyes down when you pass a German."

Thus, this was how the Karnskis survived by finding work when and where possible and sharing their money. Being young, Lech headed down into the underground café scene where he learned to play jazz and pick up gigs.

If one good thing has come from this horror, it's my introduction to this new form of music with its emphasis on the Blues. In them, I can pour my soul into what I'm feeling.

The longing of black people for a better life in America became Lech's theme song there in Warsaw. How often he would play "Midnight Special" after having heard it from the blues singer, Lead Belly.

Like you, Lead Belly, I want to be free of this awful weight of hate and frustration.

Periodically, the sirens sounded through the night: dee-dah, dee-dah, dee-dah. The lonely family would then crawl even deeper into their sheets praying for protection from a midnight crashing at the door. The next morning would see them looking guiltily among themselves knowing they were safe for the day. They would occasionally talk in hushed tones about people who had been taken away.

"Momma, have you seen my friend, Sonia? I haven't seen her lately."

"Nooo, Francis, I haven't. When did you last see her?"

"About three or four days ago."

Momma would hang her head as she knew another friend was never to be seen.

When will it be our turn?

The Karnski's turn came in late 1940. In fact, it was just by accident that Lech escaped. He was just returning home from a gig as the sun was coming up when he heard a commotion from around the corner of their apartment. Suspecting what might be happening from earlier such raids, he peered down the street just in time to see his family being loaded into the back of a lorry and hauled away.

Surprisingly, as I look back on that scene, I remember feeling little sadness at the moment. Perhaps I was numb from the lives we had been living for the past fifteen months. Perhaps it was simply expectancy. If anything, hatred became only harder and more crystal clear in my soul. I knew then that I was not going to abide by Poppa's guidance of staying put and staying quiet. I was going to survive by doing whatever was needed.

Survival started immediately with that scene. Knowing how efficient the German bureaucracy was, it wouldn't be too long before they noticed I hadn't been swept up. I needed to disappear before that happened. The resistance groups around Warsaw seemed to offer my best chances for survival.

Working in the jazz scene is a sort of half life. One simply learns about what happens in the underworld. Sewers were the highways of the resistance underworld. Fighters could move easily all over the city without drawing attention to themselves. My new profession was to be a sewer rat.

Finding a contact wasn't too hard. I needed only to ask a few questions to find the man I needed: Walter Lebowitz. I first met him in his favorite bar after he got off work.

Walter was a man of medium size weighing 170 pounds. His mustache was grimy from long hours in the city's cesspools. As he looked at me, I could see tired eyes that had seen poverty with little hope of improvement. His hands were thick from unceasing labor moving debris along the sewer pipelines. His clothing stunk of his profession. Altogether, he was a laborer such as I had never seen during my pleasant childhood years. Now I was asking to become one.

"You're Mr. Lebowitz?"

Looking at Lech suspiciously, he asked, "Who wants to know?"

Lech replied, "I'm sorry. I'm Lech Karnsky, and I'm looking for a job in the sewers."

Grabbing Lech's hands and turning them over, Walter saw how soft they were, and he began to laugh.

"You? With these hands? What's your profession anyway?"

"Until the war came along, I was a music student. Now, I play jazz gigs in underground cafes."

"All right, so why the sewers?"

Looking at Walter squarely in the eye, Lech replied, "Because there's a lot of shit in this city that washed my family away, and I want to clean it up."

"You're a Yid aren't you?"

Lech nodded "yes."

"Well, that makes for problems. Nothing personal, but your types draw too much attention which makes things dangerous for the rest of us."

"Mr. Lebowitz, I'm 18 years old and weigh 185 pounds. I'm also pretty strong for my size. This means I can do a lot of work. I'm also willing to stay in the sewers for as long as need be."

Walter began looking at Lech with some interest as he pressed his point.

"Mr. Lebowitz, do you mind if I sit down? I'll draw less attention than standing up as I talk to you."

Walter motioned for him to take a chair.

Once seated, Lech spoke in a lower voice.

"Mr. Lebowitz, you and I both know the sewers let you control the city. Well, I have an excellent memory from having to learn so much music. Give me a month, and I'll know the

system backwards and capable of leading people safely anywhere they need to go. Besides, I want to use them to clean a lot of shit. Once it disappears, I can assure you no one will ever see it again."

Walter was laughing, but he was now really looking at Lech closely as he commented, "You're pretty assured about yourself aren't you?"

It was now Lech's turn to laugh as he replied, "Anyone growing up in a community of Jewish musicians learns to take care of themselves with assurance. They all think they're the best players in the world and everyone else is *scheisse*. So, yes, I learned assurance at an early age."

With that Walter stuck out his hand and said, "Lech, if you can shovel shit as well as you sling it, you've got a future in the sewers."

With that, I lived underground for the next three years.