

The Sound of Freedom



• KATHY KACER •



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To Maya and Elisheva –
a new generation.
And for Gabi and Jake –
with love as always.

—K.K.

*“There are two possibilities for me:
To win through with all my plans, or to fail.
If I win, I shall be one of the greatest men in history.
If I fail, I shall be condemned and despised.”*

—ADOLF HITLER¹

*“One has to build a fist against anti-Semitism.
A first class orchestra will be this fist.”*

—BRONISLAW HUBERMAN²



“Last one to the bakery has to pay,” shouted Anna, bolting down the street.

“Wait, you didn’t warn me,” her friend Renata yelled before dashing after her.

The two girls raced, pigtails flying, through the streets of Krakow, on their way home from school. Anna thought she was comfortably in the lead until she glanced over her shoulder and realized that Renata was right on her heels. At the last second, Renata sprinted ahead of her and rounded the corner, coming to a stop in front of Mrs. Benna’s bakery shop.

“Not fair,” Anna said a moment later as she pulled up. She was panting heavily, and even though the air was cold and the wind was biting, she could feel the sweat rolling down her back under her heavy jacket.

“What do you mean, not fair?” Renata replied. Her cheeks were flushed from the run. “It was your idea. And I’ll have my donut filled with chocolate, please.”

Anna raised her arms in defeat and entered the bakery with Renata. They quickly found a table and ordered their sweets.

Stopping at Mrs. Benna’s shop on the way home from school was a Tuesday afternoon tradition for the two girls. Tuesdays were when Anna’s father gave music lessons at their house. He was a gifted clarinetist who played in the famous Krakow Philharmonic Orchestra and lectured at the music academy. Many families in town lined up to send their children to learn to play clarinet from Anna’s father, the renowned Avrum Hirsch. So on Tuesdays, Anna had permission to stay out after school with Renata—that is, as long as the two of them also got some homework done.

“You have icing sugar all over your face,” Anna said after she and Renata had polished off their treats.

“Do I?” Renata reached up to brush the sugar and crumbs away. “It’s so good. I could eat donuts filled with chocolate all day long.”

“Agreed! Except that I’ll take mine filled with strawberry preserves.”

At that, Renata made a face. “Nothing is better than chocolate.”

Anna pushed her plate aside and pulled out her notebook. Mrs. Benna never minded when the girls came to her shop after school. “You set a good example for other young people who walk in here,” the shopkeeper said. As long as no one was lining up for their table, Mrs. Benna said they could stay as long as they wanted.

Anna flipped through the pages of her math assignment and chewed on the end of her pencil. “I don’t know how I’d get through math without you,” she said, looking up at Renata.

“You’re just as smart as I am,” Renata replied. “Just in different subjects. I’m better with numbers, but you’re the one who helps me with literature.”

Anna and Renata had been great friends for years, ever since they started school, spotting each other across the classroom and exchanging smiles. They met each weekday morning at Anna’s corner to walk together to school. Now, at age twelve, they were as close as sisters. Baba, Anna’s grandmother, always said they could have been twins with their jet-black curly hair and dark eyes. But when it came to their studies, they were as different as they could possibly be. Anna loved to read while Renata could untangle a math equation faster than anyone in the class. Anna loved art while Renata always claimed she had ten thumbs when it came to drawing or painting. Anna

loved music, and even though Renata took clarinet lessons from Anna's father, she hated to practice. Anna always reasoned that the differences between them were what made them great friends—complements of each other and a perfect team. One couldn't manage without the other to help. Today was no exception. The girls finished off their homework in record time.

"Will you come over to my place?" Anna asked as they began to pack up their books. "Baba is making her famous beef stew."

"Sounds delicious!"

"And maybe she'll give us a cooking lesson." Anna's grandmother loved to cook.

Renata nodded. "Sure. My mother will be thrilled that I'm learning. She can barely make a cup of tea."

"It can't be that bad!"

"Trust me, it is. Last week, she burnt the chicken and served rice that was still as hard as gravel. I need all the help I can get."

"I'm sure Baba will be happy to include you. And then, when we're done, you can help me find a dress to wear to that concert that my father is playing in." That was another difference between the two girls. Renata loved to dress up while Anna didn't give a thought to fashion and "girly" things. Baba was the

one who always insisted that she wind hair ribbons around her long pigtails, or wear fancy dresses. Anna found all of that so tiresome.

“You can borrow my scarf,” Renata said, tugging at the bright green silk that stood out against her shiny coal-black eyes. “It’ll be perfect with just about anything in your closet.”

Just then, the bell above the door to the bakery shop rang and a group of boys entered. Anna recognized them from school, though she didn’t have much to do with them. They were older and a couple of grades ahead. And they usually kept to themselves—that is, unless they were going after the weaker kids at school. They had that nasty reputation. Lately, they seemed to be targeting Jewish kids. Another boy from their school had been chased home by one of these boys. Everyone was talking about it. The bully threw rocks at the younger boy and shouted terrible insults. Anna and Renata looked at each other nervously. Both of them were Jewish, and they knew that it was better to stay away from these boys.

The boys were jostling one another and talking loudly. One pounded his fist on the counter and demanded, “Hey, we need some service.”

Mrs. Benna approached from the other side of the shop. Her eyes flashed and her mouth narrowed

into a thin line. “There will be none of that in my restaurant,” she said sternly. “If you don’t show better manners, then I want you out of here.”

The boy who had banged on the counter took a step toward Mrs. Benna. He was just about to say something when one of his friends grabbed him by the arm. “Come on. Let’s find somewhere else to go. This isn’t worth it.”

And with that, the boys turned and left. Anna exhaled a long, deep breath and shuddered.

“Those boys give me the creeps,” Renata said.

Anna nodded, a knot settling in the pit of her stomach. And it wasn’t just the boys that made her nervous. They were simply a reminder of the other troubles that seemed to be descending on her city of Krakow and across all of Poland. Lately, she had heard stories of Jewish people being attacked on the streets, pushed off the sidewalk and made to walk in the gutter, or forced to pick up garbage. At first, the victims were the most observant Jewish men, those with long beards, full-length coats, and bowler hats. They stood out and were easily targeted. But more recently, the violence had spread to the general Jewish community—people not unlike Anna and Renata.

Her baba had said that everything changed when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. She called him a maniac and said he’d made everyone feel unsafe.

“My parents have been talking a lot about what’s happening to Jewish families,” Renata was saying. “The attacks, the name calling. They’re afraid those things are only the beginning.”

“The beginning of what?” Anna put her coat on and grabbed her bag of books.

Renata shook her head.

“I don’t think anything worse is going to happen,” Anna continued, although what her friend said was making her even more anxious now. And it didn’t help that when they were thanking Mrs. Benna and saying good-bye, the shopkeeper leaned closer and said, “I’d stay away from those boys if I were you. One at a time, they’re a nuisance. But a group of them ...”

She didn’t finish the sentence. And Anna didn’t want to hear any more. She linked her arm in Renata’s and pulled her out of the bakery shop. Outside, Anna flipped her thick-braided pigtails off her shoulders, pulled her knitted cap down on her head, and lifted the collar of her coat up around her ears. She needed to steer the conversation to a better place. “My father might still be teaching when we get to my house. So we’ll have to be really quiet until his student leaves.”

Renata remained silent.

“Are you okay?” Anna asked, turning to look at her friend.

Renata still looked troubled. "Those boys ..."

"Don't be afraid of them, Renata," Anna said, mustering more certainty than she was feeling. The girls were passing through the Jewish quarter of Krakow, where the streets pulsed with activity. This was familiar territory: the old synagogue Anna and her family attended for the high holidays on her right, restaurants that overflowed with patrons up ahead, and the market where Baba bought fruit and vegetables just around the corner.

"It's just that my parents keep listening to the news reports from other countries," Renata continued. "And the news isn't good. Even Mrs. Benna warned us to be careful."

"She just meant those boys. And we will."

"I suppose you're right," Renata replied. Then she shook her head as if she were trying to clear any nasty thoughts away. "I hope your grandmother has a couple of extra aprons. I like to make a mess when I cook."

Anna laughed and the two girls continued to wind their way home. Nothing terrible had happened, Anna thought, allowing herself to relax. And soon, she and Renata would be home and cooking with Baba. That was the last thought she had before she suddenly saw them again.



Anna yanked Renata's arm closer and pulled her to an abrupt stop. "Look!" She pointed ahead.

The boys from the bakery were emerging from Mr. Kaplansky's butcher shop, the place where Baba shopped for their meat. The butcher was a sweet man with a kind smile who had always had a candy for Anna when she accompanied her grandmother to his store. The boys were laughing and shoving one another. "You stay right there, old man," one of them called over his shoulder. "We're just going to do a little redecorating out here."

The anxiety Anna had felt earlier suddenly swelled once more. Something told her that they couldn't get in the middle of whatever was happening up ahead. Perhaps if they didn't move, they wouldn't be seen. She gripped Renata's arm more tightly.

One of the boys carried a small tin in one hand. In the other hand, he held a paintbrush. Had he been holding those things when they were in Mrs. Benna's store? Anna couldn't remember. While the boy's friends stood and watched, he dipped the brush in the tin and began to paint on the large window in front of Mr. Kaplansky's store. He painted big, black strokes—up, down, and across, while his friends egged him on. A moment later, he stood back. There on the store window was a giant Star of David. "Don't stop!" another boy demanded. "Finish it off!"

Anna and Renata remained glued to their spot. Behind her collar, Anna's face had grown hot. Suddenly, she spied Mr. Kaplansky staring at the boys from his doorway. His eyes were dark and angry. One of the boys spotted him and shouted, "Hey, we told you to stay inside." The butcher quickly ducked back into his shop.

Anna glanced around. *Why doesn't someone do something?* she wondered desperately. The street had become strangely quiet, and those few people who were out hurried by, burying their faces into their jackets and scarves.

Just then, Anna spotted Constable Zabek, the police chief, approaching from around the corner. His daughter Sabina also attended Anna's school. *Finally!* Anna breathed a sigh of relief. Help had

arrived. Constable Zabek was a portly man, and the front of his uniform was pulled tight across his round belly, the buttons threatening to pop. The police chief strolled over to Mr. Kaplansky's store and took a long look at the scene in front of him. But instead of doing anything, instead of shouting at the boys to stop, or driving them off, or even arresting them, the police chief simply stood next to Mr. Kaplansky's shop with his hands clasped behind his back. He had a small smile on his face and watched everything that was happening with a detached kind of curiosity, as if he were watching a crowd of children in the playground.

The boys continued to jeer. "Finish it. *Finish it*. FINISH IT!" Each chant grew louder than the one before. And as they repeated this refrain, the boy with the paint can dipped his brush once more and then painted a slow, thick X through the Star of David. His message was clear. Jews were not wanted here.

Constable Zabek looked over at Anna and Renata, who were still frozen. He pulled himself to his fullest height. "You're not here to look at the view," he bellowed. "Move on!"

That was all it took. Anna and Renata grabbed hands, and together they ran. It was only when they reached the corner, close to their houses, that Renata pulled free and faced Anna.

"I'm going home," she said.

“But I thought you were coming over.”

“Not now. I can’t. I need to go home. I’m sorry, Anna.”

And with that, Renata took off in the opposite direction. Anna felt another chill surround her as she turned and headed for home.