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THEY TOOK ME IN

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I was left alone, completely alone. They shot my father, then my mother. Good people had hidden my sister somewhere. But where am I to go now? Like a heel of bread that's been broken off, I just couldn't fit in anywhere — always unnecessary, always superfluous. What fault of mine is it that I'm a Jewish child? It seems they baptized me, gave me a different, Christian name, changed my last name, and the pastor of the parish wrote out a new birth certificate. Oh yes, my surnames kept changing. I had as many last names as the hands I went through. Lukaitis, Mockus, Grišius, Kvedaras . . . But I remained a little Jewish child, just as I'd been before. Always unnecessary and expendable . . .

Looking around fearfully, I sat outside on the doorstep and wept.

Here, in the narrow street on the outskirts of town, it's as if the war had never been. There are none of the charred logs or brickbats; neither are there any of the sooty stone walls with their windows, like dead eyes. The many-colored tops of the flowers squeezed through the fences and the red-cheeked apples swayed on slender branches.

A huddle of sparrows scratched around in the middle of the unpaved, dusty street. Hopping around, they would gather a stray grain of wheat or some caterpillar, or a small worm, which had crawled here, where it had no business. The neighbor's cat walked slowly along the fence, his tail between his legs, lying low to the ground. He tried to snatch one of the hopping little sparrows.

Evening will come and the little worm will slink off to its hole, the birds will chirp and flutter away to their nests. The cat will patter over to the door, scratch it with his claws, jiggle it — and the people will let him in, stroke his fur, feed it some milk . . .

When the new government* ordered all the Jewish children to be brought, under pain of death, to the district headquarters, I was staying with Lukaitis, the shoemaker. You see, a policeman had come to live next to Mrs. Daunoras, the seamstress, so she turned me over to Lukaitis' wife.

It used to be that Mrs. Lukaitis would sit me down at the table, feed me and say: "Don't be afraid, eat . . ."

And she used to recount how earlier she'd known all of the town's Jews, that they'd been good people and had always helped her in times of misfortune. No one knows why they'd shot them, or for what, and the most innocent people at that . . . Lukaitis would stare at us crossly, showing the whites of his eyes, and then would hammer away, mumbling something under his nose. Lukaitis' glances and Mrs. Lukaitis' tales, by which she tried to soothe me — they made the food stick in my throat.

At night Lukaitis would return heavily dragging his feet and would kick aside all the stools until he reached the bed where we slept. He would tear off the covers and grope around trying to grab Mrs. Lukaitis by the hair. Both of us would curl up in the corner and lapse into silence, like mice when a cat appears.

"Where are you now, you toad?" the shoemaker would roar. "I'll bust out your teeth, you witch . . . You're rearing a little snake under your skirt there . . . You want them to shoot us? No . . . They won't shoot me. Better I'll turn both of you in! I'll turn you in! Ha, ha . . ."

He would cough, stagger around the end of the bed and again: "Wait! Why turn you in? I'll butcher you myself . . ."

I'll cut you up! Where's that knife of mine . . . Give me the knife, you damn snake. Give it to me, I say!"

He would grope, poke around the work bench, collapse right there on the floor and start snoring. Then Mrs. Lukaitis would drag him into bed, while I hid in the corner the whole night without shutting my eyes once. He'll wake up, I thought, and butcher me . . . And not a word to anyone. Besides, who'd care? Like a fly on the wall — press it with your finger, splat, and no more fly.

Next day Mrs. Lukaitis would comfort me a little more sparingly. The number of the town's former Jews that she had known lessened. She would sit me down by the table and say: "Eat."

Afterwards, her Jewish acquaintances disappeared entirely and she would bark at the table: "Eat! What are you gaping at?"

Then the neighbors took me in — two nice old folks, good people, the Mockuses. They had their own children, but the latter had either died out or had gone abroad. It wasn't me they were out to save, as much as my newly baptized soul. It's no joke to sprinkle a Jew with holy water! And here's a little Jew, all baptized. Almighty Christ — He's a Good Shepherd and returns every stray sheep to the flock. That's written in the Bible, too. And whoever helps find such a sheep and turns it over to the Shepherd gets thousands of days in indulgences! Anyway, there wasn't all that much left of life in this vale of tears...

Each morning and evening, and sometimes even during meals, I would say my prayers so that God would forgive all my sins and would spare me some black bread and I wouldn't die of hunger. I poured out, as if they were peas, the Our Fathers, the Hail Marys and all the other kinds of prayers — I wouldn't have made a mistake in my sleep. The little old couple didn't begrudge me any black bread. They'd even throw in a long sliver of bacon to drive the Jew out of me faster because, as they'd say, even if I was now a Christian, still I wasn't quite a real one. At first it nauseated me. I wasn't used to it. Later I got accustomed to it.

But the Mockuses were so apprehensive that they even drove me into a fearful tremor. There wasn't a bright day that they'd open the shutters. They were always afraid of the men in white armbands. Well, after all, they'll come in, find us, blast all three of us and that would be that. That's the law — where a Jew is being concealed, there everyone must die. *Die!* The old couple paid for two requiem Masses — for all the deceased and those who had innocently perished, but the fear still grew like that dragon — you chop off one head and three new ones appear . . . And again I couldn't sleep, just like at the shoemaker Lukaitis' place. So then the Mockuses ordered me to pray for the eternal rest of my parents, all the others who had died and, most important, to mention their names without fail.

So I would pray and pray, except that the Jewish names never seemed to connect with the Catholic prayers. How could it be my fault? I would begin over and over again, without end. But when I would whisper, "Give them eternal rest, Oh Lord!" — my throat would choke up and I'd feel like screaming at the top of my voice. No, I didn't want eternal rest for them ... Let them be alive, let them live with me just like they did before the war . . . Why did they die, and why don't they rise now from their graves, and come to me? Why could Christ rise from the dead, but not my mother?

On one such sleepless night I overheard some whispering.

"Are you asleep, father?" "No, woman, no . . ."

"I'm afraid, so afraid, father. . . They'll find him . . . They will!"

"Aha, they'll find him, well, of course . . ."

"They'll kill us, Povilas, as sure as you see me now. What can we do, what can we do, such is the Lord's cross. . ."

"I don't know, woman. What can you do. He's not a puppy, after all, you can't throw him out."

"Let's give him to the Grišiuses, the childless ones who live at the end of the street. They're young, but they don't have any of their own . . ."

"But that Grišius is a freethinker, he's not afraid of God. How then are you going to save the child's soul? And the indulgences, all those days of indulgences . . ."

Quiet.

After that, once again:

"Father, are you asleep yet?"

"No, woman, I'm not . . ."

"I say the Almighty won't be angry."

"And just how will He not be angry?"

"I tell you, the Tenth Commandment of God says: love thy neighbor like thyself. So how are you going to love that neighbor if you're putting your own head in front of a bullet? Aren't you?"

"Well, yes, of course. In front of a bullet . . ."

"So let's give him to Grišius, father . . ."

"But what about the soul, eh?"

"Well, we've herded the little lamb into the Lord's flock and taught him all the prayers, maybe the Good Lord Himself will look after the little lamb; maybe He won't let those freethinkers lead him astray . . ."

"Of course, maybe He won't."

The next day, laden with coarse home-made bread and fatty bacon, I bid good-bye to the kind old couple, the Mockuses. The Grišiuses, the freethinkers, took me in.

On the very first day my new stepfather slapped me on the shoulder and, without hiding a smile, said: "With me you're going to grow up a free man!"

On the second day a neighbor stuck her head in the door and whispered to Mrs. Grišius: "Lord save us, the activists are on their way, they're looking for Jews . . ."

"Jesus, Mary!" screamed Mrs. Grišius. "Juozas! Come here, Juozas!"

The men in white armbands had barely entered our little street, or maybe they never did, and I already had a new set of parents — the Kvedarases. I lived with them an entire day and a half.

Where can I go now? No one's giving me away anymore, or maybe nobody's taking me. It's not as if I were some kind of treasure ... I have to go out myself. But where? I can't just sit here all my life on this dusty doorstep, in a forgotten little street on the outskirts of town. Should I go kill myself? They say people do that sometimes . . . Maybe I should drown myself? Like they drown blind kittens . . . But whose going to tie a bag over my head?

The sparrows are chirping and hopping about. Soon they'll take a worm to their little fledglings. But nobody will take me in anymore, or shelter me in their nest.

The fog in front of me thickened and grew darker . . .

*Gėriau dieną, gėriau naktį
Pas Jurguką plikakaktį.
Dėkui jam ir vaikams,
Ir bačkutei, ir lankams!*

(I drank all day, I drank all night,
At good old George's with the balding brow,
Thanks to him, and to his kids,
Thanks to the barrel and the barrel loops!)

When I heard the song, I rubbed my eyes. In the middle of the street some man was raising a cloud of dust.

I looked at him. He stared at me.

"Hey, kid, come here," he shouted. "Come here, I say!"

I curled up even more.

"Aha, so you're not coming . . ." He swayed closer. "So whose are you?"

I looked at him with frightened eyes.

"Well, well, don't be afraid . . . I'm a good man. A good one! So I tossed down a few drinks, so what? Is it a sin? Is the earth crumbling?"

He sat down next to me on the doorstep.

"So whose are you, eh? And you're blubbing, little man . . . Hm . . ."

"I'm nobody's . . . I'm alone . . . I'm a Jew . . ."

"Aha, a Jew. Of course, of course, I understand . . . Well, well."

I grew more confident. "I don't have anywhere to go, so I am sitting and thinking, I ventured.

"You've got nowhere to go. Don't go anywhere! Of course! And don't tell anyone who you are. Nowadays — well, people are like wolves! Anything can happen . . ."

"Nobody wants to keep me, they're afraid and they're not giving me to anyone else. Dear sir, tie me up in a bag and throw me into the river. Like a kitten . . . Where can I go now?"

"Aha, you should've said that from the start! You whelp! So it's to the river, like a kitten! Ha, ha, ha! You little brat, when I whack your tail, you'll forget all about this drowning business! Well! Well!"

I lost all my trust in this stranger. I trembled like a chick before a hawk. What had possessed my tongue? It would've been better if I hadn't mentioned the bag.

"So they're not keeping you?" he pointed to the door.

"They're . . ."

"But they took you?"

"They took me . . ."

"The stinking bums . . . I'll show them! You have anything here? Some clothes or something?"

"I don't have anything. I'm just like you see me . . ."

He pushed me aside.

"You wait. Wait, I say."

He then rolled up his sleeves. It seemed that his drunkenness evaporated, as if some hand just took it away.

"Hey, you toads, so this is how you've tormented the child?" And he shoved his fist into the window. The glass exploded with a resounding crack. He pulled out his hand and shook it.

"Blood! There's blood running!" I cried and rushed nearer.

"It's nothing, kid, nothing. I've got a good dog — he'll lick it off, you'll see. Hey, you whelp! Let's go!"

"Where?"

"Let's go, I say! We're going to my place!"

He grabbed me by the hand, squeezed it in an iron vise and took me with him.

On the way he mumbled under his nose and hummed: "I drank all day, I drank all night . . ."

He pushed me into a small shack, sunken into the ground and with windows as small as one's hands.

"You're going to live here now! Mother, take in this child! You've got six, now here's a seventh! And you, you imps, take a look. Look, I say! Well, here's a brother for you from now on. A brother!"

Four children, each bigger than the other by a handbreadth, crowded around me. The other two were not to be seen.

Quietly, so that we wouldn't hear, the man told his wife: "A little Jew ... No one's keeping him. He'll live with us, eh, mother?"

"He'll live here . . . Another one can join the crowd."

"Oh, I love you like that," he shouted and put his arms around the mother.

She shook him off.- "You're drunk, father, go take a nap."

Then she looked at me. She looked at me in such a way, as no one else had from the time I had lost my mother.

The parish pastor rewrote my birth certificate. I was now called Dinikis. Benius Dinikis.

So many hands had taken me and yet not taken me in. And now they took me in, they finally took me in! I had reached a warm nest, too, and now I understood that they won't throw me out — not until the down changes to feathers, until the wings grow stronger . . .

After a few days Dinikis told his wife: "We're going over to live by the estate, the one outside town. Maybe life will be better and, anyway, you can't find anyone you know there, even with a shining light. After all, Benius is a real son to us now."

* The Nazi occupation authorities.

Translated from the Lithuanian by
Saulius Sužiedėlis

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