

## "Incident at the Brook"

By Joan Desilva

May 2018

This was yet another home in which my father left me. The caretakers had accepted the payment and believed my father's story. I was not worried about them. It was the neighbors and friends who posed a danger. The community was small, and seeing a new child in their midst created curiosity and suspicion.

The suspicion would spread from ear to ear until the gossip reached a conclusive possibility. The whisper of a "Jewish child" would roll off their tongues in wonderment, shock and malice. They were the bearers of this news to the Gestapo, who periodically visited the areas and who were the extended arm of death for the savagery resonating in the hearts of the friends and neighbors.

This was Poland 1942 when the summer breezes in the villages should have lulled the hearts to love and goodwill, where the Sunday chimes rang out in churches, calling all worshipers to come and receive the blessing of their Savior.

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The following episode occurred on the outskirts of a village where my patrons and their friends were enjoying a picnic outing near the shore of a brook on just such a balmy summer's day.

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The rolling grains of sand spread out across the narrow beach. Beyond the sand the land rose into a gentle hill. Tufts of grass joined to form a large grassy patch at the top. That is where I sat with a company whose identity I cannot recall. Although their conversation was cheerful, I felt afraid. They were totally immersed in each other, but what if their focus should change and center on me. What if they began to question me and wonder who I was?

I was now five years old and the understanding was growing within me. The assaulting words "Jewish child" prompted my father, in the past, to relocate me to another home, for however much time destiny allowed, paid fully with one of the many jewels my mother had sewn into a garment. No one would have kept me for even a great many more jewels had they known my true identity.

I was in a bathing suit sitting on the grass beside my patrons and their company. Being a small child, I was not expected to participate in the conversation. I did not want to make eye contact feeling it would bring me more to their attention and I therefore sat slightly apart. Not wanting to turn my back to them and appear rude, I sat sideways, holding my legs against my chest and pretending to be absorbed by the scenery at the brook. The conversation behind me continued to generate a fear which I finally could not withstand. I stood up and made my way towards the brook.



Intimate voices of children and parents connected across the sounds of summer. I stepped into the clear, cold and swift water. The polished stones beneath my feet shone like a lustrous mosaic and the reflected sun made spotlights on the smooth and glossy bedrock. For a few moments I stood as if transfixed in a glass cage, the rushing brook streaming over my ankles.

With the next step the ground suddenly sloped and the water reached my calves. In attempting to turn back I lost my balance and fell. The current surged over my head and water filled my mouth and nostrils. For a moment everything was dark and silent. Pulling my head out I tried to raise myself but the undertow slipped beneath my feet and twisted me around to a sitting position, the water up to my chest.

If I could only get a hand, I thought, somebody's hand, and I felt the pain of not being able to ask. To my left I saw a little child about three years old, his hand in the firm grip of a large woman whose appearance, due to my sitting position and her proximity, I could discern only up to her waist. My eyes followed the receding child and my whole being felt the abandonment, envy and yearning for the mother who held his hand.

This momentary distraction loosened my grip and I slid forward, the water now up to my shoulders. The rushing waves collided across my neck sending sharp sprays darting into my face. My inability to breathe brought on a fierce panic but my urge to scream for help was strangled by the stronger dread of discovery. Terror unleashed in me a surge of strength and I pushed against the slippery stones with my hands and feet, heaving myself backwards towards the shore.

As I emerged from the depth and the sharp current, I was able to open my eyes. To my surprise I saw that everything was as it had been. People were walking, laughing and frolicking. Not a single person had noticed my predicament. For everyone it was a peaceful, enjoyable afternoon, only for me it had been a furious, silent battle.

The stones were slippery as I raised myself on all fours to a standing position. Trembling uncontrollably, I attempted to calm myself to avoid notice. Going up the hill was an effort because my knees had become weak from fear. When I reached the top, I sat down in the same position as before. No notice had been taken of me and I sat still for a long time, my heart pounding wildly as if my little chest had become a battleground.

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