

For the Sake of Her Children ...

by April Shour Laufer

Cet article raconte l'histoire d'une femme qui a sauvé son neveu des camps de concentration en se faisant passer pour sa mère.

*From the transport she heard her mother's cries,
"You cannot separate a child from his mother."
It took her a moment to realize what her mother
was saying. She understood her mother was
pleading for the life of her grandson.*

And Miryam the prophetess, the sister of Aharon, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miryam answered them, Sing to HaShem for HaShem has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider has HaShem thrown into the sea.

(Exodus 15:20)

The war is over and the three of them have survived a year of hiding, a year where they dared not reveal their Jewish identity. She is 26 years old, and a widow, her engagement lasted longer than her marriage. Her year-old baby sits on her lap at the kitchen table. The baby offers up a smile, looking happily into his mother's delighted face.

Of course, the baby does not remember waiting for food that did not come. He does not know that he has lost his father. Fed on sunshine, and love, there was only cream of wheat for him to eat, and so at the end of their year of hiding, he suffered from rickets. Just a baby, and he is a survivor.

His mother looks at him with pure love and devotion. The pain of the past year will forever be in her heart but she will not speak of it to him. It will be a secret.

Her four-year-old nephew is about to leave. He is going to stay with relatives in a nearby town. He is quiet, solemn, afraid. She gently takes him in her embrace, kisses him, offers him tender words, and tells him everything is okay. He sees her confident expression, and her smile, and he is able to leave her.

She feels the tears behind her eyes as she looks at her nephew. She has borne the pain of losing her only sister, and she knows that she cannot protect her nephew from the memories and sorrows of the past.

Throughout the year of hiding, he never left his aunt's

side. He, too, has been saved from death. But he remembers. He remembers the boots of the ss officer.

His parents had already been taken in an earlier transport and he had become an orphan by the age of three. He had been left with his grandparents, Miryam, his aunt, and his uncles. Then the ss came and knocked on their door, again. He was thrown onto the truck with the other family members.

His aunt remained inside. Inexplicably, they had not taken her. She stood there with her infant held tight to her. As her parents, husband, brother, nephew, were taken from her, she begged that she be taken too.

"Don't leave me. I want to be with my family," she cried, and the tears burned her cheeks and fell onto her child of one month. She did not want to stay alone, to stay behind.

"Take me, too," she pleaded.

The ss officer closed the door with the promise that he would return.

Afraid, frantic, Miryam stood in the front hall unable to think of what she should do. Her mother, her parents, were being taken from her, those who had always known what to do. From the transport she heard her mother's cries, "You cannot separate a child from his mother."

It took her a moment to realize what her mother was saying. She understood her mother was pleading for the life of her grandson. Through her mother's tears, Miryam heard what she was asking, she would pretend that she was mother to her nephew.

Her mother's voice continued, crying, pleading, "You can't, you can't take the child from the mother." And the officer, knowing that he would have to return, obliged.

He kicked Miryam's nephew out of the transport truck with his shiny, high, black boots. He kicked so hard that the child, a little boy with no parents, flew through the air as high as the second floor. And the child, this little boy, forever after remembered the feeling of being kicked by those black boots.

Two days later the ss returned. They kept their promise. It was time for Miryam to be with her family. She took her baby, and her nephew in hand.

"I'll get the child a diaper."

Polite, wary, she pretended things were normal—a child, a diaper.

"Not necessary," said the officer. It was spoken in a tone of finality; Miryam knew there was no point in insisting.

She took her nephew's hand and holding her baby in her arm, she walked out of the house. She stepped onto the transport truck. There were other women and children there, but her children were by far the youngest. Most of the young women and girls had already been taken in an earlier transport.

So Miryam stood on the truck with all the other women of the town, her children next to her. As the truck moved away, her back was to the house. She had already left her home a year prior, when the Russian front moved too close. She didn't need to look at this house. She was filled with memories of her childhood, her husband, and the brief time they had had together, her memories of her sister, her older brother, who had been taken much earlier. She had already said good-bye to her home. There was nothing left.

She had waited these two days wondering only when she might see her parents and husband again, when they

might be together. The possibility that she might join them only in death didn't frighten her as much as the possibility of being alone, without her family. Two days of anxiety, bordering on torment, if only she could be with them. She could not stand to be separated. What was the point? What was there to live for? How could she go on?

And so the trip to the Gestapo building passed with her heart filled with the pain of the last two days of longing. She descended the truck with little thought of what had passed before that moment. She knew only that her hand would not leave the grasp of her nephew's hand, and her arm would remain glued to her infant son.

And when she looked around, she was in a room with other women and their children. In the last two days she had become mother to two children, her own son, and her sister's son, and as she looked at them she realized that she could not envision any future for them.

Three days of waiting passed. Like the last two days in the house, there was nothing to do. There was nothing to plan for or think of, there was only the feeling of emptiness.

During the first 24 hours of waiting, she watched as her baby learned what waiting meant. He did not ask for more food, there was none to give. Her milk had dried up—she had no food or water for herself, and so there was nothing for him.

The women tore their garments to provide the baby with cloth that might serve as a diaper. But after the first day it didn't matter. The baby did not need to be changed.

When the other women tried to offer advice, or words of encouragement, Miryam could only ask them to leave her be. To their offers of help, to their plans, she replied indifferently,

"Please, don't. My parents, and my husband are gone.... Please."

There was a faucet that offered a few drips of water. They tried to collect the water, but there was nothing to collect it in except their cupped hands. Once, they had managed to collect some water in a discarded pan. They went to give it to Miryam so she could have a drink, but the SS officer who was there, kicked the pan out of their hands. It clattered onto the floor. Their sacrifice of waiting and watching as the drops of water collected in the pan came to naught.

Her nephew sat next to her. He sat quietly,



Rochelle Rubinstein Kaplan, "Shelter No. 31," linocut print, 1994.

looking at her, always within reach of her arm. They waited for three days together. His eyes were still focused, sharp, wary. He could still feel the pain of the bruises on his back where he had been kicked.

Miryam lay on the straw that had been placed on the floor. The women watched over her. They still tried to find some way to collect water for her. "What is the use," she replied, "there is nothing for me to live for." The baby was still in her arms, and her other child, never more than an arm's reach away.

On the third day of waiting as she looked at her baby's drawn face, the dark circles under his eyes, his quiet, almost still, little, frame, she knew that soon she would be with her family.

"Someone needs to clean the washrooms."

The voice of the ss officer came as a strange intrusion on their waiting. A woman in the group offered to go. When she returned, some time later, she came over to Miryam.

And all the women went after her with timbrels and dances....

"You will go to the hospital," she told her.

Miryam heard the words but for a minute she did not understand them.

"How?" she asked.

Sing to Hashem for Hashem has triumphed gloriously....

The other woman replied, "I asked this officer to take the 500 *kronen* that I gave him, and give it to my boss."

Miryam could only look at this woman uncomprehendingly. She did not know her. How did she come to her? This woman had children of her own, they were older than Miryam's but still children, and yet, here she was trying to explain to Miryam what she had done.

The woman looked at Miryam pleadingly, her eyes fixed on Miryam's eyes, and her face willing Miryam to understand, and Miryam knew the lie. The other woman had bribed the officer in hopes that Miryam would be spared.

Miryam did not know what made this woman risk speaking to the officer, and then boldly offering the bribe. Miryam looked at this woman and wondered at her strength, her courage, and she saw around her the interest of all of the woman watching the exchange between them.

Waiting with their own children for the final transport, these women prayed that maybe one might survive, might find the strength and courage and ingenuity necessary to survive. Who better than a young mother who just might be willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of her children?

These women with children of their own were prepared to risk themselves for the possibility of Miryam's freedom, her future. Only moments before there had been nothing, but now Miryam understood. Hearing the words of hope, "You will go to the hospital," she came to the realization that she would have to find the strength, for the sake of her children.

The transport was there and waiting. The ss officer surveyed the women and children in the room and he told them to get ready. Suddenly in the midst of the confusion

of three days of waiting and knowing there was no escape, the ss officer told Miryam she was to be taken to the hospital.

Miryam got up, and put her baby down between her feet. She reached over and took the coat that had covered her nephew, helped her nephew put on the coat, and began to do up his buttons. She was very deliberate as she performed this motherly rite of preparing a child for a trip.

"No," said the officer, "not him."

And she looked at the officer, and said she would not leave them. She would stay and die with both her children but she would not leave either of them. And the women gathered around her, and they begged and pleaded with the officer.

And all the women went out after her....

They begged and pleaded for Miryam and her children.

All the women stood around the ss officer beseeching him with words of entreaty. He had already accepted the bribe and the women knew it. As the women were pleading with him he was suddenly afraid someone would see him allowing the women to talk to him, and he shut the door to the room.

The women would not move away from him. They continued, "Let her go! What will you do with the children?" The question had no meaning but still they begged and pleaded. The officer looked at Miryam and her two children. He signalled her to go with him, and she knew that she had triumphed.

She would never waver from this new found determination. With her nephew's hand in hers, and her baby in her other arm, the ss officer escorted her down the stairs. She never looked back.

Once at the hospital Miryam contrived to stay as long as possible. In a casual meeting with a woman visiting her pregnant daughter, she found someone who was willing to hide her. Miryam walked out of the hospital with her two children.

In the year of hiding Miryam's resolve was constant. She would do anything to save her children.

In 1950, accompanied by her new husband and her sons, ages two and four, Miryam arrived in Canada, grateful for the opportunity for a new life.

This story is based on the life of Sarah Mittelman Neuman Laufer, my mother-in-law. She triumphed through her love, and her determination, and through the love and strength of the women who waited for the transport from Trencin, Czechoslovakia, September 9, 1944.

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