Opening Extract from...

THE GOOD DOCTOR OF WARSAW

Written by Elisabeth Gifford

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THE GOOD DOCTOR OF WARSAW

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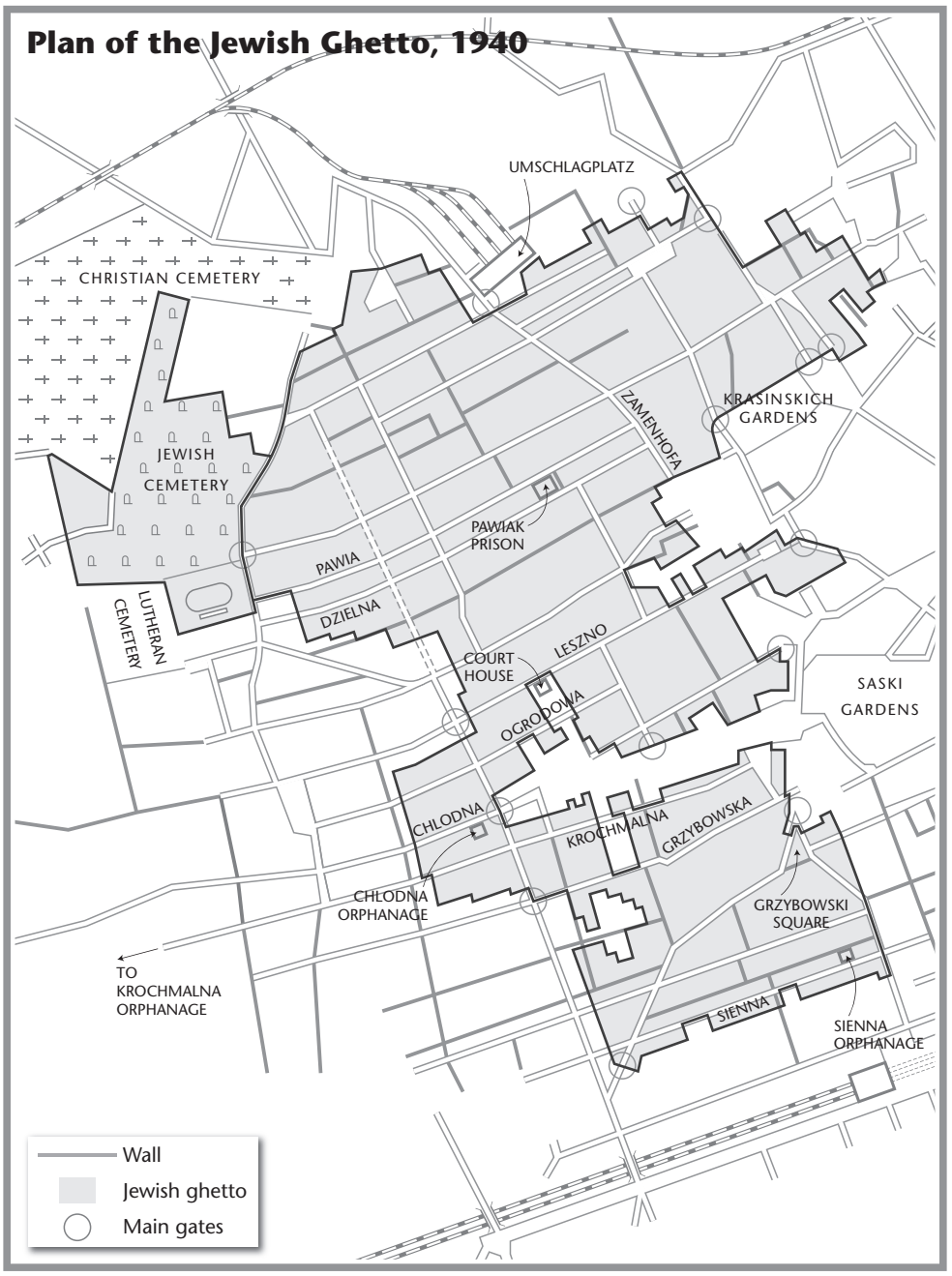
You do not leave a sick child alone to face the dark,
and you do not leave children at a time like this.

Janusz Korczak


Plan of the Jewish Ghetto, 1940
UMSCHLAGPLATZ
CHRISTIAN CEMETERY
JEWISH CEMETERY
LUTHERAN CEMETERY
ZAMENHOFA
KRASINSKICH GARDENS
PAWIAK PRISON
PAWIA
DZIELNA
COURT HOUSE
LESZNO
OGRODOWA
SASKI GARDENS
CHLODNA
KROCHMALNA
GRZYBOWSKA
CHLODNA ORPHANAGE
GRZYBOWSKI SQUARE
TO KROCHMALNA ORPHANAGE
SIENNA
SIENNA ORPHANAGE
Wall
Jewish ghetto
Main gates

CHAPTER ONE

WARSAW, 17 JANUARY 1945

Two hours before dawn, Misha stood on the bank of the Vistula, looking out across the frozen river towards Warsaw. In his hand was a photograph of Sophia, no bigger than his palm. He had cut around her outline to make her seem more real over the years. Two small holes in her shoulders where he'd tacked her up above his bed in various training barracks, a holy icon for a believer. In the dim light her pale eyes looked out at him, serious and afraid. He knew the rest of the picture by heart, her fair hair drawn back, her beautiful face too thin. Two years since he last held Sophia's warm face in his hands and kissed her lips, or breathed in the faint

smell of almonds that her skin carried. The wind chilled him with a relentless blast, an ache in his body from her absence. He pulled up his collar and slipped her back inside his canvas wallet, beat his hands against his arms to get the feeling back.

'Here, Misha, have some of this.'

A few yards along the bank he could see the outlines of Russian guards in thick winter coats, eating from metal tins, the steam rising in the frozen air as they talked and laughed loudly. One of them held out a bottle. Misha walked over and took a swig. The guns had fallen silent now, but you could still smell the smoke drifting from across the river. The Russians were in a good mood, relaxed and laughing about who was going to dance with big Irina that night.

Irina, a broad-faced woman filling her uniform with a massive body and a large bosom, grinned down at them in the gloom, spooning up her bean stew.

'Don't even bother asking,' she snorted, pushing her cloak back over one shoulder. 'I'd eat you lot for breakfast. But if anyone was asking, I might say yes to Misha.'

She looked at him with a greedy glint. Misha was used to women behaving strangely around him. His dark amber eyes with their green flecks were as beautiful as any girl's – at least that's what Sophia had once told him. He was tall and fine-boned, and the Polish uniform of high boots and jodhpurs gave him an old-fashioned, almost aristocratic air, but then with his easy-going humour Misha had a way of being friends with most people. Even though he was a Pole – and a Jew at that – the Russians included him readily as one of them.

Misha dipped his head as Irina bellowed with laughter. Having Irina for a girlfriend would be a dangerous business. There was a rumour going round that her last lover had died, not from a German bullet, but from Irina's pistol after a jealous argument.

'If you find any of Hitler's friends still over there, give them my best wishes with one of these.' Irina patted her gun in its holster.

They all clapped him on the back, magnanimous and hearty, Warsaw's liberators.

As part of the reconnaissance group for the Polish First Army under Russian command Misha was always first into the enemy territory ahead, scouting out safe passages for the tanks, tensely looking out for German stragglers. Today, his small unit would be the first to enter Warsaw. Three years since he had last set foot in the city.

The line of four Willys jeeps was waiting at the edge of the snow-covered river. Between the breaking clouds, scraps of black and a sliver of metallic moon. Franek, Misha's driver and self-appointed guide and counsellor, was at the wheel of the first jeep, the flaps of his sheepskin hat pulled down over his ears.

'Hurry up, man, before we freeze to death,' he yelled. 'We want to get across before there's any light.' Warsaw was still held by night but at their backs, dawn was already a pale red line. Their brief was to send back a wireless message on the situation before the Polish infantry began to cross on foot as dawn broke.

Misha hauled up alongside Franek and pulled the door shut, but the cold wind still managed to whistle in through the gaps, the jeep rocking with its blows. He took his pistol from its holster. In front of them, the river shone white, a long and meandering plain of snow, far brighter than the wadding of clouds above.

His breath fogging and rising in front of his face, Franek leaned forward as the wheels bumped down onto the snow-covered surface of the river. Misha felt his muscles tense but the ice held, half a winter in thickness. Sliding and jolting, they began to track across the rutted surface, four black shapes, no headlights, driving

slowly, the engines' noise low. Snow had softened the shapes of burned-out army trucks and the frozen bodies of dead horses and other debris, casting long shadows in the ghostly light. To their right, the broken girders of the Poniatowski Bridge rose up out of the ice at drunken angles.

'Hard to believe,' said Misha. 'Here we are, the first to liberate Warsaw. Going home.'

'Do you mean liberate in the Russian sense? Sit on the opposite bank saying you're waiting for supplies for six months until the Wehrmacht has crushed the Polish resistance into the dust, wait until the Germans have pulled out, and then roll in? A nice clean slate for Russian occupation.'

'Have you heard any more from your brothers?'

Franek shook his head.

'I'm sorry, Franek,' said Misha.

Franek had heard through intelligence that one of his brothers had died during the Warsaw uprising. Another had died in the unauthorized breakout of the Polish army in an attempt to cross the river and come to the aid of besieged Warsaw a few weeks after they arrived. They had been beaten back with terrible losses. Beneath the frozen ice were hundreds of corpses from the Polish First Army. The Russians were furious. They had dismissed their Polish general and replaced him with someone more obedient.

The jeep banged down into a deep rut in the ice and Misha's free hand flew out to grip onto the dashboard. The dark shapes behind braked. Franek spun the wheel, gained purchase again and drove carefully around the rutted area. Misha looked back. The others were following. He unpeeled his hand from the cold metal and rubbed his frozen cheeks. His skin prickled with the naked feeling, waiting to hear a shot ring out from the opposite bank.

They were now more than halfway across the ice. For years, Misha had crossed the Vistula back home into Warsaw, taking for granted the town's long silhouette floating between the sky and the wide river, its elegant steeples and church towers, the bulk of the palace fortress.

All that was gone. As he trained his binoculars on the approaching bank and the bridgehead up on their right, he scanned nothing but empty spaces and eroded stumps in the toneless light. Rising smoke drifted against a dirty sky. He swung the binoculars round to the head of the broken bridge.

'Stop, Franek. Stop. Up there, I can see a sentry.'

Franek braked sharply. Misha heard the jeep behind squeal to a halt.

Misha passed him the glasses, and pointed to a red-and-white box just visible on the bank. 'No cover out here if he fires.'

'He's not moving. Can't have seen us.' Opening the window flap, Franek clicked the gun catch, sighted and fired. The noise of the shot ricocheted across the plain.

'Shit. Missed.' Franek reloaded hurriedly, waiting for the sentry to return fire. He quickly took a second shot. The guard shuddered, a spray of matter from a direct hit, but the man remained leaning rigidly against the wooden box.

Misha took the glasses back.

'There's snow on his shoulders.'

'My God, frozen at his post.'

Approaching the bank cautiously, Franek pulled up alongside the sentry box. Light was beginning to gather in the sky, and the snow cast an eerie light up on the dead man's grey face. A rime of frost dusted his helmet and the wool of his coat. A second sentry was leaning inside the box like a toppled skittle, a rifle slung across his front.

'Warsaw's being guarded by corpses,' said Franek.

The small convoy of jeeps carried on up the slipway alongside the smashed bridge piers. At the top, Franek stopped the engine.

In front of them lay a sight that defied words in the cold half-light, nothing but long vistas open to the livid sky, miles of ruins and rubble blanketed with snow. Not a single building intact, chimney stacks left like broken trees. Here and there ragged remains of walls stuck up with gaps for windows, black against the luminous snow. They listened tensely for the click of a gun, a lone sniper watching them, but there was nothing. A deep silence, even the air frozen and dead.

'Which way?' said Franek.

Misha shook his head. 'If we go ahead that was Jerozolimskie Avenue.'

They began moving slowly along a narrow track between the slopes of bricks and scree, one wheel jolting over rubble. The substantial shops and offices of the commercial district were gone, replaced by ruins and avalanches of bricks and dust. Drifts of snow had whitened the debris, the blackened ruins of the walls rising like tombstones in a winter cemetery. Not a single living person anywhere. A thousand years might have passed since elegant shoppers and businessmen had thronged the avenue with its red trams and polished cars.

At the corner of Jerozolimskie they stopped and looked along the main thoroughfare. Marszalkowska Avenue was another endless vista of buildings crumbled into mounds of rubble, the remaining masonry black and fire-damaged. Franek cut the jeep's engine again. Misha tensed but no shot rang out. No snipers waiting. The uncanny quiet made the skin along Misha's back contract. An atavistic fear thickened the air. Something wicked brooded over the city in the

twilight of the winter morning. Only the dead should linger in the underworld.

'But there's got to be someone here,' Misha said. It sounded like a plea. The blankets and medical supplies that they had brought with them in the back of the jeep for civilians were beginning to feel like a sick joke.

A strained moment when the jeep failed to start again in the cold. Franek pulled the choke two or three times and the engine made a whining screech.

'Not too much, it'll flood,' Misha said, his voice more anxious than he expected. Finally, the engine caught and they jolted forwards over rubble along Marszalkowska Avenue.

They came to a section where the rubble had been cleared, apartments with less damage. In the distance, they could see buildings that were more or less intact. The unmistakable sound of a lorry engine moving away.

'The Germans must be using the buildings ahead as barracks,' said Franek.

'Sounds like they're pulling out. Better continue on foot.'

Misha opened the jeep door carefully and unfolded his long frame into the deep cold, signalling for Franek and three of the men behind to follow. They skirted along the side of an apartment block, crouching down, running across the next junction in turn. As the last man crossed there was the whish and snap of a bullet and he doubled over. He limped across, holding his thigh, a dark stain spreading. Misha scanned along the building opposite. A sniper on the roofline. More cracks as they exchanged fire and the sniper fell. Yelling in German from the street ahead, the roar of a lorry pulling away. The sound of the engine faded and a thick silence fell again.

'They're only interested in getting out,' said Franek.

Misha radioed back to headquarters while the men drank from flasks and the wound was bandaged.

'The infantry will be across the river in two hours,' Misha told the waiting men. 'We carry on scouting out the full situation but don't engage unless we have to. We'll split into two groups.'

There was no way to check if the streets ahead had been mined by the retreating army as Misha, Franek and one of the radio boys headed north. A reddish dawn was spreading at the edge of a white sky like a wound behind a seeping bandage, showing with increasing clarity details of the broken landscape: a field of wooden crosses standing inside the ruins of a roofless church, an iron bedstead rising from the snow, an upturned child's pram.

They carried on along Senatorska Street towards Theatre Square, hoping to see something of the Warsaw they had known. Nothing but more rubble. The Opera was gone, the town hall eradicated. Along Midowa to Castle Square to another demolition site. The column of King Sigismund lay in pieces, the defender of Warsaw face down in the mud and snow. Market Square was charred ruins, stumps of buildings like gravestones in the toneless light.

They headed west down Dluga Street, past the wastes of Krasinskich Park. Every tree had been felled. Nearing the area that had been walled off as a ghetto, Misha felt his heartbeat rising. Abruptly, the bomb-damaged buildings ended. The ghetto wall was entirely gone as were the thousands of buildings inside it. Speechless, Misha got out of the jeep. He was standing in front of miles of empty land, a levelled field sown with snow and frost. Every brick and plank had been taken away, the ground razed flat. Nothing remained of the ghetto except for a church half a mile away, marooned in a white and frozen sea. Three years ago, he and half a million other Jewish people had lived here, crowded together in a constant hubbub of so

many voices. Now, there was only the sound of the wind blowing unimpeded across this scraped-clean demolition site. He walked out a little way. He was standing alone in the blank luminosity, the cold penetrating his boots and his gloves. There were no other tracks except for his.

Misha made his way back to the jeep, feeling frozen to the bone.

'Do you think we've time to go past Krochmalna Street?' Misha asked as he got back in. 'If you don't want to risk it . . .'

Franek nodded his assent and the jeep started along what had once been Leszno Street, now a ghostly track through a desert.

Mounds of broken masonry blocked Krochmalna Street. Misha got out of the jeep, scrambling over rubble towards the place where he had lived and worked as a teacher only three years ago. By some miracle, several buildings in Krochmalna Street were still standing. And there it was. The children's home was still there. The dormitory windows had been blown out, the roof was gone, the front pitted with shrapnel, but it was still there. His heart contracted in the silence. No voices of children shouting and laughing as they played in the yard in front of the house.

There was the noise of someone following him over the rubble. Franek appeared beside him, looking up at the building's remains.

'I heard a rumour that Dr Korczak and the children escaped. That they're alive in the east somewhere.'

'Yes,' said Misha. 'I heard that rumour.'

He looked up at the empty window frames. With a pain in his chest, he thought back to the last time he had seen the doctor and the children, the Sienna Street home inside the ghetto walls. He had been out of the ghetto all day as part of a work detail for the Germans, clearing broken glass in the Praga barracks, the bored guard holding his rifle loosely as he watched over them.

When he'd got back to the orphanage late that afternoon, the children were gone. Half-drunk cups of milk and bread lay cold on the tables, chairs pushed back and tipped over. Looters had already been through the building, splitting open pillows, and spilling the contents of the children's keepsake cupboards across the small ballroom of the businessmen's club that for the past year and a half had served as a crowded dormitory, schoolroom and dining room for two hundred children.

Before the war, he had walked with Sophia through Warsaw towards Grzybowski Square, making her laugh with stories about the children, children who were naughty and wise and so full of life.

Tears streaming down his face now because they had been taken, because he hadn't been there to save them. He stood in the cold wind that blew across the broken bricks of Krochmalna Street, his face stripped bare as driftwood, scoured down to the bone by pain.

CHAPTER TWO

WARSAW, MAY 1937

Korczak is still mourning the loss of his wireless broadcast. Millions tuned in across Poland each week to hear his message of understanding and respect for children. But now it seems a Jew may not speak on Polish air. Contract terminated. What is he if he isn't Polish? He thinks and he dreams in Polish, knows the streets of Warsaw as well as he knows his own palm. Truly, the poison of the Nazi insanity is spreading across Europe.

At least he still has the lectures, the chance to influence a new generation of teachers who will one day care for Poland's children. He's wearing his tweed suit with a fob watch in the waistcoat, a bow-tie.

Korczak slows his steps so that the small boy at his side can keep up as they climb the stairs. Around them the smooth surfaces of the hospital echo and re-echo with footfalls and with distant doors closing.

'Good afternoon, Dr Korczak,' a nurse calls out as she hurries by, glancing at the skinny urchin holding his hand. She evidently wants to ask what the doctor's doing here today, years since he resigned to take care of a house full of orphans. A bachelor father, caring for a hundred children.

Outside the radiography door, Korczak kneels down to talk to little Szymonek.

'We'll go inside, there will be lots of people there, and then I'm going to ask you to stand behind the special machine. Are you ready?'

Szymonek nods. Large serious eyes. 'Because it will help the grown-ups understand children.'

'You have great courage, my little man.'

Korczak stands up and opens the door. He's still angry and shaken by the discovery yesterday that one of his own teachers in the orphanage on Krochmalna Street had dragged a boy down to the cellar and left him there in the dark.

'What else could I do, Pan Doctor?' the teacher had asked, expecting sympathy perhaps. 'Jakubek wouldn't listen to me. I was so exasperated I even raised my hand, but he just yelled back, "Hit me and Pan Doctor will have you thrown out." I'm not proud of it, but I saw red then and pulled him down to the cellar. He went quiet after that.'

'You left a child alone in the dark?' Korczak had closed his eyes, speaking almost in a whisper. 'But how do you know he wasn't acting badly because he was suffering? You're the adult. You had the chance to find out what was wrong, to teach him that he doesn't

need to lash out when he's upset. But no, what do you do? It's into the dark, into the cellar.'

Korczak had had to rush away at that point, the tears close.

A few days later, they learned why Jakubek had been so difficult. He had been out on a Saturday to visit his beloved grandmother only to find that she had passed away.

The room is filled with chattering students. They are all puzzled as to why they've been asked to vacate their usual lecture room in the Institute of Pedagogy and walk over to this laboratory in the hospital. They fall silent as Dr Korczak enters, expectant. No one falls asleep in Korczak's lectures.

But his attention is only on the child, speaking in a low voice to him as he leads Szymonek to stand behind a square glass screen. The blinds are down, the boy's skinny chest luminous in the gloom. His eyes follow the doctor as the lecture begins.

'So you've been with the children all day. I understand. It's not easy sometimes. Some days you're worn out. You can't take any more. You feel like yelling at them, feel perhaps the impulse to raise your hand.'

Dr Korczak switches on the fluorescent lamp behind the child. The glass screen lights up with an ethereal glow showing a portrait in dark pencil, a small child's ribs. Inside is the shadow of a heart, beating fast, jumping like a panicked bird.

'Look carefully. This is how a child's heart behaves if you shout at them, if you raise your hand. This is what a child's heart does when they are afraid. Look carefully, and remember.'

Korczak turns off the lamp, puts his jacket around the boy and picks him up. 'That will be all.'

Korczak leaves with the child and the stunned room breaks into a buzz of chatter.

A boy taller than anyone else in the room, a long athletic frame, a slightly receding hairline above a broad forehead that gives the impression of good sense, is packing away his notebooks hurriedly. Misha is thinking about how he's going to write a letter to his father that night, explaining why he isn't going to get an engineering job now he's finished his degree. Instead, he's going to begin a teaching degree at night school and carry on working at Korczak's orphanage as a barely paid student helper. His father will be furious. He knows from his own job as a teacher that there's no money in education, no jobs. He'll blame Korczak for this catastrophe, which will be correct.

If you want to change the world, change education.

As he crosses the room, a pen falls from Misha's canvas bag. He kneels to retrieve it and looking up sees a girl still sitting on a chair, lost in her own thoughts, reflecting on the talk. He sees fair hair drawn back from an oval face, clear blue eyes, generous lips, a white blouse with a Peter Pan collar. Just a girl.

But he can't move, he can't look away; deep in his chest there's the unmistakable hum of a tuning fork, the inevitable true note around which all the other notes will harmonize. This girl. He badly wants to speak to her, to sit by her and take her hand.

But what's he thinking of? He'll be on duty at the home soon. And let's face it: he's going to be too poor to fall in love for a long time. He should be strong. He has that letter to write.

He shoulders his bag and leaves.

*

But the girl won't leave him. Over the next few days Misha finds himself back in that moment again, gazing up at a pale, open face, impelled to speak to her.

So at the next lecture, he decides, he's going to do it. He's really going to find a way to talk to her.

But a crowd of friends surrounds her. A boy in a chalk-striped suit, oiled hair, calls out, 'Sophia.'

Her name. Misha picks it up like a treasure.

He watches the eager-faced boy, notes how he laughs self-consciously at something she says. Is she smiling back because she likes him too? Is she just being polite? Misha finds he dislikes him intensely.

Next time. He'll go up and speak to her next time. Sophia.

But there is no next time. Korczak's lectures are cancelled. No reason given, though everyone knows why. Only true Poles can be trusted with the education of Polish minds.

Now Misha has no business going to the university any more. Misha's studying for a teaching certificate at the night school. He was only there at the Institute lecture because Korczak invited him.

It's for the best, he tells himself. He's being ridiculous, falling in love with a stranger. And no, he certainly isn't going to let himself go back to the Institute and hang around the gates in case she comes out.

He waits for his crush to fade, like a graze on a child's knee that will heal itself in time. But she ambushes him as he's crossing Saxon Park in the cool of the evening. She ambushes him when he's standing by a window looking over the yard where one of the boys is playing a harmonica, 'My Shtetl Beltz'. Her face comes back to him like a longing for home.

He finds himself hoping he will bump into her somewhere. It feels as though it's something that is meant to happen, will happen. But the months go by, summer comes and goes. The air begins to have an unpredictable tang of cold.

Autumn is almost here, and he still hasn't seen her again.