

ELLIE MIDWOOD

*The*  
Girl  
Who  
Escaped  
*from*  
Auschwitz

*bookouture*

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# Prologue

*Żywiec Mountains, Poland. July 6, 1944*

The road before them, framed by towering mountains and emerald valleys, stretched long and empty in the early-morning sunlight. Under the dome of a pale blue sky, the air was fresh with the promise of freedom in it. Her blue overalls dusty and wrinkled after yet another night spent in a forest, Mala chewed contentedly on the blade of sweet grass, unbothered in the slightest by the rumbling of her stomach. Next to her, Edek was whistling a joyful tune, his arm draped around her shoulders, his SS tunic unbuttoned and smelling faintly of moss and smoke.

“Hungry, Mally?” His whistling stopped abruptly at the particularly loud noise her belly had produced.

Brave and in love, she tossed her head, gazing at his unshaven, tanned face with infinite affection.

“We can go off the road and try to find some more mushrooms,” he suggested, searching her face.

Long before they had escaped Auschwitz, he’d promised to take care of her, to guard her life with his own, to do his utmost to make her forget the horrors of the death camp, but instead, he made her troop along the endless ribbons of half-trodden roads and survive on mushrooms and berries and sleep under the open sky, with only his embrace protecting against the elements.

Little did he know, that was all Mala needed: his arms around her and the air that didn’t carry the stench of crematoriums with it. Hunger was the least of her concerns—Auschwitz had trained her well for surviving on a crust of bread.

“No, I don’t want to stop just yet,” Mala said. “Let’s keep going. The sooner we reach the village, the better. We’ll buy some food, together with civilian clothes for you.” She gave her lover a mischievous once-over. “Else, the partisans will shoot you on sight if you appear before them in such an attire.”

Feeling the molten dental gold rolling under his fingers in his pocket—a ghastly present from the *Sonderkommando*, the inmates manning the furnaces, to aid their escape—Edek nodded and hastened his step, as though spurred forward by their inaudible, powerful voices: *get yourselves to safety, tell the partisans your story, lead them, along with the victorious Red Army, toward this blasted place and avenge all the innocent souls we’ve been forced to burn by those SS beasts.*

The SS beasts, whose uniform he was presently wearing.

Passing his hand over the stiff gray-green wool, Edek thought of the moment he’d finally tear the hateful thing off of himself and burn it until nothing was left of it but ash.

Mala stopped to re-tie her boot. Just a few steps ahead of her, Edek gazed at the mountains longingly.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t catch the deathly undertone to Mala’s voice when she called his name.

“Edek.”

It came from behind, a doomed half-a-gasp cracking with horror.

He turned, smiling—*What it is, my love?*—and felt his smile faltering, slipping at the sight of her ashen face, her eyes staring ahead. It seemed that all the pain in the world was reflected in their golden irises that had suddenly lost all of their shine.

Standing perfectly still, Edek slowly followed her gaze and felt himself sinking into a black abyss at the sight of two uniformed figures walking purposely and deliberately toward them.

They must have appeared from behind the bend of the road, heavens only knew why. The Germans hardly ever patrolled this area; Edek and Mala had been assured of this much by the Soviet

prisoner of war inmates who had conducted several successful escapes themselves and the sympathetic Polish civilians who worked in the camp and were only too glad to stick it to the Nazis by helping another couple of inmates escape.

A dreadful, sickening shiver rising the heckles on his neck, Edek looked with infinite longing at the forest looming to their right, then shifted his gaze back to the approaching German border patrol. The muzzles of their submachine guns shone brightly in the golden rays of July sun. He stared at the weapons with bitter disappointment, angry tears already pricking his eyes. He'd seen far too many comrades mowed down by those guns to nurse a hope that the woods were within reach, that the border patrol men would somehow miss from such close distance, that at least Mala would escape the hail of the German bullets...

As though reading his mind, she picked up his hand and pressed it tightly, shaking her head with a small smile.

He had always been a dreamer. She had always been the voice of reality and, now, that reality stared into his soul with those black muzzles and there was suddenly no escape from it.

“Forgive me, please, Mala... I love you.”

They were the very last words he uttered before the Germans leveled with them, saluted crisply and politely demanded, “Your papers, please, Herr Unterscharführer.”

# Chapter 1

*Auschwitz, autumn 1943*

Edek had had enough. The grim realization of it dawned on him along with the first slanting rays of the sunset bleeding red atop the barracks' roofs as he watched SS Officer Brück stomp repeatedly on an inmate's head with the steel-lined sole of his tall jackboot. The guard had been at it for quite some time now; his victim had long ceased not only resisting but moving altogether, and yet, the SS man kept crushing his skull with a disgusted viciousness of a farmer crushing a rodent with his shovel.

After all, that's precisely what they, the inmates, were to the SS—vermin. The Nazis had made their sentiments known to the new arrivals on their first day. Edek was among the very first political prisoners to receive such a “welcoming address” after their transport spilled them, dazed and sun-blinded, onto the infamous Auschwitz ramp in June of 1940. Seven hundred and twenty-eight people arrived in what used to be Polish barracks that day. It was on that day that Edward Galiński, the maritime school cadet, had ceased to exist. From that moment on, he became *Häftling*—inmate—531, sentenced to hard labor for...

What was it precisely that the Polish section of the Gestapo had stuck him with? So much time had passed since he was forced to sign his confession, the details of it kept slipping Edek's mind. A suspiciously sweet-talking, bespectacled German official had courteously explained to him that in order to leave the Gestapo cellar alive, Herr Galiński had better put his signature under the unreadable text in German and admit that he was plotting against

the Reich along with other members of the Polish intelligentsia. Edek had tried to explain that he was a simple plumber's son and had never even dreamt of classing himself with the intellectual elite, let alone enter into any conspiracies as part of their circle. The German official had nodded sympathetically, slammed his fist into Edek's temple a few times, cleaned his hand thoroughly with a handkerchief, and advised him to think again.

By the end of the week, Edek had signed the paper.

Everyone eventually did, the Gestapo officer had explained to him amiably as he put Edek's case among rows and rows of similar dull-gray, swastika-bearing folders lining the walls of his newly established office in Tarnov prison. Behind the barred window, instead of Polish national flags that had all been taken down after the German invasion in 1939, crimson *Hakenkreuz* banners slapped against the façade. In the courtyard, crimson pools of blood sat next to the pockmarked wall. Enemies of the German Reich were shot there—journalists and liberals mostly, who agitated the regular folk and confused their minds against the official state propaganda. The Gestapo did away with such outspoken types first. They spoke the truth far too loudly for the Nazis' liking.

The Nazi didn't lie, as Edek learned from the men who shared the same transport to Auschwitz with him. They all were there on the same charges. "We're guilty of being young, healthy men capable of picking up weapons and organizing a revolt against those Nazi sods," one of them had said as he pulled on his cigarette, his eyes staring apathetically into the void. At his feet was a small bundle of personal possessions each inmate was permitted to take with him to their new destination, the name of which their escort kept like some sinister secret. He spoke in an undertone, for the abovementioned *Nazi sods* had replaced Polish policemen at the station and were presently sitting on a bench in the same train car, glaring at the Poles with beady eyes and barking abuse at them each time someone turned their gaze toward the window. "That's enough

for them to ship us all someplace away from the general population on conspiracy charges,” the man had carried on. “Women with children and the elderly don’t represent any threat to them. That’s why they’re the only ones whom the Germans have left in peace, for now at any rate.”

The young man’s name was Wiesław.

Now, three and a half years later, he stood next to Edek and watched the SS guard stomp an inmate to death, and just one stolen glance at his friend’s face told Edek that he had also had enough.

“We have to get out of here,” Edek murmured in Polish.

It was sheer bad luck that Brück, the SS officer, heard him. At once, he whipped around, forgetting all about his victim buried in the mud.

“Using your swine language again?!” He was breathing heavily. In his neck, the vein was bulging under the tight collar with SS markings on it. “Do you wish to spend a few days in the *Strafblock* to freshen up your principles?”

Eyes downcast, Edek apologized promptly. He’d already spent more days in the punishment cell than he cared to remember. The size of a doghouse, the cell was a concrete sack with no windows or even standing room; only a filthy bucket in the corner to do one’s business and a food bowl placed before him once a day. Though the physical discomfort was not the punishment; the real punishment was the complete and total isolation in that all-consuming darkness that slowly but surely drove one mad. After a mere few hours, a paralyzing sensation of having been buried alive began to creep up and even howling at the top of one’s lungs didn’t help in the slightest. Whoever designed those ghastly affairs went through the pains to ensure that his punishment inventions were almost entirely soundproof. One could scream themselves into consumption; there were only four walls and the echo of your own hoarse voice to reply to the desperate pleas.

No, Edek didn’t fancy going back there at all.



The SS man, hands shoved in pockets, strolled up to the pair. He was a young fellow like them, hardly older than twenty-five, with the same smooth face and bright eyes, only, his body was all flesh and muscle and his head wasn't shaved but cut according to the fashion—short on the sides and the back, with a long, silky forelock falling onto one eye. The Aryan master of the world, solely on blood principle. A wry smile was playing on his lips.

“What was he saying to you?” He stood nose to nose with Wiesław, his pale blue eyes staring at the inmate without blinking.

But Edek's friend was not to be deceived by the suddenly friendly tone.

“He was admiring your wristwatch, Herr Scharführer,” he explained in a grave tone in his halting German. “Said he's never seen such beautiful work.”

Edek began to breathe again. Wiesław could be relied on in such matters—the man's ability to think on his feet had long ago earned him respect among the camp population.

The SS guard lifted his hand languidly. The red of the sunset glinted softly on the golden face of the watch. *Stolen from one Jew or the other*, Edek thought to himself but, naturally, said nothing, only apologized for speaking in his native language once again.

Scharführer Brück noticed the short prisoner number on Edek's chest, recognized a camp veteran and waved him off generously.

It wasn't the first time that his inmate number, or the red triangle of a political prisoner, had saved him from a beating or a bullet. Ever since the SS brought the first Jews to Auschwitz, it was commonly decided that all of their Nazi ideological hatred would be directed at them. The Poles suddenly found themselves to be elevated to the positions of the *Kapos*—inmate functionaries—along with the German criminals who proudly wore their civilian clothes with green triangles sewn onto them. Not that Edek minded such a welcome change, but he couldn't help but feel for the poor devils who were being slaughtered solely for belonging to the wrong race.

“Where are you two heading?” the SS officer asked.

“Birkenau, Herr Scharführer,” Edek replied promptly. “On Rottenführer Lubusch’s orders.”

“Lubusch? The *Kommandoführer* in the locksmith shop?”

“*Jawohl*, Herr Scharführer. We’re helping the carpenters on his orders whenever he tells us.”

Edek was about to explain further, but Brück had already lost all interest.

“Take this stinking carcass to the cart—” with a lazy sweep of the hand, Brück indicated to what the inmates called the death cart that stood by the barrack’s wall, a small mountain of corpses piled on it, “and off with you. You were sent here to work, not ogle people’s watches.”

But despite the guard’s grumbling and his smirk, Edek saw how much the compliment had pleased him. The wristwatch must have been expensive indeed. Edek wondered about the man who had parted with it prior to parting with his life and felt sick to his stomach.

*We have to get out of here*, he had told Wiesław and he meant it. He’d had enough of the SS men trampling their innocent victims to death; he’d had enough of them appropriating the murdered men’s riches. But, more than anything, he’d had enough of showing deference to all of these uniformed bastards, of apologizing for speaking Polish, of having to tear his cap off his shaved head each time one of them was near, of being called a subhuman and having to act like one.