

Chapter One

Before the War

My mother was born on September 13, 1923, the fifth of fourteen children, the second daughter in a house that never stopped humming with noise and need.

Sorrow had already claimed her before she could walk. She carried it quietly, the way you carry something you never chose.

It began with her older sister, Bleema. My mother was still an infant when it happened. My grandmother was nursing her in bed, a pot of boiling water nearby to warm the room against the bitter Kisvárdá winter. Two-year-old Bleema wandered in, unnoticed, and fell into the pot. She died soon after.

My mother seldom spoke of it. But when she did, guilt trembled beneath her voice, a guilt without reason, yet entirely real. Because she was the baby being held, she believed it was her fault. That kind of sorrow cannot be reasoned away. It enters the body before language can challenge it, and there it stays.

Decades later, I named my second daughter Britt Meira Bleema, not only as a remembrance of loss, but as a gift to my mother: a name reborn into gentler hands.

After her sister's death, my mother became the eldest daughter, a role she had never sought and could not refuse. She left school after fourth grade to help my grandmother raise the younger ones. Her childhood dissolved into chores and caretaking. Duty arrived early, and she bore it as though endurance itself were a kind of grace.

They lived in a cramped three-room house rented from an older man who occupied a shack behind it. I try to picture it: fourteen children, two parents, and somehow still enough air to breathe. The three sisters shared a single bed. There was no electricity, no indoor

plumbing, only an outhouse buried in snow half the year. In winter, darkness made even small tasks dangerous. At night, they avoided the outhouse altogether, the cold and fear too sharp to face.

Yet threaded through the hardship was tenderness. Each evening, my grandmother pressed a hot iron against the sheets before the girls climbed in so the bed would be warm when they slept. That small ritual, of making comfort from nothing, stayed with my mother all her life.

Her father was a man of contradictions.

Handsome, devout, gifted. And often stern in a way that left little room for softness.

He had a cantorial voice that relatives compared to Yossele Rosenblatt's, the great cantor whose voice had made him famous across two continents. When he played the violin, people stopped what they were doing to listen. Not politely, completely. As if something in the sound reached past the room itself.

Before the war, he ran a small factory tailoring uniforms for military officers. For a time, there was stability. Respectability. The sense that life could be shaped and held.

It did not last.

My grandmother used to say she fell in love with him the first time she heard him play. I try to imagine that moment, a small room, people gathered close, and him standing slightly apart, lifting the violin and drawing the bow slowly across the strings, not merely performing but revealing something of himself. The sound filled the space with what felt like certainty, like direction, like a man who knew exactly who he was and what the world required of him.

That kind of certainty can feel like safety, especially to someone who has not known it. She married him.

And the rules changed almost immediately.

He demanded strict observance. He severed my grandmother from her family. He insisted she shave her head, even though she covered her hair, so that even the possibility of transgression would be erased before it could begin. Pregnancy became a near-constant condition. Her life narrowed. His did not.

And still, she adored him.

Not blindly, but completely. Because the man she had married was not only the man who imposed the rules. He was also the man who could transform a room.

On Friday nights, everything shifted.

The worktable, where cloth was cut and scissors moved in their steady rhythm, where her father bent over his sewing after the factory collapsed, became something else entirely on Shabbos. Candles lit. Wine poured. The room stilled.

And then he began to sing.

My grandfather's voice softened as it rose, not weaker, but fuller. And when his sons joined in, the zemiros layered into something that felt like it had come from somewhere beyond them. Neighbors gathered outside the window just to listen. They didn't knock. They didn't interrupt. They stood in the cold, drawn toward something they could not produce in their own homes.

My mother would sit at that table and watch him.

This same man, who demanded, who corrected, who expected obedience without question, now carried something that felt like holiness. Not abstract. Present. You could hear it move through the room.

Food never tasted so good, she would say.

I believe she meant more than the food.

It is hard, because of moments like that, to separate him into simple categories. The same man who could fill a room with beauty could also empty it of tenderness. His life revolved around Torah. Everything else- his wife, his children, even their suffering- circled that center.

When his sons resisted Torah study and wanted to work instead, my grandfather beat them. He was especially severe with Nuzsi, whom he cast out at thirteen.

My mother never forgave that. Even decades later, something in her hardened when she spoke of it. And yet she could not fully condemn him either. Nuzsi behaved badly, she would say. He had shown no respect. He could have influenced the others. As if she were trying to hold two truths at once: the father she feared, and the father she still needed to believe in.

I used to wonder how a man so steeped in Torah could lose his children's hearts. If the sacred filled his days, why did so little of its compassion reach his home?

Now I think the answer is harder than that. Not that he lacked belief, but that his belief left no room for softness. He loved through structure, through demand, through a vision of what life must be, so rigid it could not bend toward the people living inside it.

And my grandmother loved him through it all, because she had seen the other side. The music. The certainty. The man who could make a room feel held together. For her, love and obedience became the same language. And once learned, she never unlearned it.

Then came the war, and everything fractured.

My grandfather and his third son, Herschel, handsome, talented, my mother's favorite, were drafted into the Hungarian army. Only my grandfather returned. They never learned what happened to

Herschel. There remained only a single photograph, kept folded in my mother's prayer book, its edges worn soft by her fingers.

While he was gone, he had entrusted his factory to a Jewish man he believed he could rely on. That trust was misplaced. The man took what he could and left, the equipment stripped away, the business gutted beyond recovery. My grandfather returned from the war to find nothing waiting for him, not the livelihood he had built, not the stability he had imagined returning to, not even the consolation of a loss he could fully explain.

He came back with an ulcer instead, earned, the family believed, from years of refusing to eat non-kosher food while living among non-Jews. For relief, he pressed a hot lid against his stomach, the heat the only remedy available to him. The pain left him withdrawn and easily angered, a man hollowed out by war, betrayal, and the particular bitterness of someone who had sacrificed everything to remain faithful, only to return and discover that the world had not noticed.

Every child worked. My mother cooked, cleaned, and tended to her grandmother, her education having ended after fourth grade. Her sister Suri pedaled from town to town selling the suits their father had sewn because travel had become too dangerous for visibly Jewish men with beards and payot. Once, Suri was nearly assaulted. She admitted later that she had feared her father's wrath over a failed sale more than the men who cornered her.

What stays with me is that neither of them questioned any of it. They accepted burden as destiny, convinced that obedience was holy. They pitied their mother as though pity itself were a form of love. Childhood was something they never tasted.

Even now, I am tempted to soften the story, to say it was simply the times, that choices were few. But I have heard other stories: families who balanced reverence with laughter, authority with tenderness. My grandfather, I have come to believe, was what we

might now call a zealot, his fervor eclipsing his mercy. His children bore the cost.

It has taken me years to name it that way. Not to judge them, but to see them clearly: people doing their best in a world already slipping toward catastrophe. Somewhere between duty and love, they lost their footing.

What remains are traces, a photograph worn thin by prayer, a song that still trembles in memory, the faint warmth of an iron pressed against a winter sheet.

Maybe that is the legacy no one meant to pass down: the courage not only to survive our parents' world, but to examine it honestly and tell the truth about what survival demanded.

Truth, when finally spoken, brings its own form of mourning.