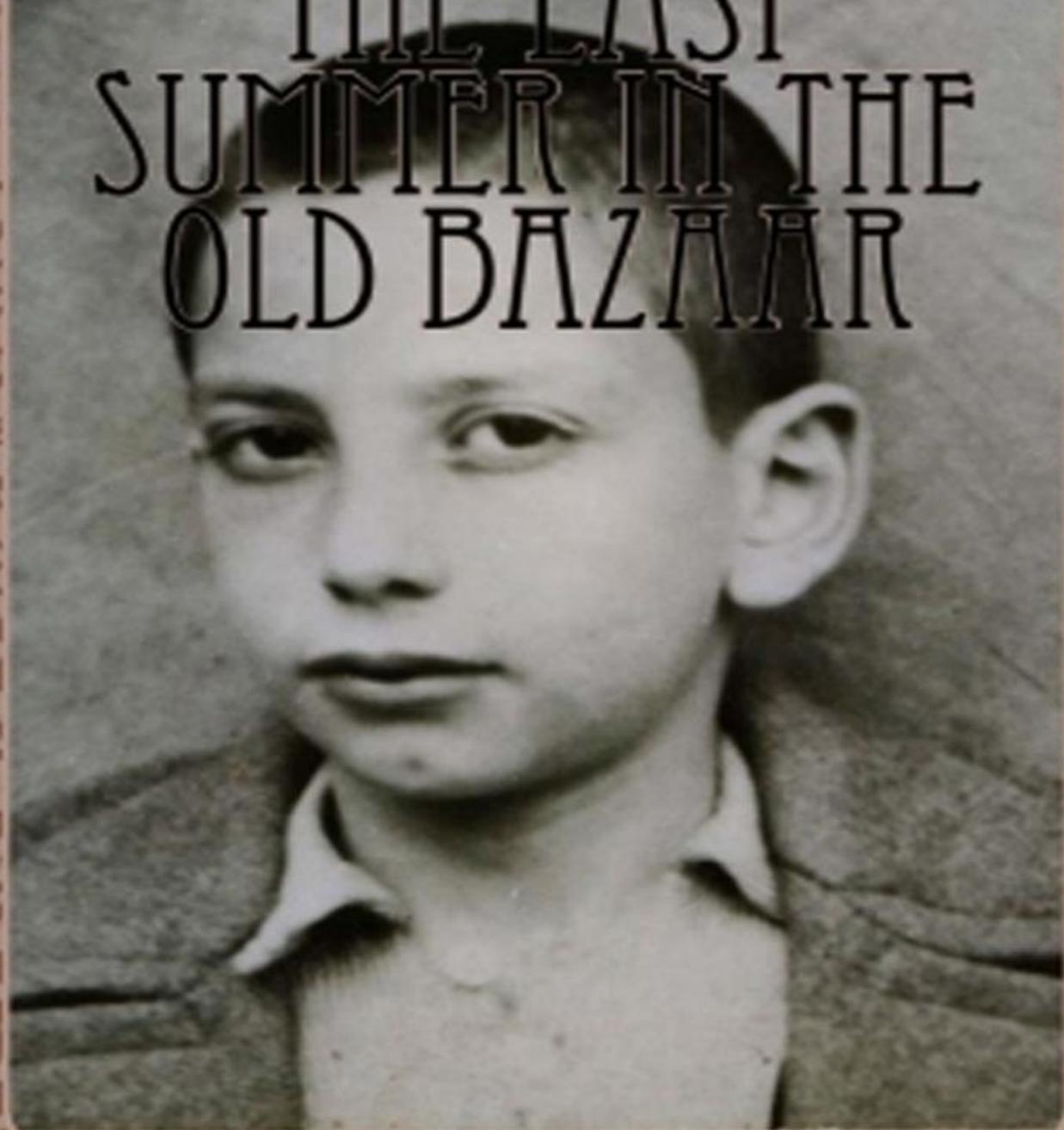


THE LAST
SUMMER IN THE
OLD BAZAAR



Vera Bužarovska

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE LAST SUMMER IN THE OLD BAZAAR

First edition. May 27, 2015.

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ISBN: 978-1511646383

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Chapter 1



It was early in the morning when I arrived at the small restaurant in the Old Bazaar for the first time. I looked around with real curiosity. After a while, I decided it looked like a chicken coop.

Two round copper pots bubbled on top of the braziers. The smell of boiling soup hanging in the air could wake even the sleepest of stomachs. The restaurant walls were yellowed with smoke, who knows when they'd last been whitewashed. The place was crawling with insects. Drawn by the warmth, they sat in clumps on the windowpanes, peering through the dark glass. They crawled over the tables, scabbled over the bowls and then took up their position by the windows again.

Everything in the restaurant was carefully arranged, everything had its place—two dusty tables, four long benches, the chair where Gazda¹ Mito sat, his pigeonhole-sized cupboard in front of him.

The floor was a caked carpet of thick mud. Thin netting covered the corners where traps had been set up for all sorts of small creatures.

After I'd inspected everything, I stole a glance at Gazda Mito's hung-over face. He was stretched out and snoring on one of the benches. I wasn't sure whether I should wake him but, in the end, I whispered, "Gazda, should I do some work?"

"Ah," he answered sleepily. "Of course, do some work, that's why you're here."

He got up, rubbed his sweaty neck and tottered over to the washbasin as if walking a tightrope. When he'd woken up a bit more, he said, "Now fetch some water. And, when those two scoundrels get back, you'll go with them to the slaughterhouse."

I peeked over at the washbasin and saw two big copper kettles. They were just above knee-height. My eyebrows shot up but I didn't want Gazda Mito to think I was weak, so I grabbed the kettles and made my way over to the stairs. When I got there, I remembered to ask, "Where do you get water? Where should I fill them?"

"From the pump opposite the inns," I heard him say behind me, so I ran quickly down the two concrete steps. My wooden sandals were slippery and my feet slid all over the uneven cobblestones.

Out in the Old Bazaar, the shutters on the small shops, lining the alleyways, creaked open and scruffy heads peered out at me. The shops looked like crooked matchboxes, leaning this way and that along the winding lanes. I loved the Old Bazaar. It was peaceful here and familiar. To me, this world was neither strange nor unreal.

At the corner, opposite the small restaurant, was a barbershop. In front, a shorthaired boy sat on a chair, which had been turned backwards, as if he were sitting on a horse. It would be some time before he'd learn the skills of barbering, I thought to myself, inasmuch as the men around the Old Bazaar never seemed to cut their hair or shave.

On the left was Shukri's forge. The hammer blows on the anvils rang out like thunder and the bellows heaved. When the lemonade-seller's clinking bottles were added to the mix, the Old Bazaar sounded like an orchestra.

I took small steps along the street. My eyes wandered over the shop fronts, reading the names of their owners, which had been slapped on with paint. I quickly learned all their names and their crafts. When I came to the second crossroads, I noticed all the inns lined the small square where I was told I would find the pump. The most popular inn here belonged to innkeeper, Stevo's wife. God had made her a widow but had left her a son; they worked and lived together at the inn.

It was mid-July. The sky hung low over the baking roofs and it was unbearably hot. I tried carrying the kettles up high but their weight dragged me down. They tilted my spine and, in my wooden sandals, my feet felt like two thin sticks, threatening to break at any moment from the weight of the kettles. I put the kettles down on the cobblestones and blew onto my reddened palms. Hot and tired, I cursed the person who'd made them so big. I looked down the length of the street and shuddered. If I continued to rest after each step, I'd never get back. Mustering the last of my strength, I pushed on. Barely keeping my balance, I strained my muscles and counted each step, trying to see how much further I had to go.

Among the neighbors was a Russian woman who took in hungry, homeless cats. Suddenly, a strange thought came to mind, instead of being born a person, I could have been born a cat, which is fed and taken care of. The idea disturbed me, so I gripped the handles of the kettles even tighter.

When I got back to the restaurant, two pairs of hostile eyes greeted me. Two boys were sitting on the stairs in front of the restaurant, staring at me like I was a devil. They were about twelve years old but quite different from each other. One was dark, with a long face and straight, oily hair. The other had curly red hair, a ruddy nose and a round head, like a watermelon.

When Gazda Mito saw me, he shouted at them, "Why are you standing around like cattle? Why don't you take the kettles from her?"

They sprang up suddenly as if they had been startled from a dream and took the kettles from me. The restaurant began to feel like a crowded coop filled with angry chickens. The boys grumbled and I stared back at them, angrily. I got the feeling, if they could have, they would have booted me out the same door I had entered that morning—they saw me as a threat to their daily crust. They glared at me in silence, like I was a traitor and I stared back—we were sizing each other up as if preparing for a fight.

Gazda Mito told me their names. The one with the long face was Sami; the other one with the curly hair, who looked Jewish, was Leon. I thought, *he'd probably been given a longer name at birth, just as I had. No doubt he'd been called Leonid.*

Either trouble followed me or me it; I'm not sure which. In any case, Gazda Mito sent the three of us to the slaughterhouse. We walked out, one after the other, bristling like cats. The two boys walked in front while I followed behind, keeping them firmly in my sight. When they turned the first corner they whispered something to one another and took off quickly. But there was no way I was going to let them get away. I took my sandals in my

hands and ran after them, the sharp, uneven stones cutting my feet like knives. Despite the pain, I kept going and eventually caught up to them. They stopped, extended their arms surrounding me, holding me in a tight grip.

“Where are you going?” Sami shouted, staring straight into my eyes.

“Where Gazda Mito sent me,” I replied, defiantly.

“Then go alone. Why are you glued to us?” one of them said.

“I don’t know where the slaughterhouse is, otherwise ...”

The position they were holding me in became unbearable. I made my body into a ball and tried to get out from under their rough grasp but, guessing what I was up to, they gripped me even tighter, like pliers.

“Let go of me,” I shouted, close to tears.

“Listen,” Sami said, sharply, “D’you see the sun?”

I looked up at the round ball and said, “Yes, I do. So what?”

“If you can understand Kauriski,² tonight when the sun disappears behind the hill, make sure you’re gone from the Old Bazaar, as well.”

I knew exactly what he meant but I wanted to stir them up a bit and said, “Got it, sir. But tomorrow when the sun returns, I’ll be back here again.”

“Don’t ever come back here again. Have you got that?”

“How am I supposed to understand you when I don’t speak that gibberish?” I replied.

Their anger erupted and sparks darted from Sami’s small eyes when he spoke. “I’m warning you—make sure you’re gone from the Old Bazaar.”

“I’ll leave the Old Bazaar,” I said, going right up to his nose, “when your father hands you the deed to it.”

I wanted to say more but I suddenly felt a strong pain in my shoulder.

“Just wait and see how your bones are going to crack when I grind them,” Sami said, gripping me harder.

I was determined to hold out to the end and replied, “I’ll be back and I’ll tell Gazda Mito about you. Then we’ll see who disappears from the Old Bazaar—me or you.”

Leon, who was far more good-natured and timid, grabbed him by the hand, the way you would hold on to an old friend and pleaded with him, “Let her go. The hell with her. Can’t you see she’s a blabbermouth? She’ll tell Gazda Mito on us.”

I stole a glance at Sami. I wanted to see if Leon’s words would have an impact and if I could find a way of escaping. I watched and listened carefully.

“You want me to let her go?” Sami said, pulling his hand away from Leon, in disgust. “Are you afraid of a little alley cat? A silly little girl?”

“Listen,” I interrupted. “Let’s make a deal; if you let me come with you to the slaughterhouse now, then tonight I’ll take you to the quarter where I live and show you

lots of strange things.”

“What things?” Sami asked, skeptically.

“You’ll see later,” I said, wanting to get away.

He put out his foot to stop me and said, “Tell us now, otherwise you’re not taking another step.”

“I’m not telling you now,” I replied, offhandedly.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Near the abandoned hospital.”

“There’s nothing interesting there,” he said, annoyed, as if he knew the whole city.

Leon thought about it and asked, “Is your quarter big?”

“Of course it is. It starts at Lenski Bridge and goes all the way to the station. Our street is very interesting, small—an alley. First, you enter through a narrow passageway, narrower than four feet. After that, it becomes a bit wider and starts to wind. Now listen carefully,” I said, trying not to seem too desperate. “There’s a building just where the alley widens, but it’s no ordinary building. It’s long with small windows. It looks like a dungeon. There are two gates on either side. They’re huge—as high as this shop here on the corner.”

They looked at me doubtfully and Sami sneered, “So what if it has gates like that. What’s so important about that?”

“The gates might not be important, but the hospital is.”

It was obvious they didn’t understand much but they weren’t about to wait for me to explain.

Leon said, “What is that hospital?”

“You morons. You mean you don’t know it? Well, it’s an old abandoned building whose walls are the only things left standing. The entry doors are blocked and there’s no way in. But I know a secret entrance. And it leads all the way to the basement. They say there are gold kettles buried there, really big ones.”

“How do you know that when you’ve never seen them? You just made that up,” Sami retorted.

“I didn’t make anything up. But, if you take me with you now to the slaughterhouse, I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

“Stay here,” Sami ordered. He grabbed Leon by the shoulder and took him aside to confer.

Standing alone, I looked further down the road. A ditch divided the livestock market from the Jewish quarter. The sticky summer had started early, drying out the road and kicking up a thick dust. The houses were in no particular order; big ones stood next to small ones, old ones next to new ones, everything was built haphazardly. Painted various

colors, the façades made for a strange patchwork. A few pigs grunted in a muddy ditch. I looked at everything and was overcome by the quiet sadness of the street.

First, I saw Sami's shadow in front of me and then his long face. He stood before me and said, "OK, you can come with us. But keep ten paces behind and don't come an inch closer. And ... carry the buckets."

I nodded in agreement, put my sandals back on and shuffled after them. They knew all the roads but I was worried I'd lose sight of them because they were constantly whispering to each other, which infuriated me—I was desperately trying to think of a way out.

When we got near the slaughterhouse, Sami whistled through his teeth, gesturing at me with his hand and I rushed on. I hated having to be obedient but, still, I listened and obeyed him.

When I got near them, Sami ordered, "Stop there."

I stood aside while they paced around self-importantly, as if they were inspecting something. The building was long and dirty with peeling walls. It looked more like a barn than a slaughterhouse.

The sounds here were strange; on the left side, the river murmured quietly, inside the slaughterhouse sheep bleated and cows mooed, while outside, trucks roared by noisily and cartwheels creaked. You could also hear the shrieks of barefoot children. Every now and then, a shot from a revolver rang out.

Sami came closer to me and told me to follow him. Everything was making me suspicious and uneasy, so I followed them cautiously. Coming to the back of the slaughterhouse, there was a small field with wooden stalls. Sami and Leon hid behind a crumbling wall and ordered me to crouch down beside them.

"Why?" I asked, tired of giving in to all their demands.

"So you don't get your head blown off," Sami replied, pleased for having more sense than I had.

"Why are there soldiers here?" I asked, wanting to know everything.

"They're not soldiers. They're Germans," he said, trying to impress me.

"I know they're Germans but what are they doing here?"

"Keep quiet and just watch," he said. "And if you faint from what you see, I'll have to slap you to bring you back to life."

"I'm not scared of anything. I've even seen a dead person," I said.

Leon was crouching beside us, watching curiously and quietly.

I heard another shot and, when I looked, I shivered at the sight; a horse was slumped in the wooden stall, attempting, in a last-ditch effort, to escape its inevitable death. Suddenly, at that moment, another bullet rang out and the horse lay entirely still.

Sami approached me and whispered in my ear, "Did you see that? Another horse will get it now."

“Why are they killing them?” I asked, aware for the first time he knew something I didn’t.

The expression on his face changed. He puffed up like a peacock and said confidently, “The Germans eat horse meat.”

“Let’s go. There’s nothing else to be seen here,” I said, keen to avoid more terrible sights.

“She’s scared,” I heard a sarcastic voice say.

“No,” I whispered, not wanting to give myself away.

Leon felt the same way I did, so we agreed to abandon the wall. I didn’t want to be the first to leave and lose sight of these two thugs. But the sound of another gunshot would have ripped right through me and it would have been difficult to stay calm.

The sun was high; its rays beat down on us and bounced off the red curls on Leon’s head. Sami kicked listlessly at the dirt and got up to leave. Leon and I followed him. Near the door to the slaughterhouse, we found our buckets filled with steaming animal entrails that stank.

“Pick up the buckets.” Sammy ordered.

“What?” I said, astonished. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“Pick them up and go down to the river and clean them. Or I’ll make you lick ‘em clean.” Sami shouted at me.

I glanced at him, knowing I was too small and weak to retaliate.

“You don’t need your sandals to dip your feet in the water,” he said. “Give them to Leon.”

“They’re my sandals and I’m not giving them to anyone.” I said.

“If you go into the river with them, the water will drag them off you,” he warned. “Either way, the leeches are going to come and suck your blood.”

I didn’t want to listen to anything else he had to say. I looked at the leeches—those small, disgusting creatures with dark green flesh—and shuddered.

“Leave your sandals and go to the river,” he yelled.

Jagged acacia trees grew along the river. The water was strong and powerful, rushing over the stones and splashing loudly. In places, the water had driven piles that snagged grass and old rags. On both sides of the river, crumbling cottages lined the winding alleys, looking like a row of sleepy, old people.

I handed over my wooden sandals without a fight and stood aside. Leon quickly tried them on and a huge smile lit up his face. They looked as if they had been carved just for him. I looked at my bare feet while he marched back and forth like a soldier on guard duty. I wanted them back.

“The straps will break,” I said, tearfully.

Sami pulled out a small knife from his pocket and flicked its blade. He headed straight for me, as if he was going to stick the knife into my chest. I tried not to show my fear. I waited silently. When he was quite close, he handed it to me and said, “Here’s the knife. Now go down to the river and clean and chop up the entrails.”

Just as I was about to leave he said, “Hang on—I’ll carry the buckets because if they spill out, Gazda Mito will give us hell.”

I shuffled off barefoot in the dust and ran after him, secretly plotting my revenge. An idea suddenly flashed into my mind; *I’ll trick them and I won’t take them to the abandoned hospital tonight. They’ll find out just who I am, those alley rats.* I felt much better after this and went into the river.

The gurgling sound of the river, with its many small dangers lying in wait, frightened me. I fought hard against a cruel fate that always seemed to surround me. But all of a sudden, we quickly became friends and the water flowed around me obediently.

My work kept me busy and the day passed quickly. At the end of the day, the sun sank behind a big hill and it suddenly turned cooler. Soon, the noise in the Old Bazaar died down. Suddenly, the wooden and iron shutters banged closed and a cold and empty darkness fell over the uneven cobblestones. The friendly world of the Old Bazaar slowly became deserted and it settled down to rest.

All day, I had been mulling over things in my mind. When it got dark, Gazda Mito gave me permission to go and I left without being seen.

The streets in the Old Bazaar were short, no more than thirty to sixty feet long and they crisscrossed one another. I avoided a few of them so I could cover my tracks, in case Sami and Leon discovered me. When I reached the wooden bridge near my quarter, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I held on to the wooden rails of the bridge and started walking across it. I couldn’t help smiling at my victory but then, all of a sudden, behind me, I heard someone out of breath and I recognized Sami’s rough voice, “Grab her.”

I felt a sharp pain across the top of my head. They grabbed me by the hair and started dragging me back. I pressed the palms of my hands against my head to stop them from pulling my hair and turned around quickly.

“You’re not going to get away from us,” Sami said, dragging me even harder.

“Let go of me, you ape,” I shouted in agony, thinking how to get myself out of this hopeless situation.

I punched his bony ribs a few times and made him let go of my hair but he grabbed me by my wrists, instead.

“So, you wanted to get away from us?”

“I’ll take you to the hospital tomorrow,” I lied so I could get free.

“No, you’ll take us now.”

“I won’t.”

“What did you say?” he asked slowly.

“I said I’m not taking you and you’re nothing but a piece of garbage.”

He let go of my wrists suddenly and slapped me across the ear. I stumbled but tried to remain on my feet. Leon stood near us, pale and frightened, muttering something.

“Now get a move on and lead the way or I’ll give you another slap,” he ordered, gruffly.

I went on ahead, clenching my teeth in anger. Then, suddenly, I turned around to look at them and said, “Keep ten paces from me and don’t come one inch closer.”

They were cornered—afraid I might escape again. Leon wiped the sweat from his dusty face with his sleeve. I tried to stay calm, acting as if I didn’t care. I was trying to think of a way I could convince them to let me go. Soon, the Old Bazaar came to an end and the street, which was next to mine, began. I slowed down to gain some time but Sami was on to me and said, “You want to trick us, don’t you?”

“No,” I said and then added, “But I’m afraid.”

“Of what?” he asked.

I stood on the pavement. “It would be really dangerous for you to come to our street tonight.”

“Dangerous? Why?” he asked, looking me in the eye.

“Well ...” I started to say, waving my hands in the air. “The only thing separating our yard from the Kavaev’s yard is a wall and every Wednesday Mr. and Mrs. Kavaev have visitors.”

“So what?”

I tried to frighten them, “The Chief of Police is always invited and, when he’s here, it’s full of policemen from one end of our alley to the other. I know all this because I’m friends with the Kavaev’s daughter.”

This explanation seemed to worry only Leon. He quickly took the yellow patch off his shirt, which all the Jews had to wear, and put it in the pocket of his torn pants. Sami finally understood the real danger. His courage and fighting spirit disappeared. Suddenly, he seemed small and rather stupid, even though he was a foot taller than I was. He looked at me suspiciously, trying to determine if what I had told them was just a lie.

I took advantage of their uncertainty and added, “I live here and everyone knows me but I can’t promise you anything. If you’re scared, it would be better if you just went back the way you came.”

They looked at me, skeptically. Leon was ready to give up but Sami grabbed his elbow and said, “Don’t believe her. She’s lying. She just wants to get away.”

Then they suddenly made ready to go. “No,” I stopped them. “Wait.”

“What?” Sami asked barely hiding his anger.

“Listen. Our house has two entrances, two gates, d’you follow me? One from the alley and the other from the main street.”

This was something new to them and they started thinking about things again.

“Come on, stop dreaming,” I called to them and took off without waiting. They followed me quietly, looking around on all sides, like scared rabbits.

It was almost dark. There was tension in the air. Without anyone seeing, I brought them over to the gate, the one on the main street. Behind it, the yard was overgrown with trees and bushes.

Our gate was small and low. It was locked from the inside with a chain. However, I knew how to put my hand through a crack and open it. When I had done that, I grabbed the bell and stuffed it with a hanky so it wouldn't ring. Therefore, there would be no chance of anyone seeing us entering the yard. I made a sign for them to enter under the cover of darkness, even though I knew there wouldn't be anyone in the yard at that time.

Right up against our tiny shack was a tall, yellow building whose threshold I had never crossed. The Kavaev family lived there. They didn't want to mix with their poor neighbors. When they first moved here, we shared a small wooden fence but later they built a high wall and shut themselves up completely in their own world.

For a long time, I tried to climb the wall so there wouldn't be any secrets from the other side. My efforts paid off. Every night, without being seen, I would crouch on the wall and learn everything that went on in their house. What I found most unusual was all the strange food served at dinner. And compared to us, their behavior was different— weird and stuck up.

The first step to climbing the wall was to get onto the roof of our washhouse, which I reached by climbing the large quince tree in our yard. From there, it was easy to climb onto the wall. I told Sami and Leon about my discovery and they climbed up together with me. When we were on the roof, I whispered to them, “Now you'll get to see the Chief of Police up close.”

Soft and gentle music was coming from the other side.

“Is their radio playing?” asked Sami.

“That's not a radio. It's a piano,” I said self-importantly, moving my fingers as if I were playing one.

We sat on the high wall, crouched side by side, and looked on at this rare sight. Mrs. Kavaev's short wrinkled fingers ran lightly over the black and white piano keys. A younger lady, who was walking around the room with a glass in her hand, looked up at the ceiling with half-closed eyes, as if she were seeking God. She went up to the Chief of Police and said, “Bach is my weakness.”

Bach is her weakness, I repeated to myself, trying to guess who in our street that might be. I thought of the writer who lived at the end of our alley. He rubbed sherbet in his hair to make it shiny, straight and to keep the wind from tousling it. I was sure he was Bach and continued listening.

The Chief of Police sat in a velvet armchair, smoking a big pipe. He was squeezed into a too tight uniform, making him look like a monkey in a cage. Silver braids, like those on

the dress of a village bride, sparkled on his chest, while he dozed, resembling a stuffed turkey.

Pots hung from a balcony on the other side of the wall. Clumsily, Leon slipped, sending one of the flowerpots crashing to the marble floor. At that moment, my heart started to pound. Our bones shook. We quickly went back the way we came.

As Sami was climbing back down the quince tree, a sharp branch pierced his skin, leaving a red mark. He curled up with pain but he didn't cry out. When we got back to the gate, I said, "Now get out of here. I'll show you the other things tomorrow."

Not waiting to hear their reply, I went inside and shut the gate behind me. I felt much better after they left. *If I'm able to trick them this easily today, then tomorrow it would be even easier.* I jumped into bed without dinner and without talking to anyone, because my worries were my own concern.

Chapter 2



The next day I got up with the sun. As it climbed over the low rooftops, it gave them the appearance of orange peel. I dragged my feet sleepily along the uneven cobblestones, my wooden sandals beating a steady rhythm.

The way I saw it, someone was responsible for creating the world but there was one thing that really puzzled me—why hadn't that someone who created the world made it all the same instead of making it a mixture of good and evil? In the world of good things, I placed Gazda Mito, his small restaurant and the food he gave us to eat. In the world of evil things, I placed those who had taken my father away by force to the village of Svetorače.³ I divided my world that way so I could understand it better.

If someone asked me what war was, I would say, "War is when villages south of our city are set on fire with cannons, when we are surrounded on all sides by an army and when we are left without any bread to eat. War is when fathers are sent to prison in Svetorače, when mothers have to patch the holes in our clothes twice over and when children have to wear knitted socks instead of shoes."

During the war, two agents moved in near Baba Marionka's place. They were looking for the bell-ringer's sons who were partisans.⁴ One of them was often locked up in prison.

I wanted to gain Gazda Mito's trust and get to the restaurant in the morning before the shutters were opened. I got up so early to get to the restaurant before Sami and Leon got there. However, as soon as I crossed the bridge and came to the small crossroads, a sharp whistle blew and those two mischief-makers appeared.

They stuck out their chests, blocking my path. We sized one another up. I knew I was no match for their strength but I was sure I was smarter than they were. Suddenly, they seemed small and insignificant to me.

Sami pointed at his face and said, "D'you see this?"

I didn't have to get too close to him to see the dark gash across his cheek, starting at his temple and ending just below his chin.

"It wasn't me who gave you that cut," I said, trying not to place too much importance on what had happened to him. "It's all Leon's fault. He pushed over the pot and that's why we ran off."

"I got this cut when I was in your yard," he said, furious.

"No one forced you to come into our yard. You came because you wanted to," I said, putting up a fight.

"You said you were going to show us the hospital but all you did was take us to an ordinary old yard."

"The yard might have been ordinary but the Chief of Police wasn't ordinary."

“We don’t care about police chiefs.”

“Well, that’s not my problem. Now get out of the way.”

I was sure Leon was weaker and more frightened, so I pushed him out of the way and snuck past them. Behind me, I heard, “Why did you let her go, stupid? She’s a relative of Gazda Mito. We’ll lose our jobs now because of her.”

Leon heard Sami’s warning and they both ran after me. The road seemed quite long. After a while, I stopped to wipe the sweat off my brow. I realized I would have to face them, if I were going to clear things up with them. In a strong voice, I asked them, “What do you want from me?”

“To make a deal,” answered Sami.

“I haven’t anything to sell and I don’t want anything from either of you. Plus, I don’t deal with thieves.”

“Who are you calling a thief?” Sami asked. He was deeply offended and he clenched his bony fists, ready to take a swing at me.

“Wait,” Leon said, pushing him back. “She probably means me.”

I could easily stand up to Leon. He was scared and meek and, if Sami wasn’t by his side, he would have been even smaller.

“What I just said goes for you, as well,” I added to Leon, firmly. “Take a good look at yourselves. You both look as if you’ve been rummaging through the dump.”

Without thinking, they inspected themselves from head to toe. I continued with my attack, “You’re grubby and dressed in rags. You don’t even go to school and the only thing you know how to do is fight. And who with? With girls. If you’re such a couple of big heroes, why don’t you come over to my quarter and fight Laze.”

“Laze,” they repeated his name and sniggered as if there was no boy in the city they couldn’t fight.

Sami winked at Leon. He stepped forward and said, “Who’s this moron, Laze, anyway?”

“All he has to do is knock you flat just once and you’ll remember him for the rest of your lives,” I said, walking away to see if they would try to stop me. They followed me, clearly interested in what I had just said.

“Well, just let him come over to the Albanian quarter and try it. He won’t forget me either,” said Sami.

“See what I mean—you’re afraid of him.”

“Afraid. Who me?”

“You, of course—who else,” I said and started to walk off.

I was pleased when I saw them start to follow. A warm and wonderful feeling came over me. One thing I know for sure is that there are two kinds of people in this world, winners and losers. Nevertheless, victory doesn’t come easy. It comes from hard work.

And once you gain it, you have to defend it or you could lose it. I walked ahead slowly, in front of them, quietly confident.

The day soon settled down. The three of us remained silent as we worked in the restaurant, occasionally hurling dirty looks at one another. In the afternoon, when the racket in the Old Bazaar lessened, I sat and watched life and its entire goings on. I wanted to find out everything about it—about the everyday lives of those ordinary people, who knew when to be happy and when to be sad.

Opposite Gazda Mito's restaurant was a small shop, where Petko, the shoemaker, earned his living. If he didn't get the chance to crack a few jokes, his day would drag. He poked his head out of his small shop like a turtle and yelled, "Hey, Georgi. What happened to that pound of liver you bought?"

The monotony of the Old Bazaar was suddenly broken. From the other side of the street, innkeeper Vanko joined in on the joke and said, "The cat ate it."

The fate of others affected me deeply. Later, when Leon came and sat down beside me, I asked him to tell me what had happened to Georgi.

"One holiday, as a special treat, Georgi bought some liver for his children to eat. He left it on the table in his string bag but grocer Stevo's cat snuck up and took it, dragging it across the whole of the Old Bazaar. Georgi ran screaming and crying after the cat, begging it to let go of the liver but he gave up when he saw the cat licking its whiskers."

I felt as if my heart had been ripped out. These kinds of jokes from the Old Bazaar made me sad.

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