

The Child's Shoe

By Rae Antonoff

I lay there in the cold. To my left was the sky; to my right, dirt. My soles met only air and the view of a dirt road and, beyond that, some bushes; in the opposite direction, there grew some grass that seemed like a miracle. In the midst of all this confusion, the grass still grew green, the flowers still bloomed, and the birds still had the nerve to sing their joyous song as though all were right with the world. I longingly thought of when all *was* right with the world—my world, the only world that existed. This whole ordeal actually started a few years ago, but my world shattered around me this morning. Was it only this morning? It seemed a century, or even a millennium, ago. . .

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“*Hast!* Hurry, Eva, you’ll be late for school!”

“I’m coming!” Eva shouted. She grabbed my mate and me and pulled us onto her feet. She tied my laces quickly. The school stood only two blocks away, but with all the soldiers in the streets, those two blocks could take twenty minutes if the usual amount of them were to stop Eva and her older brother, Daniel, demanding identification. The yellow bands on their coat sleeves made them easy targets. Eva’s father had told her to be proud of the star and band.

“*It is a sign of our life, our being. No matter what others think, our Judaism is a source of pride, not shame.*” Tears welled up in Eva’s eyes whenever the words resurfaced. How could she be proud of the very thing that ruined her life? She could no longer see her best friend, Mariel, or any of her other non-Jewish friends. The only friends she could ever talk to were the students at the small impromptu Jewish school in the western quarter of the ghetto. Only the soldiers and Nazi officials could go freely between the ghetto and the rest of Eva’s hometown.

The armband made Eva feel like a criminal. She said so in the mutterings I so often overheard as she prepared for supper each night—her only time to think alone.

“It’s not right. A ten-year-old shouldn’t feel like she’d done something wrong just by being born to a Jewish family,” I thought.

Eva walked the two blocks with her brother in record time; none of the unusually few soldiers in the streets stopped the two children. Daniel was suspicious, and told Eva so.

“I don’t see what’s wrong with it. Maybe they decided to give us a break,” Eva countered in hopeful innocence... yet her tone was laced with that of an adult who has seen and been through much, seeming not to believe even her own words. Daniel agreed that it might be true, but skepticism still leaked into his voice.

The day went by smoothly. Too smoothly. Eva took her grammar and arithmetic tests without much effort. She enjoyed being top of her fifth grade class, especially since she had skipped a grade and still held that position.

Then—

A shot.

The history teacher fell silent mid-sentence. Hardly a moment passed before gruff shouts stabbed the air.

“Raus, verdammte Juden! Raus! Jetzt! Hast, jüdische Schweine!” Out, damned Jews!
Out! Now! Hurry, Jewish swine!

The teacher stiffened. He told the class to line up and remain calm. But calm was the last emotion on the children’s minds; no amount of pleading or comfort could prevent the near-hysteria. They filed out of the building in a ragged line, chattering nervously. Tears rolled down many cheeks; other cheeks remained dry only out of uncomprehending shock. All the school-aged children of the ghetto stood in a large group, confused and afraid. Cries of *“Mutti!”* and

“*Vati!*” arose in frightened young voices from students of all ages. My Eva was among those, crying for her mother in a small whimpering voice. Children huddled together for warmth in the chilly German early spring. No one dared move; the glare reflecting in the guards’ guns paralyzed any thoughts of rebellion the older children may have had.

The hunger of midday only added to the misery of the cold and the fear. Eva looked around for Daniel. He was nowhere in sight. Her breath quickened as her worrying increased.

“Eva!”

Eva whirled around at the sound of her brother’s voice. He was weaving his way through the crowd toward us. After the tightest hug I had ever witnessed them sharing, Eva’s trembling voice asked what was going on, what was going to happen to them. Daniel told her he had heard that this was an *Aktion*; the Nazis were rounding up all the Jews to send them away. *Aktions* had occurred in many other ghettos and towns already. No one knew where the Jews from those towns went. Daniel muttered that none had been heard from after they left, not even the ones who disappeared in the first rounds in 1937, like their cousins in Poland.

“Seven years later? Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Eva’s eyes widened. Her lip quivered.

Daniel assured her that some people would be able to hide in the bunkers they had dug for themselves and their families in case this happened. But despite his attempt at confidence, he couldn’t fully hide his uncertainty and fear.

Eva looked at her brother. He looked so much like their father. She whispered the words “*chazak chazak v’nitchazeik*—be strong, be strong, and we will strengthen one another.” Her father’s Hebrew wisdom stalled in the air. If there ever were a time for strength, that time had come. She straightened and grabbed Daniel’s hand. He squeezed back in gratitude.

Someone cried out.

“Look!”

All the children looked up to see a large group of women being marched toward them. As they came closer, a few cried out “*Mutti!*” and tried to run toward the group.

The runaways froze and retreated once a shot threw one of the younger boys to the ground.

The minutes seemed to expand and pass in slow motion until the two groups finally merged. Children and mothers united. The faint scream of the mother of the dead child was heard as the woman collapsed. Other women wept with relief. Eva searched frantically for her mother.

“Eva! Daniel!” Eva whirled toward her mother’s voice. The three cried out in relief, embraced each other, and recounted stories. Eva’s mother said that all the Jews in the ghetto had been rounded up, the women sent to one group and the men to another. The men were marched in a different direction. Daniel asked if anyone could have hidden in their bunkers. Her eyes fell.

“*Nein*. No, there was no warning at all. Everyone was caught off guard. I would have kept you two home if I’d had even the slightest idea...”

Before she could continue, a Nazi official ordered silence. The group didn’t quiet down right away, but a single shot cut through the air, abruptly ending all other sound. The official began to speak. Follow the soldiers. Do not step out of line. Do not ask questions. Anybody caught lagging behind will be shot.

He barked a few more instructions in rapid German. The words were muffled by the shifting of the crowd as we started walking. Daniel and Eva clung to their mother, but even her presence and words of encouragement did not lessen their fear or loosen their grip.

An hour and a half of walking passed. The cold only worsened. Many people were “removed” for lagging behind. The tension was beyond palpable—it solidified the air. I felt myself being dragged more often than I was picked up between each step.

Suddenly, Eva stumbled. I was pulled off of her foot and deposited on the side of the road.

“My shoe!” she cried. Her mother begged her not to stop—would it be better to have a sore foot or be shot? Eva looked back at me and continued walking. I saw her strong front fall away. A single tear slid slowly out of her eye. It was a tear of hate, of despair, of longing to be somewhere, *sometime* else, a tear of indescribable feelings that only a person in such a seemingly impossible situation as this could feel. She walked on, leaving me on the side of the road.

And so I lay there in the cold. To my left was the sky; to my right, dirt. My soles met only air and the view of a dirt road and, beyond that, some bushes; in the opposite direction, there grew some grass that seemed like a miracle. In the midst of all this confusion, the grass still grew green, the flowers still bloomed, and the birds still had the nerve to sing their joyous song as though all were right with the world. As though my owner were not being marched to her death in a camp twenty miles away, to become only a number among six million others. As though I, her little shoe, had never existed. What lunatic would—no, *could* bring on such a war that I should be left on the side of a small, unnamed dirt road. . .

“Do not tell me of the horrors of war; tell me instead of the child’s shoe abandoned on the side of the road.” – Author Unknown