

Find The Light

By Ansuya Sharma

Our Lady of the Elms HS

Word Count: 865

“Faster! Every second is necessary!!”

My palms were damp and my forehead glistening. It was an odd day at camp—a day we girls at the ghetto were sent to the grey building at the end of the block in order to construct arms for the angry men beating us. We had been there for just three of our eight usual hours and my joints were already aching. I reminisce about the day before: a day of rest. The soldiers weren't this generous with the girls at other camps-or so we heard from the elderly lady gossipers—so we learned to count our blessings. The girls beside me were all red in the face. Before, I was put here with different girls, ones with more experience and who were here for just as long as me. I didn't want to think about what had happened to them or if I was next for whatever fate they faced.

One of the new girls, 10168 I think, breathed unusually hard. I understand how she felt. I remember my first few days at camp—days where I would go the whole eight hours without water because I hadn't earned those privileges yet. Days where the sun shone especially bright and one could feel it inside the suffocating facility that has no windows and only one door. A thud. I use my peripheral vision to look to the left of me— if I stare directly, who knows what punishment I would endure. The other girls haven't that yet. All of the new inmates spun their heads to glance at the other new inmate who fainted. A soldier rushes over, rifle in hand. Other soldiers come over too, eager grins on their faces, ready to beat the ones who had looked, I'm sure. My hands fumble the almost ready arm. This had only happened once in the four months I'd been here, and while I only saw it from a distance, it had been terrifying.

Pow: The firearm reverberates.

Chaos erupts: Girls screaming left and right while soldiers try to rally them by beating them with their guns. The girl on the ground is bleeding; meanwhile, the soldier who shot her keeps prodding her with the weapon he is holding. Suddenly, a burst of hot air fills the cramped room. Everyone is shook into stillness-even the soldiers with the previous overjoyed expressions. In comes the chairman, Mr. Czerniakow. He is a tall man whose first name is unknown, at least to me. His eyes have a shine that is sinister but also somehow kind. He stage-whispers words that cause the rest of us to shiver.

“Everyone go home and remember for next time, there’s plenty of spit in your mouths to keep you hydrated.” Is this the same man who set up a food kitchen for us when we had no stoves, or food? I have seen him talking with German police. Is he a friend, or an enemy?

I don’t want to go home. The ghetto is a worthless place with squat “homes” all connected together; however, there is one beauty about it: the small tree the higher ups reluctantly let us keep in exchange for fewer meals. When my mother hears about that exchange, she will be appalled, but we have to live with it. The tree doesn’t have leaves and the grass around it is dry and brown, just like everywhere else; still, it reminds me of my previous life. In my past home, my family had a large tree in the middle of our front yard. Lush green leaves sprouted out of it and the large stump allowed for hide and seek to take place and a base for tag. I squat under the lifeless tree and think back on my former life: how I took it for granted, how I had no idea what would happen next, how I miss it altogether. Back then, there were no deportations. I think about how my old self would react to everything. Although I wouldn’t believe it, I would fight for myself, just as I fought for this tree.

Usually, whenever I sit under the tree, I play the same game I used to with my old friends. The game was simple but it always put a smile on our faces. We identified what part of the tree we

were feeling while being blindfolded and getting clues from the others. If the person feeling the tree guessed the part on their own before getting help from the people giving the clues, they would win. I reach out to the tree and pretend someone is giving me clues. I let them win the game everytime. Maybe, I think, this tree will help me get out, escape. If I cannot escape this ghetto physically, the tree allows me to clear my head and know that, even though life is at its lowest, if it was good before, it can become good again. I have hope in knowing that in all of this darkness, I am able to find a light, and just maybe, I can use it to bring my old self back and fight.

Works Cited

“Adam Czerniakow, Chairman of the Jewish Council in Warsaw.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/adam-czerniakow-chairman-of-the-jewish-council-in-warsaw>

"Concentration Camp Prisoners." *Welcome | Experiencing History: Holocaust Sources in Context*, perspectives.ushmm.org/collection/concentration-camp-prisoners.

"Forced Labor: An Overview." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/forced-labor-an-overview.

"GREETING, FORMS OF." *JewishEncyclopedia.com*, www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6873-greeting-forms-of.

"Jewish Councils (Judenraete)." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-councils-judenraete.

"The Nazi Concentration Camp System." *The National WWII Museum | New Orleans*, 21 Apr. 2025, www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/nazi-concentration-camp-system.