

“By Boat or By Train”

By Christine Mwangi

Our Lady of the Elms High School

Elaine Fippin, Instructor

Word Count: 998

"By Boat or By Train"2

Normandy, November, 1940

It's a sunny day. Someone calls my name.

"Your mother is calling!" Simon points to my panicked mother. I run to her; as I fly, talk of invasion and Nazis spreads like wildfire. I reach our door and she pulls me in.

"What do you need?" She shuts the door and begins grabbing things and heads upstairs. "Don't leave," she says.

After a while I yell, "May I go now?" She shouts as I run into the square to play with Simon. I feel free. We play tag then walk home. Papa is waiting outside, arms crossed and foot tapping. I nervously wave goodbye to Simon. Papa begins shouting.

"I always do this and you never get angry."

He whips around and glares at me. "Go to your mother."

I discover her packing a suitcase. She looks anxious. What is she hiding?

"I was so worried! Why did you leave?"

Normally, I would argue, but her voice sounds like she's on the verge of crying.

"I am sorry," I mumble. She snatches the yarmulke from my head.

Papa is at the door. Mama hands him the suitcase, and he hurries out. I stumble on the uneven cobble-stones. We reach the train station, buy our tickets, and board. When we stop, I have to run to keep up. He finally pauses at a house and knocks. A man ushers us in. Papa hands him the suitcase and an envelope, and then ruffles my hair.

"Behave yourself, understand?"

I nod. Is he leaving me? I cling to Papa.

"You can't leave me here! Where will you and Mama go?" I sob. Papa pries me loose.

His figure recedes into the shadows. I scream for him, but he never turns.

"By Boat or By Train"³

February 4, 1943

Two years I have lived with the Dubois. They are kind, risking much to keep me here. The Germans are deporting native Jews to concentration camps. Yesterday, Madame and I witnessed a family forced from their home. Their neighbors stood and watched. No one spoke. I froze as the scene unfolded until Madame grabbed my hand. Monsieur Dubois explained that we must look in the other direction, even if we think it is wrong. I thought of Mama and Papa that night. Were they pulled from home like that family? Did everyone stare and sigh with relief because it was not them?

In public, I must call Monsieur Xavier and Madame Claire "Papa" and "Mama," but it feels wrong. They treat me like their own, but it isn't the same. Monsieur Xavier walks me to school. When lessons end, Madame Claire is waiting for me. She gives me a hug and we walk home. The soldiers are taking another family. As we pass, a child reaches out; we lock eyes for a moment before I tear my eyes away. I hear children screaming, but to help them would call attention to myself and the Dubois. For the rest of my life, I will hear those children.

August 24, 2015

Someone shakes me awake. I open my eyes to see Baba with a candle, beckoning me to follow. I rub the sleep from my eyes and groan. I look back at my little brother, Zahir. I follow Baba quietly. He leads me to the door where Mama and Hashim wait.

"Can't we go in the morning?"

Baba looks as if he is going to say something, but Mama shakes her head. Mama gives me a kiss and hands Hashim a satchel. Baba grabs my hand and starts to lead us somewhere.

“By Boat or By Train”⁴

Hashim follows; I look back and see a tear slip down Mama’s cheek. I smile at her and turn.

Why is Baba walking so quickly? He keeps walking until we reach a dock where a small boat is tied. The sounds of children crying are frightening. I back away towards Baba. He grabs my shoulders and moves me towards Hashim, who pulls me onto the boat. A man holds out his hand. Baba places a stack of notes in his hand, then turns away. The man holds up his hands to the people behind Baba.

“There is no more room; you will have to leave.”

Then the man unties the rope and the boat starts to shift. Baba isn’t getting on the boat.

“Baba, you’re going to be left behind. Hurry!”

He bites his lip and shakes his head. He isn’t coming. I start shouting and try to climb back on the dock, but Hashim grabs me. I shout for Baba to get on the boat, but he walks away. The boat drifts and Baba disappears. I shout until my voice is raw. Hashim strokes my hair, but it does nothing because Baba, Mama, and Zahir are gone.

We’ve been on the boat so long that Hashim has lost track. Five people died of dehydration and were thrown overboard. The food in Hashim’s satchel is gone. We will sleep hungry tonight. Hashim stirs next to me. We watch the sun rise. The feeling of routine will keep us grounded, he says. He wraps his arms around me and I doze. Floating on this boat makes me wonder: Is anything good waiting for us, or is the future a cycle of hope and crushing desperation?

“A ship!” I shout, almost standing before Hashim pulls me back. The boat sways dangerously and everyone whispers. Some say I’m going to be the death of them and others are chattering about rescue.

The ship rescues us, but from what? They take us to a crowded camp. We barely have room to lie down at night. Hashim’s searching for work, but finding jobs that pay well is difficult. I spot Aliyah. She was fortunate to leave Syria with her mother.

“Aliyah, when do you think we can bring our families here?”

She responds, “They say we must wait two years.”

Two years until I hear Zahir’s laugh, or smell Mama’s cooking. Two years before I see Baba again. Two years is an eternity.

Works Cited

"Daily Life in the Warsaw Ghetto." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/daily-life-in-the-warsaw-ghetto>.

Accessed January 16, 2020.

DePillis, Lydia , Saluja, Kulwant and Lu, Denise. "A visual guide to 75 years of major refugee crises around the world." *The Washington Post*. December 21, 2015.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/historical-migrant-crisis/>. Accessed January 14, 2020.

"France." *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/france>. Accessed January 20, 2020

Keegan, John. "Normandy Invasion." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. January 16, 2020.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Normandy-Invasion>. Accessed January 13, 2020.

"Lore Heumann." Personal Stories. *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/personal-history/media_oi.php?MediaId=2923&th=children. Accessed January 15, 2020.

"The Mediterranean Migration Crisis." *Human Rights Watch*.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do>. Accessed January 21, 2020.

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Bantam Books, 1982. Accessed January 3, 2020.