

# A Spring Morning

IDA FINK

**D**uring the night there was a pouring rain, and in the morning when the first trucks drove across the bridge, the foaming Gniezna River<sup>1</sup> was the dirty-yellow color of beer. At least that's how it was described by a man who was crossing this bridge—a first-class reinforced concrete bridge—with his wife and child for the last time in his life. The former secretary of the former town council heard these words with his own ears: he was standing right near the bridge and watching the Sunday procession attentively, full of concern and curiosity. As the possessor of an Aryan great-grandmother he could stand there calmly and watch them in peace. Thanks to him and to people like him, there have survived to this day shreds of sentences, echoes of final laments, shadows of the sighs of the participants in the *marches funèbres*,<sup>2</sup> so common in those times.

“Listen to this,” said the former secretary of the former town council, sitting with his friends in the restaurant at the railroad station—it was all over by then. “Listen to this: Here’s a man facing death, and all he can think about is beer. I was speechless. And besides, how could he say that? I made a point of looking at it, the water was like water, just a little dirtier.”

“Maybe the guy was just thirsty, you know?” the owner of the bar suggested, while he filled four large mugs until the foam ran over. The

1 *Gniezna*: river in Poland.

2 *marches funèbres*: funeral marches; When the Germans invaded Russia, they began killing any Jews in occupied territory. Special Action Forces would march Jews, Communists, and Gypsies to the edge of town and shoot them. The victims were usually buried in mass graves.

clock above the bar rattled and struck twelve. It was already quiet and empty in town. The rain had stopped and the sun had broken through the white puffs of clouds. The sizzle of frying meat could be heard from the kitchen. On Sunday, dinner should be as early as possible. It was clear that the SS shared that opinion. At twelve o'clock the ground in the meadow near the forest was trampled and dug up like a fresh wound. But all around it was quiet. Not even a bird called out.

When the first trucks rode across the bridge over the surging Gniezna, it was five in the morning and it was still completely dark, yet Aron could easily make out a dozen or so canvas-covered trucks. That night he must have slept soundly, deaf to everything, since he hadn't heard the rumbling of the trucks as they descended from the hills into the little town in the valley. As a rule, the rumbling of a single truck was enough to alert him in his sleep; today, the warning signals had failed him. Later, when he was already on his way, he remembered that he had been dreaming about a persistent fly, a buzzing fly, and he realized that the buzzing was the sound of the trucks riding along the high road above his house—the last house when one left the town, the first when one entered it.

They were close now, and with horrifying detachment he realized that his threshold would be the first they crossed. "In a few minutes," he thought, and slowly walked over to the bed to wake his wife and child.

The woman was no longer asleep—he met her gaze immediately, and was surprised at how large her eyes were. But the child was lying there peacefully, deep in sleep. He sat down on the edge of the bed, which sagged under his weight. He was still robust, though no longer so healthy looking as he used to be. Now he was pale and gray, and in that pallor and grayness was the mark of hunger and poverty. And terror, too, no doubt.

He sat on the dirty bedding, which hadn't been washed for a long time, and the child lay there quietly, round and large and rosy as an apple from sleep. Outside, in the street, the motors had fallen silent; it was as quiet as if poppy seeds had been sprinkled over everything.

"Mela," he whispered, "is this a dream?"

"You're not dreaming, Aron. Don't just sit there. Put something on, we'll go down to the storeroom. There's a stack of split wood there, we can hide behind it."

"The storeroom. What a joke. If I thought we could hide in the storeroom we'd have been there long ago. In the storeroom or in here, it'll make no difference."

He wanted to stand up and walk over to the window, but he was so heavy he couldn't. The darkness was already lifting. He wondered, are they waiting until it gets light? Why is it so quiet? Why doesn't it begin?

"Aron," the woman said.

Again her large eyes surprised him, and lying there on the bed in her clothing—she hadn't undressed for the night—she seemed younger, slimmer, different. Almost the way she was when he first met her, so many years ago. He stretched out his hand and timidly, gently, stroked hers. She wasn't surprised, although as a rule he was stingy with caresses, but neither did she smile. She took his hand and squeezed it firmly. He tried to look at her, but he turned away, for something strange was happening inside him. He was breathing more and more rapidly, and he knew that in a moment these rapid breaths would turn into sobs.

"If we had known," the woman said softly, "we wouldn't have had her. But how could we have known? Smarter people didn't know. She'll forgive us, Aron, won't she?"

He didn't answer. He was afraid of this rapid breathing; he wanted only to shut his eyes, put his fingers in his ears, and wait.

"Won't she, Aron?" she repeated.

Then it occurred to him that there wasn't much time left and that he had to answer quickly, that he had to answer everything and say everything that he wanted to say.

"We couldn't know," he said. "No, we wouldn't have had her, that's clear. I remember, you came to me and said, 'I'm going to have a child, maybe I should go to a doctor.' But I wanted a child, I wanted one. And I said, 'Don't be afraid, we'll manage it somehow. I won't be any worse than a young father.' I wanted her."

"If only we had a hiding place," she whispered, "if we had a hiding place everything would be different. Maybe we should hide in the wardrobe, or under the bed. No . . . it's better to just sit here."

"A shelter is often just a shelter, and not a salvation. Do you remember how they took the Goldmans? All of them, the whole family. And they had a good bunker."

"They took the Goldmans, but other people managed to hide. If only we had a cellar here . . ."

"Mela," he said suddenly, "I have always loved you very much, and if you only knew—"

But he didn't finish, because the child woke up. The little girl sat there in bed, warm and sticky from her child's sleep, and rosy all over. Serious,

unsmiling, she studied her parents' faces.

"Are those trucks coming for us, Papa?" she asked, and he could no longer hold back his tears. The child knew! Five years old! The age for teddy bears and blocks. Why did we have her? She'll never go to school, she'll never love. Another minute or two . . .

"Hush, darling," the woman answered, "lie still, as still as can be, like a mouse."

"So they won't hear?"

"So they won't hear."

"If they hear us, they'll kill us," said the child, and wrapped the quilt around herself so that only the tip of her nose stuck out.

How bright her eyes are, my God! Five years old! They should be shining at the thought of games, of fun. Five! She knows, and she's waiting just like us.

"Mela," he whispered, so the child wouldn't hear, "let's hide her. She's little, she'll fit in the coal box. She's little, but she'll understand. We'll cover her with wood chips."

"No, don't torture yourself, Aron. It wouldn't help. And what would become of her then? Who would she go to? Who would take her? It will all end the same way, if not now, then the next time. It'll be easier for her with us. Do you hear them?"

He heard them clearly and he knew: time was up. He wasn't afraid. His fear left him, his hands stopped trembling. He stood there, large and solid—breathing as if he were carrying an enormous weight.

It was turning gray outside the window. Night was slipping away, though what was this new day but night, the blackest of black nights, cruel, and filled with torment.

They were walking in the direction of the railroad station, through the town, which had been washed clean by the night's pouring rain and was as quiet and peaceful as it always was on a Sunday morning.

They walked without speaking, already stripped of everything human. Even despair was mute; it lay like a death mask, frozen and silent, on the face of the crowd.

The man and his wife and child walked along the edge of the road by the sidewalk; he was carrying the little girl in his arms. The child was quiet; she looked around solemnly, with both arms wrapped around her father's neck. The man and his wife no longer spoke. They had said their last words in the house, when the door crashed open, kicked in by the

boot of an SS-man. He had said then to the child, "Don't be afraid, I'll carry you in my arms." And to his wife he said, "Don't cry. Let's be calm. Let's be strong and endure this with dignity." Then they left the house for their last journey.

For three hours they stood in the square surrounded by a heavy escort. They didn't say one word. It was almost as if they had lost the power of speech. They were mute, they were deaf and blind. Once, a terrible feeling of regret tore through him when he remembered the dream, that buzzing fly, and he understood that he had overslept his life. But this, too, passed quickly; it was no longer important, it couldn't change anything. At ten o'clock they set out. His legs were tired, his hands were numb, but he didn't put the child down, not even for a minute. He knew it was only an hour or so till they reached the fields near the station—the flat green pastures, which had recently become the mass grave of the murdered. He also recalled that years ago he used to meet Mela there, before they were husband and wife. In the evenings there was usually a strong wind, and it smelled of thyme.

The child in his arms felt heavier and heavier, but not because of her weight. He turned his head slightly and brushed the little girl's cheek with his lips. A soft, warm cheek. In an hour, or two . . .

Suddenly his heart began to pound, and his temples were drenched with sweat.

He bent towards the child again, seeking the strength that flowed from her silky, warm, young body. He still didn't know what he would do, but he did know that he had to find some chink through which he could push his child back into the world of the living. Suddenly he was thinking very fast. He was surprised to see that the trees had turned green overnight and that the river had risen; it was flowing noisily, turbulently, eddying and churning; on that quiet spring morning, it was the only sign of nature's revolt. "The water is the color of beer," he said aloud, to no one in particular. He was gathering up the colors and smells of the world that he was losing forever. Hearing his voice, the child squirmed and looked him in the eye.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, "do what Papa tells you. Over there, near the church, there are a lot of people, they are going to pray. They are standing on the sidewalk and in the yard in front of the church. When we get there, I'm going to put you down on the ground. You're little, no one will notice you. Then you'll ask somebody to take you to Marcysia,

the milkmaid, outside of town. She'll take you in. Or maybe one of those people will take you home. Do you understand what Papa said?"

The little girl looked stunned; still, he knew she had understood. "You'll wait for us. We'll come back after the war. From the camp," he added. "That's how it has to be, darling. It has to be this way," he whispered quickly, distractedly. "That's what you'll do, you have to obey Papa."

Everything swam before his eyes; the image of the world grew blurry. He saw only the crowd in the churchyard. The sidewalk beside him was full of people, he was brushing against them with his sleeve. It was only a few steps to the churchyard gate; the crush of people was greatest there, and salvation most likely.

"Go straight to the church," he whispered and put the child down on the ground. He didn't look back, he didn't see where she ran, he walked on stiffly, at attention, his gaze fixed on the pale spring sky in which the white threads of a cloud floated like a spider web. He walked on, whispering a kind of prayer, beseeching God and men. He was still whispering when the air was rent by a furious shriek:

"*Ein jüdisches Kind!*"<sup>3</sup>

He was still whispering when the sound of a shot cracked like a stone hitting water. He felt his wife's fingers, trembling and sticky from sweat; she was seeking his hand like a blind woman. He heard her faint, whimpering moan. Then he fell silent and slowly turned around.

At the edge of the sidewalk lay a small, bloody rag. The smoke from the shot hung in the air—wispy, already blowing away. He walked over slowly, and those few steps seemed endless. He bent down, picked up the child, stroked the tangle of blond hair.

"*Deine?*"<sup>4</sup>

He answered loud and clear, "*Ja, meine.*"<sup>5</sup> And then softly, to her, "Forgive me."

He stood there with the child in his arms and waited for a second shot. But all he heard was a shout and he understood that they would not kill him here, that he had to keep on walking, carrying his dead child.

"Don't be afraid, I'll carry you," he whispered. The procession moved on like a gloomy, gray river flowing out to sea. ∞

<sup>3</sup> *Ein jüdisches Kind!*: German for a Jewish child!

<sup>4</sup> "*Deine?*": "Yours?"

<sup>5</sup> "*Ja, meine.*": "Yes, mine."