

## Prologue

### Extracts from Renata's Diary 1938-39

*translated from the German*

#### **Berlin, Germany: December 1938**

Early on these grey winter mornings I get up as soon as I wake, listening to a bird singing in the leafless tree in the garden. Then I creep down to the kitchen and sit beside the warm stove to write my diary. It helps me to try and make sense of all that's happening here in my home city where we've always lived.

My older brother, Walter, will be eighteen soon, but we won't be able to celebrate his birthday like we used to as things are too hard now. Mutti says Walter's 'a bit of a dreamer'. He always has a pencil in his pocket and draws our portraits – and they're really good. He gets my corn-coloured hair and green eyes just right. He wants to go to art school, but under the Nazis, Jews like us can't attend schools and colleges with everyone else like we used to, only Jewish schools.

My sister Ella is pretty and she loves dancing, but she's a bit spoilt because she's the youngest. She wants to go everywhere with me, which can be a nuisance. Though I'm fifteen, my parents still treat me like a child. They don't realise how quickly you grow up if you're a Jewish girl living in Nazi Germany.

These are not good times. Rumours are spreading of bad things happening to Jews and others, round-ups and prison camps – no one wants to believe them.

My best friend Dina and I often talk about boys and clothes and what we're going to do when we grow up. I want to be a doctor like Papa and

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she wants to marry and have six children, and be a famous actress too! But I'm afraid we're living in a dream world while the real world around us is growing darker and more threatening.

Papa explained that the Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, are powerful and ruthless. They're using Jews as scapegoats for Germany's problems, taking away all we have.

Already we must hand in valuables. My aunt's flat was ransacked by the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo, and, because they found my great-grandmother's box of tiny, blackened silver coffee spoons, they took my aunt and uncle away – no one knows where.

My parents queue for hours every day with hundreds of others trying to get visas to leave. You need to have a job in another country, and that's very hard to get. Papa is from Poland, so we may go to Warsaw where we used to spend holidays with my grandparents. But yesterday he came home with a flash of hope in his eyes. He'd heard from a friend, Dr Lowy, about a small factory run by his Austrian cousin, Emil Hirsch, in a country called Ireland.

It's very far away, but Dr Lowy is trying to get jobs there for himself and Papa, though neither ever worked in a factory. Maybe we can all escape from Berlin, the city where we were happy – till the Nazis came, and the horror began.

### **Berlin, January 1939**

Today there are deep snowdrifts. In the old days we used to go sledding and tobogganing, but now we're not allowed.

Things are getting worse, and Mutti has grown thin. Today Walter came home badly bruised. Seeing the yellow star that Jews have to wear on his jacket, Nazi Stormtroopers kicked and beat him when he refused

to jump into the gutter to get out of their way. No one came to his aid. Battered and angry, he went straight to the Jewish Community Office to ask about ships to Palestine, the ancient country where Jews, young and old, are travelling to work the desert land.

Papa said Walter wasn't cut out to be a farmer, and when I reminded him about his dream of being an artist, he said he could work by day and study art at night. 'I refuse to be treated as an *untermensch* – I'm not sub-human,' he said heatedly, unlike his usual gentle manner. 'You should all come. Germany is a hell for us now.'

But Papa said he was expecting a visa for Ireland, and he would send for us from there. 'The British are in charge in Palestine and Jews can't get in there now,' he warned Walter. 'You could end up in a detention camp—'

'Couldn't be worse than the prison camps here,' Walter broke in.

Mutti wept, but a week later, with borrowed fare money and with our prayers and kisses, Walter departed, leaving us all desolate, like a tree with a branch cut off.

### **Berlin, March 1939**

I miss Walter, my big brother who taught me to ride a bike and to skate, and always protected me. Ella keeps asking where he is now, but we've heard nothing.

People are disappearing – whole families – and we don't know if they've escaped from the Nazis or been sent to prison camps. Dina went without saying goodbye; her house is shuttered up and there are new people, Nazis, living there. Mutti heard Dina had escaped to Britain on a Kindertransport with other Jewish children. Our names are on the list, but thousands are trying to get out.

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Then one day Papa came home with Dr Lowy, waving precious visas for them to work in Ireland.

As they drank tea, I asked, 'Where is Ireland?'

'It's near Britain – a small, beautiful island,' said Dr Lowy. 'It's lush and green because it rains a lot.'

'And it's not ruled by Nazis!' Papa picked up Ella and whirled her around.

'Still, they don't welcome refugees,' put in Dr Lowy. 'They allowed in a few people, including Emil, who's from Vienna, to set up factories employing local people.' He sighed. 'But hardly anyone gets in now, even if they're desperate.'

'Can we go tomorrow?' asked Ella.

But the visas were only for Papa and Dr Lowy.

'I'll find a way to get you all out of the clutches of the Nazis,' Papa told us, 'to safety in Ireland.'

I just hope he does.

### **Berlin, April 1939**

It's so lonely without Papa. It's dangerous to go out and we miss our friends. Now I'm the eldest and I try to help Mutti and keep Ella cheerful. Although spring has come and the cherry trees are in bloom, our house feels empty and sad. As well as taking everything from us, the Nazis are breaking up our family. Who will be next to leave?

Papa has rented a room somewhere in Ireland. Mr Hirsch, the manager, helped him write to the Immigration Department in Dublin to get us entry papers. But though Papa has a job there, he still can't get permission to bring us over.

Our shoes are in holes. Ella cheered up when we went shopping,

though we can only afford second-hand shoes, and anyway most shops won't sell to Jews. Ella complained that the wooden clogs we had to buy are very clumsy. 'I can't even skip in them.' She showed us and she was right.

As we returned, our neighbour rushed out. 'A black car full of SS men arrived after you left,' she told us fearfully. We all knew these were the Nazi officers in leather coats and polished boots. They had rapped on our door. 'They'll come back,' she whispered. 'You must all leave.'

We were terrified, but Mama told us to pack warm clothes quickly. Tonight we will take the train for Warsaw where Papa's family will take us in.

On the train – no time to write more –

### **Warsaw, Poland, August 1939**

We're in a small house with my grandparents, uncle, two aunts and our cousins. Warsaw is a fine city, though we've heard there are people here too who hate Jews.

But Christian friends of Papa, Casimir and Berta Pavlak, have helped us with money and food. They're angry at what's happening in Germany to Jews, and also to others, even Christians, and they pray the Nazis don't invade Poland. So do we.

Until Mutti can get a sewing machine she helps my aunts do other people's washing by hand on a wooden board. It's very hard work, and sweaty too – I hope I don't have to do it. The whole house smells of soap-suds and damp clothes.

We're all homesick for Berlin as it was before the Nazis. I miss Dina and my other friends and the fun we all used to have. Today Papa sent us some money, and writes that he has a plan to get a temporary Irish visa for me. But only for me.

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When I heard this I burst into tears. How can I travel alone to a faraway land, without Mutti and Ella? When would I see them again?

Uncle said, 'It's hard to be uprooted again, Renata, but you must go.' He explained that if the Nazis invaded Poland they would force all Jews into a kind of ghetto, where thousands would live crowded together in hunger, misery and disease. We shivered.

'If Papa gets you a visa,' Uncle added, 'maybe he'll get your mother and Ella out later.'

'And then,' Mutti said, trying to smile, 'we'll be together in Ireland.' No one said: Except Walter.

So now I know – the next one in my family to leave will be me!