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WE MUST NOT THINK OF OURSELVES

A Novel



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ALSO BY LAUREN GRODSTEIN

The Best of Animals

Reproduction Is the Flaw of Love

A Friend of the Family

The Explanation for Everything

Our Short History

We Must Not Think of Ourselves

a novel

LAUREN GRODSTEIN

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For Penelope Lian, my daughter, who crossed oceans

I would love to live to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and shriek to the world proclaiming the truth . . . But no, we shall certainly never live to see it, and therefore do I write my last will. May the treasure fall into good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened and was played out in the twentieth century . . . We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.

—DAWID GRABER, AUGUST 1942, WARSAW, POLAND

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ONE



The man came to my classroom on December 14, 1940, at 4:40 p.m. I wrote down the time and date immediately, because he asked me to write down everything immediately, and there was no reason not to comply. “All the details,” he said, “even if they seem insignificant. I don’t want you to decide what’s significant. I want you to record. You are a camera and a Dictaphone, both.”

He was tall, with brown curly hair that seemed clean, newly cut. He had heavy brows, hooded eyes, and a sharp nose, and all in all was handsome in a rather somber way. He spoke educated Polish with an eastern accent. His name was Emanuel Ringelblum.

“I’ve heard of you,” I said. He was the one who was organizing relief agencies, soup kitchens.

He smiled, briefly, and his face briefly warmed. “I’ve heard of you too. You were a teacher of foreign languages at Centralny. Now you’re teaching English here.”

“That’s right.”

He put a hand in his pocket, took a glance around my meager classroom. “I have an archival project I’d like you to be part of, if you’re interested.” He paused as if to consider his words. “It’s important work. I’ve asked several people I know—professors, writers—to take notes on what they witness during their time here, to write down everything that’s happened, from the time we wake up to when we go to sleep.”

“And we do this . . . why?” I asked. Very few of us here needed more to do.

“It is up to us to write our own history,” he said. “Deny the Germans the last word.”

A dry chuckle escaped me. “It’s hard to deny the Germans anything, Pan Ringelblum.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “Or perhaps after the war, we can tell the world the truth about what happened.”

It was quite cold in the basement; in the few weeks I’d been teaching, I had twice ended class early for cold. Ringelblum didn’t seem to notice. “Our task is to pay attention,” he continued. “To listen to the stories. We want all political backgrounds, all religious attitudes. The illiterate and the elite. Every

ideology. Interview everyone. Learn about their lives. I need the best minds here to help.” He paused, as if trying to decide whether to add something. “Will you join us?”

I was flattered. “I will.”

“I’m glad,” he said, and reached into his bag to hand me a small white notebook. “Write about what it’s like to teach here. Your students, their parents, their friends. Whatever you observe,” he said. “There is no privacy here.”

Of course, I knew that.

“Ask them questions about how they lived before this. Write down what they remember. And your own life. With your family before they left. With your wife while she was still alive. Your day-to-day activities, in and out of the classroom. I can offer you a small stipend. I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to do that, however.”

I wanted to ask how he knew about me, how he knew who I was and what I did, but he didn’t really invite questions. He had that authority about him.

“If they find the notebook, you could be killed,” he said.

“They won’t find it.”

He nodded, told me that we would meet on Saturdays at the library at 3/5 Tłomackie Street. “You’re not religious, are you?”

Before all this, I had barely remembered I was a Jew. I told him as much.

“Well, they won’t let you forget now,” he said.

“Surely not,” I said.

“Our group is called Oneg Shabbat,” he said. “The joy of the Sabbath.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the term.”

He left the room a few minutes before five. I leaned against the overturned barrel—my classroom had no chairs—and wrote down what he’d said, all the details. The perfect Polish. The hooded eyes. I then wrote down a few scraggly details about myself—my name, my height, and what I imagined was my weight—and then immediately scratched out my height and weight, self-conscious. I had never been a diary keeper. I had never thought myself such an interesting subject. I almost tore the page out and started again, but then I thought: *What if someone found my discarded notes?* And I also thought: *It is not my job to decide what’s significant.*

So I kept going.

Name: Adam Paskow

Date: December 14, 1940

Age: 42
Height: 180 cm Weight:
75 kg

I suppose I'll start by telling you who we were.

Several of us had been printers. A few had been dentists. About the number you might expect had been rabbis. Some of us, however, had practiced more unusual work: Lieberman, for instance, had been an ornithologist and, for a while, kept a stuffed hummingbird next to his mattress as a reminder of his former life. My old neighbor Kalwitz had been a calligrapher. His brother-in-law Weiss had monitored the trolley system. I myself had been an English teacher, and in fact I remain an English teacher, the only one I know who's still at it. My vocation is so useless that I'm not surprised to be the only one, and often I'm surprised I'm still alive.

I teach in the basement under the bomb-crushed cinema on Miła Street. Our class meets after my shift at the Aid Society, before curfew, before our jagged hours of sleep. I have six students sometimes, sometimes four, rarely none at all. Szifra Joseph comes regularly, but I knew her before the war, when she was my student at the Centralny Lyceum. Just last week, Szifra read a few pages of "Moby Dick" without stumbling. (Laugh all you want at Lieberman's hummingbird, but I was the fool who'd brought with me not only "Moby Dick" but also "As You Like It," "King Lear," and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.")

Szifra is 15 and in a better world might have been an actress—she's beautiful and very dramatic—but here she's practicing English in a basement while her little brothers scavenge for food and her mother slowly goes crazy fabricating brushes in a sweatshop forty meters away. Her family had been wealthy once. Szifra spoke to me of a house in the suburbs, several Polish maids. Her father had owned a clothing factory in Praga, but after the invasion some petty commandant forced him to hand over the keys along with a receipt claiming that the factory had been relinquished as a gift. Two days after that humiliation, her father shot himself in the mouth with the pistol he'd brought home from his service to the Polish army. (Szifra said this to me in well-pronounced English, which I complimented lavishly.)

As for me, I have never owned much of my own—such is the lot of a public school teacher—but I enjoyed my life for many years and even now consider myself lucky, all things considered. First, I have no family with me: my brother went in for Palestine several years ago, and now lives with his wife and six children on a cabbage farm outside Jerusalem. My mother joined him there in '36, after the political situation here had become even more tenuous. She had suggested—begged, really—that I come with her. I was already a widower—there was nothing stopping me—but I was thoroughly uninterested in Zionism. We had never practiced Judaism before, and I thought myself too old to try believing something new, or to take advantage of an accident of birth to claim some brown patch of desert as my home. Besides, I liked my job. I liked my life. Pleasant reminders of my wife were everywhere, and I wanted to be close to her grave.

For almost a decade, Kasia and I had lived in the Mokotów District, near the river, in an apartment she had secured with her father's money. Our home was cozy, filled with books and Oriental rugs. Kasia was a stickler about nice bedclothes, so we had fine linen sheets and down blankets, things I never would have bothered with were I to have lived on my own. She wore glasses, curled her short hair. She collected German teddy bears for the children we would never have. She was the fourth and favorite daughter of a government bigwig with some distant ties to nobility, a father who indulged her even after her mother openly mused about disowning her for becoming involved with a Jew.

"But honestly, Anna," her father said to his wife, shortly after our first meeting, "what kind of Jew is this? He has blue eyes! His hair is light! He looks like a Pole. He probably isn't even really Jewish. He's probably a Pole, somewhere in those genes. Look at those eyes! And besides, our Kasia loves him."

“Also,” I pointed out, trying to be helpful, “my father died fighting the Russians.”

“You see, Anna? His father was a brave soldier. Maybe not even a Jew at all.”

(This was not true—we were Jewish to our bones—but what was the point of arguing? I believed in God even less than I believed in the devil.)

I had met Kasia in university, where we were both studying English literature—again, her parents were indulgent, and my mother was too grief-stricken from my father’s loss (why did he enlist? what did he have to prove?) to care much anymore what I did. It had been Kasia’s plan to move to London after she graduated and work as a translator for the British government. It had been my plan to be an English teacher at one of the Jewish public schools, or, if I could swing it, at a Polish school (better pay, nicer classrooms). It had been nobody’s plan to end up seated next to each other at a lecture on Shakespeare’s comedies by a visiting scholar from City College Manchester, nor to get a coffee afterward, nor to keep talking until the trolleys stopped running. She was lovely, although that’s not the first thing I noticed about her. I noticed first her fine sense of humor, her quick laugh, her honesty when it came to decoding Shakespeare. “I read the Polish translations first,” she said. “Do you?” I did not, but I told her that I did, not wanting to seem like a show-off.

“I have a much easier time,” she said, “with the Romantics. Or with Blake.” She loved Blake. She quoted “London,” even though it was a sad poem and not a particular advertisement for moving there after graduation.

“Do you really think you’ll leave?” I asked. It was midnight and we had met only five hours before, but already I was making plans.

“I suppose I wouldn’t,” she said, “if I had something keeping me here.” She coughed a little into her empty coffee cup.

We stood to put on our coats. She was tall—maybe a centimeter taller than I was—with short blond hair and gray eyes. She had a bump on her nose from a football accident; when she was a child, she said, she used to play football in the backyard with her father.

“Which way are you walking?” I asked. I lived in a student hostel near the university. She lived with her family in Wilanów. Both were in the same direction, so after a bit of awkward fumbling with our coats we walked together into the night.

Kasia and I married May 20, 1930, at the registry office of the courthouse, the same one I pass now when I walk to the Aid Society. (There’s some sort of tunnel in the basement that you can sneak through to the Aryan side if you’re insane enough to try. Some of the children get out that way and come back in, their coats full of carrots and bread.)

We were never able to have children. These days, that seems like a bit of luck. She was plagued by migraines, and, during our seventh year of marriage, in the midst of a particularly bad spell, she fell down the stairs of the Sprawy Zagraniczne building, where she worked. She broke her leg, several ribs, and the orbital bone around her eye, but the most grievous injury was to her brain. According to her doctors, hidden somewhere in her skull was a massive hemorrhage; her brain swelled and kept swelling, and in twelve days she was dead.

And yet: we had a funeral attended by dozens of people, and she was buried in a cemetery, and I know where her tombstone is.

This, too, is luck.

But, as I say, I know I’ve been fortunate, even in circumstances I might have once found impossible to see as fortunate. It has been this understanding as much as anything else that keeps me alive, that I feel certain will continue to keep me alive. Sala Wiskoff, who sleeps two meters from me, separated only by a curtain of old sheets, says that she’s trying to take a lesson from my attitude. She’s trying to recalibrate her sense of what luck looks like. But it’s not as easy for her: she has two children who spend their days smuggling and stealing, and a husband who won’t stop crying for his dead mother. We share our small apartment with the Lescovec family, and she and Pani Lescovec still bicker over the use of the tiny kitchen, even though there’s not much food to prepare. Pani

Lescovec usually starts the bickering, and Sala can't help herself, battling over who can use the teapot even when there's no tea. "But sometimes there's tea," I point out.

"Sometimes."

"We have a toilet that flushes."

"Every once in a while."

"We're alive."

"For the moment."

Other parts of the ghetto, especially the larger section across Chłodna Street, are far worse off—starving children are begging in the streets. On this side, most of us have secured jobs with the Jewish council or the Jewish police, or, like me, at the Aid Society, and there's a café on Sienna Street that usually has food, and doctors living on each of the two floors above us, so that even though sometimes gendarmes drive through the streets shooting people at random, and even though Pan Lescovec had been clubbed so hard in the ear he'd lost most of his hearing, and even though living here is undoubtedly the worst thing that has happened to most of us, we know it could be worse, and that it might be, at some point. But for now, it isn't.

And while I wait to fall asleep at night, when sleep refuses to come, I look out the window and remember Warsaw, the bustling, lunatic city, where I once lived with my wife.

TWO



In the minutes before the students arrived, I read over what I'd just written for Ringelblum's archive. It sounded sentimental, I knew, but everyone here had become almost liquid with sentimentality, and I, unfortunately, was not immune. You should have seen the lot of us: crying on the streets, standing on corners holding framed pictures of the people or homes we'd left behind. Begging the Polish guards to smuggle us or our children out and getting smacked across the face for our trouble, then going home and crying about our bruised cheeks. It was all a bit much, if you asked me, although the other responses—strange bursts of levity, wild dreams of revenge—those didn't seem particularly reasonable either. The truth is, it was hard to know what to think or how to behave, and I spent an awful lot of time either staring into space or digging myself into the deep hole of memory.

Work helped, of course. Work has always helped people keep their minds off the inevitable passing of days, and it certainly helped me after Kasia's accident and in the weeks and months after her death. I poured myself into it, tutoring in my off hours, taking on some of her unfinished translation work and staying up all night to finish her assignments for nobody in particular.

And here in the ghetto, three times a week, I still went to work, teaching my students the fundamentals and flourishes of the English language.

Just before five, I hid Ringelblum's notebook in the satchel I carried everywhere, even when I had nothing to carry. (You never knew when you might find a surprise grosz on the street, or a rogue piece of bread.) When I turned around, three of my students were standing in the middle of the room, quietly; children had learned to be unnaturally quiet here. Roman, Charlotte, Filip. Charlotte and Roman were fractious siblings, while eleven-year-old Filip was the youngest Lescovec boy, and therefore my flatmate, although I rarely saw him in the apartment. According to his mother, Filip had taken to spending most of his time on the roof of our building, even in frigid December. "He'd rather risk freezing to death than spend any more time with us," she said sniffily.

"What's that?" asked Charlotte, pointing at my satchel.

"In English."

"What's that?" she asked. "In the floor."

"On the floor."

“In the floor.”

“No, idiot,” said Roman, who had become crueler and crueler to his sister over the past few weeks. “In’ is *in*,” he said, opening his mouth and inserting a finger to demonstrate. “On’ is . . .” he looked around, but he could find nothing to put on anything else. Our room was barren and small, illuminated by a few naked lightbulbs. The walls were damp, crumbling plaster. The floor was pocked concrete. At the Polish school where I’d taught (my position secured by Kasia’s father), the hallway floors had been marble and the fountains bubbled fresh water all day long. The students had sat *in* bentwood seats. They had written *on* broad slate chalkboards.

“In, in,” Charlotte said.

“On.” I tried again. “It’s a different sound. Listen carefully. *On*.” “On,” she said.

“Very good,” I said.

“Idiot,” said her brother.

“Enough,” I said. “Now we speak English.”

“What is *in* your bag?” Charlotte said, in English, which compelled me to answer her.

“A book.”

“You have a book?”

One of my many complaints (how often my lessons devolved into complaints) was that I had no schoolbooks with which to teach them, nor even paper for them to take notes.

“It’s just a diary. Eyn togbuch.”

“From where?”

But I was saved from Charlotte’s interrogation by the arrival of Szifra Joseph, the class’s star, radiant even in our diminished conditions, smiling flirtatiously, as though there were someone worth flirting with in the room. She swept her camel-colored coat off her shoulders and onto the floor, then sat down on the coat, leaning back on her palms, crossing her legs at the ankle. This was the signal for everyone else to sit, which they did, although only Szifra dared damage her coat by draping it on the floor.

“Well,” Szifra started, “you *would not believe*—”

“English.”

She shifted naturally. “You would not *believe*”—and here she mimicked, in her speech, the style of the Hollywood movies she used to love watching; she clipped her words like Joan Crawford—“what just *happened* to me on the *street*.”

Silence. Roman and Charlotte tried not to look impressed by her theatrics, while Filip watched a mouse scuttle across the room. I wasn't sure any of them understood what she was saying.

"Don't you want to know?"

"What happened to you on the street, Szifra?"

"Well," she said, halting a bit as she found the English words. "A gendarme told me to hurry back home, that it wasn't a good idea for me to be on this side of the gates. He said it was filthy here and I was certain to get typhus."

"So?" said Filip.

"So it seemed like he was really concerned about me and my safety, and I couldn't figure out why he was so concerned. And then I realized . . ." Szifra blinked at us, waiting for one of us to say it so she didn't have to.

"He thought you were Polish," Roman finally said, but he said it dully, refusing to be impressed. His English comprehension was better than I'd guessed.

Szifra was blushing. Or, if not blushing, she at least looking somewhat bashful. "You know, I can't help it if I have good looks," she said. Which did not mean, precisely, that she knew she was beautiful, although certainly she did, but rather that she knew she didn't look Jewish, and that her looks were therefore "good." Blond hair, blue eyes, trim waist, tall. Well-dressed. Curled hair and elegant makeup. There weren't many Jews like her around, but there were a few, and they were often privileged with small kindnesses from the Germans and resented by everyone else.

"How did you respond?" I asked her.

"I said . . . Well, at first I didn't say anything, you know? But he kept talking to me in German—"

"You speak German?" Charlotte asked. Unlike her brother, she couldn't hide her admiration.

"I speak enough. I mean, a few phrases. Anyway, I tried to just walk away, because, of course, you don't want any trouble, but then he followed me and said, 'Really, miss, you mustn't be here.' So I turned around, and he didn't have that usual Nazi face, you know. He wasn't drunk or anything."

"And then?" Charlotte said, hanging on every word.

"Well, then . . . Darn, how do you say this in English? I said, 'Sir, I am Jewish,' and showed him my armband, and he looked very embarrassed, and suddenly I was scared"—and here she lapsed into Yiddish, speaking too quickly for me to stop her—"because you know that if you embarrass one of them they can take it out on you. They'll shoot you in the street, even. But

this one, he really did look like he was nice. And he was just a boy, maybe eighteen or nineteen. He said, ‘Forgive me.’”

“A Nazi asked you to forgive him?” Charlotte was stunned.

Szifra drew herself up. “He did. Yes, he did.”

“So what happened next?”

“Well, quickly I went from scared to mad, because I thought, ‘Forgive you? This is what I’m supposed to forgive you for? You steal my home and our property, and my father kills himself, but the thing I’m supposed to be mad about is that you mistook me for a gentile? For one of *you*?’ Please. I mean, honestly. Please.” She shrugged her shoulders in exaggerated exasperation.

“Incredible,” Charlotte said.

“Stupid,” Roman said.

“Hmm . . . ,” I said, and paused as the mouse darted back across our floor, skirting the fur collar of Szifra’s coat. “But that’s not what you said to him.”

“Well, of course not. I said, ‘Sir, if you please,’ in German, and then I looked down and away, to be submissive, and then one of his superiors barked something at him, and he got scared and hurried away.” We all waited for something else.

“So that’s your whole story?” said Filip, my quietest student.

“What else do you want?” Szifra said. “Honestly, I was just so *mortified* by all of it. I mean, mistaken for one of *them*,” she said, although she was glowing. And, truly, what could be more flattering than to be so clean and lovely and blond as to not look like one of us?

“You should have asked him for bread,” Roman said.

“English.”

“Bread. You should . . . demand bread. He will give you bread. He thinks you are . . . pretty.”

“Please,” Szifra said, trying not to smile. “I’m not risking my life to ask some idiot gendarme for bread.”

“He will give you some.”

“I still have money, Roman. When you have money, you can *buy* bread. You don’t have to beg.”

Roman shrugged. “Maybe one day you might,” he said. “Have to beg.”

“One day? Why one day? What are you—what are you now, telling the future?”

I could have interrupted, but it was my policy never to interrupt when they were speaking English.

“Just that one day you might not having any more money.”

“Oh, puh-leeze,” Szifra said, falling back dramatically on her camel coat; I wondered where she had learned that “puh-leeze.” We all watched her until she sat back up and wiped off her shoulders. I remembered Szifra behaving the same way back when I taught her at the Lyceum, and her fellow students responding similarly, annoyed and admiring in equal measure. Had any fifteen-year-old girl ever been so sure of herself? Or so able to put on a show of self-assurance?

“Listen,” Szifra said, in Yiddish, a tone of confidentiality, “only fools here run out of bread.”

It occurred to me that I really should get started. Was anyone else coming? It was getting so cold; I imagined I’d have fewer and fewer pupils as the winter grew darker. “Listen, students, why don’t we—”

“Anyway,” she said, “we’ll all be getting out of here in a month or two.”

“Horsecrap,” said Filip.

“We really just don’t know what will happen next,” I said, although it was possible that Szifra was right. (I wanted it to be possible.)

“It’s true,” Szifra said. “The British will fight back, the Germans will leave, we’ll go home.”

This was the chorus of the optimistic class. The British, maybe the Americans. Two months, three, then home.

“Horsecrap,” Filip repeated.

Szifra gave him a monstrous look. “I actually don’t care what you think,” she said. “Because I know what I know.” No one dared respond.

We had been meeting here three times a week for a little more than a month, but already we had sorted ourselves: those whose glasses were half-full, whose glasses were half-empty, whose cups would always runneth over.

“Perhaps, Pan Paskow, we should start?” Charlotte, in English.

“Yes, yes—of course.” I fumbled, wishing for the millionth time I had an English primer, a proper lesson plan. “Today we’re learning a poem by William Blake. There is some good vocabulary in there. It’s easy to memorize.”

Last Thursday, they had learned Rosetti’s “A Birthday,” and Wednesday, Hopkins’s “Spring and Fall.” Today, I recited a Blake poem about joy, for it was my policy to teach only happy poems. Or happyenough. My assembly stumbled a bit over, “a clothing for the soul divine,” in both pronunciation and meaning, but fairly soon we were reciting it together, time and again, automated, yes, but with feeling. Even Filip, who could be tentative, spoke loudly.

“Man was made for Joy and Woe
And when this we rightly know

Thro the World we safely go.”

(I no longer believe this is so.)

HERE, IN THE ghetto, I was teaching my students poetry to help them practice their pronunciation; without novels or short stories or grammar primers, poems were the only texts I had. I had memorized hundreds over the years. I also liked teaching poems because I believed poetry was where the English language really soared. It was utilitarian most of the time but somehow able to turn its simple grammar and plundered vocabulary into the finest poetry written: Shakespearean sonnets and Keatsian odes, and Chaucer and Eliot and Pound. I knew and loved them all for different reasons. When I wanted wisdom, I found Dickinson; sorrow, Yeats; company in my grief, Wordsworth.

(The only other language, in my humble opinion, that used poetry to rise above its station was German. My German was far worse than my English, but I knew a little bit, and I was a fan, like many Poles, of Goethe and Rilke. Still, I was unsure that a language that could order children to be mowed down by gunfire was still a sane one to use for poetry, and anyway, when comparing the two, I found English more pleasing to the ear.)

At the Lyceum, my students had been almost entirely Polish—Jewish students were limited by a strict quota system, as were Ukrainians and Lithuanians—but every so often, to be subversive, I’d teach them poetry by Emma Lazarus. After I’d taped a large poster of the Statue of Liberty on my blackboard, we’d recite together the famous words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses,” etc. I’ll confess it struck me as stickily sweet, but the image of Lady Liberty was nice and it allowed the class to consider ideas of welcome and immigration, so different from the nationalist propaganda inculcated into Poles. At the end of the class, I’d mention, as casually as possible, that Lazarus was a Jewish woman whose most famous book was called *Songs of a Semite*. I wanted my students to be impressed, but, generally speaking, they’d just roll their eyes, feeling suddenly superior to a woman whose poems had been published across the globe.

THREE

After class, Filip and I walked home together, pausing at the café on Nowolipki Street to see if there was any food on offer. (There was: cabbage and carrot-top soup, kasha, roasted beets.) We stayed close to the walls, since the gendarmes were noticeably nastier on this side of Chłodna Street and neither one of us felt like interaction. It was already dark out and bitterly cold.

“Will you go up on the roof tonight?” Filip nodded.

“Doesn’t the cold bother you?” He nodded again.

“It’s the only way you can be alone?”

He looked down at his feet. A thin boy with a pale sprinkle of freckles across his nose, he favored his father, himself a thin pale man with owlish eyes.

“It can be hard to always be surrounded by people,” I said to Filip. “I’m kind of an introvert myself.”

“What is an introvert?”

“Someone who feels better by himself than in big crowds.”

Filip shrugged. “Crowds are okay,” he said. “I used to like being around other people.”

As we crossed Żelazna Street, I noticed, with a start, that Merenstayn’s confectionery was somehow still open. Merenstayn’s! Could it be? I hurried Filip over to the brightly lit window. My parents had taken me to Merenstayn’s when I was a child, but I had almost forgotten that the place existed, and had certainly forgotten that it was here, on Żelazna Street, within the bounds of the ghetto. But now that it was in front of me, I could remember the store as though I’d been there the day before: jars upon jars of cinnamon balls, peppermint sticks, small wrapped chocolates imported from Austria. Phosphates mixed behind the counter. In a freezer case, vats of ice cream that Pani Merenstayn churned in a giant electric contraption that rattled in the back of the store. Merenstayn’s was where I’d had my first taste of ice cream, in fact—strawberry with bits of fruit swirled in. I was seven years old and hadn’t known something so delicious could exist. “Do you know Merenstayn’s, Filip?”

He gave me a rare grin. What child of Warsaw didn’t know this spot?