

The Righteous Among The Nations

Book Chapter

Kayla Petersen

Glad Tidings Assembly of God – Reading, PA

1785

Antonina Zielinski is uncertain about her future in Poland under the German Occupation, and she is not the only one. When the Jews she has grown up with are moved into the ghetto in their town of Lublin, she and her fiancé Andrzej decide to take action. Secretly, they begin to smuggle small children out of the ghetto, and take part in the underground resistance in Europe. The woman who had only talked about change becomes a part of it, and faces danger each day, all to save a few children of God.

All around the table, I see the faces of the family I love. The pierogi, pork, and crazy spread out on the white tablecloth alongside tea in the glasses of old and young alike, have been consumed. My younger sister and brothers are giggling, full of the heavy potatoes and meats they eat only on holidays. My short-bearded grandfather smiles at us all around him. I know that his faith in his beloved Poland has faltered since both the German and Soviet army invaded two autumns ago, and he longs to see it free again. This birthday celebration for my younger brother has done my grandfather good.

I stand, maneuvering around creaky wooden chairs, sideboards full of apple tarts, and scampering children to Grandfather's side. With his knotty, wrinkled hand, he takes my left hand with its simple ring on it and kisses it with his dry lips. "Is this man good enough for my little Antonina?"

"Not so little anymore," my mother declares as she refills my grandfather's teacup. He takes a sip, barely noticing that the tea is bitter without sugar. My mother smiles wistfully at me, and I know she's thinking of the young me, balancing on the doorstep in my Peter Pan collared dress and ankle socks, waiting for my grandfather to walk me to school, or for my best friend Helena to come running down the street from her own door, braids flying. "How quickly they grow up."

"Andrzej is a hardworking man; his shop on Klonawica Street has managed to stay open despite the lack of customers." I answer my grandfather's question as I hand him a cheap cigarette from the box beside the table.

"Is he coming today?" The birthday boy Eliazs peers around the doorframe from the kitchen into the dining room. Katarzyna pokes him in the back from behind, and as he squirms, she giggles mischievously.

“He won’t play with us, silly; he wants to talk to Antonina about grown-up things.” She smirks, and under her mess of curls, I can see her green eyes sparkle with glee. My grandfather and mother don’t laugh. They know how true this is. Andrzej and I spend hours with our friends talking, drinking pot after pot of weak coffee, and arguing about the fate of Poland, though the talk will do no good. Andrzej could stand for hours, one hand in the pocket of his trousers, the other gesturing dramatically about a point he is trying to make to another one of his stubborn friends. That is how we all are – all talk and no real ideas about what it is that we can do.

The winter after Poland was invaded and so easily conquered by the Germans, I would spend many evenings with Andrzej at skinny Tomasz’s apartment on Gmila Konopnica. At first I would shout just as loudly as the rest, but soon I stopped rising at every opportunity to shake my fist and let my voice go hoarse over yet another possibility.

One cold night, the parlor was full to bursting with people and ideas - more so than usual - for a group of university students from Warsaw had joined us. Many voices joined the din, but one quiet man in a tweed coat and vest stayed silent, watching through wire-rimmed glasses.

“The Germans will not just leave Poland!”

“Nonsense. It is a matter of time before they grow tired of us.”

“Grow tired? They will not stop until we are all Fascist like them!”

Tomasz folded his arms over his chest at the last declaration made by red-faced Bartek.

“They want to show their power. Look at them – a great leader after such bad times. This is the first time that Germany can be proud since before the Great War.”

“This great leader, as you say, has a plan! He is far shrewder than we can see. He would not invade a country for the sake of invasion!” Andrzej stood from his place next to me on

Tomasz's mismatched, worn wooden dining chairs. He looked at me. "Antonina, tell them what you saw last week."

I stood, smoothing my patterned dress with cold hands. "I was at the Liberman's bakery on Jana Kiepury when a group of German soldiers – low-ranking ones – came in and began to make fun of Rivka, saying all sorts of terrible things about her Jewish heritage. She was quiet. Two of them knocked over a display and picked up a few loaves of bread and ripped them apart. Then they left." I swallowed hard. "I asked her if this had happened before, and she said, 'Soldiers often come into the shop to taunt us. We've lost profit from what they do, but we cannot go to anyone to tell them this, because what can they possibly do?' I didn't know what to say." I took a deep breath, and Andrzej took my hand. What I had seen and heard had hurt me, for Rivka and her family were old friends, people my own family had always respected and trusted. My mother loved talking with Alina Liberman about the best way to bake crusty bread, and Rivka and I had played together as children!

"The Germans have a motive." Andrzej declared.

Bartek shook his head skeptically. "I don't think their 'motive' is specific to races." He looked around, gaining some nods of agreement and some eye rolls.

"Their leader, Adolf Hitler, believes that there are different levels of people – lesser people and the racially pure and everyone in between." We turned to see the previously silent man stand, hands clasped behind his back. "In his conquests of other countries, he's promoting German superiority. There is indeed a motive."

Andrzej nodded eagerly, but Tomasz raised his eyebrows and asked, "And how do you know this?"

The man is unfazed. “The events in Germany – the laws passed against Jews in Nuremberg, and the violence – prove something: Hitler is against Jews, or maybe that he is against all non-Germans.” He sat down, and we were quiet for a moment, thinking about the stories we’d heard. The man looked at me, and in the light behind him I saw his yarmulke.

A sharp knock sounds on the door, and I can hear Katarzyna’s snickers as I walk briskly to open it. Before I’ve opened it all the way, I can see Andrzej’s grinning face. He pushes his way in and throws his arms around me, and I can feel a smile spread across my own face. My hair is tumbling out of its pins, and his shoes are muddying the floor, but my family doesn’t care and neither do I. It’s a matter of minutes; after greeting my mother with a kiss on her cheek, looking at Eliaz’s new jump-rope, and introducing himself to my grandfather, Andrzej is seated quickly beside my grandfather at the table with my mother and I.

“I’m not sure what we can do but wait and see.” I say when my mother brings up the war between Germany and England.

“There are people acting against Germany in small ways.” Andrzej looks at me curiously. “We shouldn’t just sit and watch.”

“Not sit and watch. We don’t know enough, or have enough power, to get rid of them.”

“It may be easier to be quiet, but things are happening.”

“I see them too, Andrzej.” My voice is patient and tight at the same time, and I almost feel like crying.

He opens his mouth, and then closes it. We’ve talked about this, and every time, one of us becomes angry; thankfully, today Eliaz saves us from a fight.

“Can Marek come over?” His soft face, partially hidden by his hair, is pleading. “I want him to see my toy!”

“We’ll go and fetch him.” Andrzej volunteers, and takes my hand and pulls me through the door before I can respond.

Outside, on the street, a breeze ruffles my dress and the fading sunlight casts a glow over the flat walls of the buildings, making me feel a little vulnerable. I walk hastily ahead of Andrzej, biting my lip. I look up at the sky and whisper, “God, help me to speak kindly. I want to love him better.” The peace I try to feel can only come from God.

We reach Marek’s family apartment with the well-known mezuzah on the doorframe. When I knock, there is no answer. Andrzej peers through the window. “Are they home?” I ask. Wordlessly, he steps around me. He shakes the door handle, and with a jerk, the door swings open. We step through the door, and I stumble back in shock. The chairs in the Rozen’s front room are gone.

Andrzej takes my arm, and I clutch at him. “Marek? Chaim? Ruta?” I call the names of the family, but the house is eerily quiet. Usually, there are dishes clattering and loud laughter, and the occasional Hebrew blessing from Marek’s robust father, but tonight there is nothing. I start to panic.

“Where are they? What is going on?” Tears are choking my throat. I feel my way over to the settee and let myself fall onto it. I close my eyes and rock back and forth gently, worry rising in my throat.

Andrzej comes over and kneels in front of me; he says nothing, because what is there to say?

Suddenly, a man bursts through the open door. Andrzej and I stand abruptly. “Tomasz?”

“I -” His narrow shoulders heave as he hunches over, grasping his knees with his hands.

“I went to Antonina’s and they told me you were here.”

Andrzej covers the space between him and Tomasz in a few steps. “What is it.” It isn’t a question.

Tomasz takes a deep breath. “They’ve moved them to another part of town – Lubartowska and Unicka Streets.”

“Just the Rozens?” I ask, confused.

“No, lots of the city’s Jews. In the street there are soldiers and dogs, and people with luggage and furniture on carts.”

The three of us are silent, looking at one another. I’m offering up anxious wordless prayers to God, hoping He hears me. I wonder if He’ll answer.

“Take us there.” I demand.