

## Ecclesia and Synagoga

### A novella

The 9<sup>th</sup> Century saw Europe emerge from the dark Ages. Knowledge and literature was becoming more widely available but the ordinary citizen, unable to read or write, was still dependent on information gleaned from paintings, carvings and church sermons. It was a time when Christianity was beginning to exert its authority by denigrating the Old Testament. Throughout Europe stonemasons were tasked to express this in carvings. Their figures were placed in prominent positions over the front doors of buildings and places of worship throughout the Christian world.

In France a stone statue adorns either side of the entrance of the Strasbourg Cathedral. As the harvest moon rises it cast its first rays of light onto the face of the left hand figure Ecclesia who stands triumphant, noble and confident, her crown poised on her head, her scepter by her side. On the right column by contrast is the figure of Synagoga, blindfolded, stooped and dejected. Ecclesia turns and regards her with scorn.

*This is a tale of these two souls, Ecclesia and Synagoga, eternal female spirits as they travel together through the centuries facing prejudice, hardship and deprivation. Derived from primeval woman and man-force they find themselves reborn again and again in human forms as Clesia and Syna.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### EGYPT

From a high window in his palace in Amarna the Pharaoh Akhenaten son of Amenhotep III, watches the rising sun - an orange orb on the horizon - as it slowly climbs casting

shards of light across the pale yellow sand of the Nubian Desert. He blinks at its brightness, bathing in its warmth. Since his childhood as a small boy holding his father's hand, he has watched the sun rise in the East and set in the West only to appear again in the East passing, as he believed behind the world. It spoke to him of its power and oneness. Now as the inheritor of the reins of authority of Egypt, using this infinite supremacy, he has claimed this sun as his one true God. In so doing he has redefined the beliefs of his people and incurred the wrath of his advisors.

Silently he drops to his knees and raises his hands in homage to the Sun God, the one God to whom all others must submit.

The queen and the children are still asleep as he strides through the empty corridors to his prayer chamber, his feet resounding on the highly decorated floor tiles. Soon the palace will become alive with the footsteps of slaves preparing for the day. But now all is calm. On the way he looks in on his favorite daughter Clesia. She is asleep, her long golden hair falling over her shoulders. Her unblemished skin is the palest white. He adjusts her bedclothes and kisses her lightly. She smiles as she turns and opens her eyes.

'Good morning father,' she says sleepily and falls back to slumber.

He walks on until he reaches the prayer chamber at the eastern most corner of the citadel. It is the most solemn room in the palace, a place whose sacredness limits it to very few. He approaches the east facing window and stops. He closes his eyes and for a brief moment he is at one with his ancestors.

Elsewhere in the Palace life is hectic. Breakfast is being prepared in the great kitchen and the chores of the day are being allocated to the waiting lines of Jewish slaves. Another

small girl, Syna has already begun her day. Her mother the chief handmaiden to Nefertiti the Pharaoh's favourite wife has visited her mistress and taken the order for her meal. She is accompanied by Syna skipping as she goes. By chance the youngster passes the open door of Clesia's room who is just waking up. The two smile at each other, a sign of their secret friendship.

It is years later and the high walled corridors of the Amarna Palace ring with the laughter of the two teenage girls. Now close friends their footsteps echo between the tall brightly coloured columns as they play hide and seek. Built on the undeveloped side of the Nile 44 miles north of modern Asyut, Akhenaten's has named his Citadel the new capital of Egypt. This has aroused enormous criticism from the entrenched leaders for whom the city of Thebes situated some distance away on the banks of the Nile, was the natural capital. The Pharaoh has enraged the religious leaders further by naming Atun the sun god, the only God and denying all others. Shy by nature he avoids contact with the officials who come to remonstrate with him.

But the young friends know nothing of this as they play between the labyrinths of marble pillars. To the onlooker, they couldn't have seemed more different. Clesia the Pharaoh's daughter was tall and willowy with long blonde hair tied in a plait, pale blue eyes, high cheeks bones and small neat ears, the image of her mother Nefertiti. Syna the daughter of a Jewish handmaiden was shorter with dark brown hair and deep brown eyes, Her skin was the palest brown and her nose was aquiline. They were still young and fancy-free and were unaware of the deep gulf, which separated them. Little did they know that dark clouds were gathering in the kingdom? For the moment, they enjoyed their freedom within the safety of the palace walls.

Syna was having dreams, disturbing dreams that woke her up, fearful and troubled. A voice from within was commanding her, “your people are enslaved, rise up and free them”.

She awakened sweating and shaking as if from a fever. Her mother noticed that her daughter was troubled but said nothing. It must be malaria she decided and gave her a potion. She is strong and will recover, she assured herself.

But the dreams continued and Syna realised that something awe-inspiring was occurring. One day plucking up courage, she approached her mother.

‘I am troubled mother,’ she began. ‘I have been having terrible dreams. I hear a voice, deep and rumbling. It seems to be coming from within me yet I am asleep?’

‘What does it say?’ Her mother asked.

‘It is telling me to save my people. My people? Who are my people and what am I to save them from?’

‘My daughter listen to what I have to say. Be patient, the voices will tell you what the words mean, the Gods works in strange ways.’

The following night Syna had another dream. In the morning she told her mother.

‘The voice said that my people are the chosen people and that they will be a light unto all nations and that I have been selected to fulfill a prophecy. What does it mean my mother? I am anxious.’

‘Don’t be afraid my child, God choses her followers from simple men and women. When you hear the voice call you what are your feelings?’

‘I feel exhilarated, excited, prepared to do what she wishes.’

‘So you see my daughter you already know that she has a purpose for you.’

'Yes, mother. But what could that be?' She asked.

'Our people are under the yoke of the Egyptian overloads. They are overworked and beaten when they tire. Many fall dead from exhaustion. They are your people and the voice is calling you to help them.'

'But mother, I am only a child, I am too young, how can I help them?'

'Be brave she will tell you what to do, have no fear.'

The following night, Syna is again disturbed by the voice. This time the message is more direct.

'Syna I have chosen you above all others to free my people. Go to the Pharaoh and ask him to allow our people to go free.'

'But he will not listen to me, why should he? I am a mere child why would he take notice of me?'

'Say that Yahweh your God has spoken, say that she will punish his people if he does not let you go.'

Syna was frightened. She lay awake night after night trying to find the courage to speak to the Pharaoh. Finally she shared her fear with Clesia.

'Dear Clesia, what can I do? The voice won't let me rest. She talks to me every night in my sleep'

'I don't know what to say. I don't understand why your people are our slaves. How has that happened? I will ask my father, he will tell me why. There must be a good reason.'

A few days later Clesia had the opportunity to speak to the Pharaoh.

'Father I am puzzled. Why are the Jews our slaves?'

Laughing the king replied,

'My dearest daughter light of my life, it has always been so.

Since we first occupied this land we have required the people to do our will. The Jew is an inferior being. He has no skills, no

understanding. He can only work under orders as a slave. He wouldn't know what to do unless we told him.

When they are alone, Clesia explains to Syna what her father has said but Syna is not convinced and she asks her mother.

'The Pharaoh says that we are slaves because we are inferior and need to be told what to do. Is that true mother.'  
Syna's mother is dismayed.

'My child why are you asking me these questions, aren't you happy as you are?'

'Yes mother but the voice won't let me rest.'

The next day, full of trepidation, Syna approaches the gates to the Pharaoh's palace and asks one of the guards to let her speak to the Pharaoh. They laugh at her.

'Child, no one speaks to the Pharaoh. What do you want?'

'Can you give him a message? Tell him that a mighty power has demanded that the Jewish slaves be set free otherwise his kingdom will be punished.'

The guards laugh amongst themselves.

'This Jewess says that her God will punish us. She is mad. The Jews, they are never satisfied. Let them go free! What else will they want?'

That night Syna again dreams and this time she is able to answer the voice and tells her what has happened.

'Go back and tell the Pharaoh that your God is mighty and will punish his people.'

Even more timid Syna returns and speaks to the guard on the gate. This time he tells his commanding officer and the word gets back to the Pharaoh Akhenaten.

'Who is this Jewess whose God threatens me? Bring her to me.'

The following day two guards appear at Syna's house and drag her to the Palace, into the Great Hall where she is hauled in front of the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh Akhenaten is seated on a golden throne. He is tall with a thin narrow face. He is wearing a long white cotton gown with the double crown of the two kingdoms on his head, the white crown from Upper Egypt and the red crown from Lower Egypt. Incense is burning from golden holders on either side and at his feet is sitting his daughter Clesia who is holding his right hand, on the index finger of which is a large sapphire ring.

Suddenly he speaks; his voice is thin and high-pitched.

'What is her name that dares to speak to the pharaoh?' he demands to the guard who has dragged Syna from the back of the Great Hall.

'She calls herself Syna and is a daughter from the tribe of Israel.'

'Bring her to me.'

Syna is pushed forwards and stands in front of the throne, her head bowed. She is a diminutive figure in contrast to the Pharaoh.

'You,' he says pointing his bejeweled finger at her, 'you dare to come to my Palace and threaten to punish my people, you insignificant mortal child. You threaten the Pharaoh?'

'My lord and master,' said Syna bowing low, her heart in her mouth. 'It is not me who threatens you; it is Yahweh my God. She speaks to me in my sleep. She demands that you let her people free.'

'Ha ha,' laughed the Pharaoh. 'It's a joke, a Jewish joke. Go and tell your God, your Yahweh to come and face me, then we will see who is the mightiest.'

On hearing her father's reply, Clesia gets up from where she is sitting and confronts him.

'Dear father my friend Syna is one of 'them'. What have the Jews done wrong? Why can't they be free like us? Why

must they be slaves with no rights to come and go? Why father, please I don't understand?

Akhenaten was only half listening.

'Daughter whom I love more than life itself, did you say that you are friendly with this Jewess?' Pointing to Syna's bowed figure.

'Yes we are good friends we play together. She is the daughter of mother's hand maiden.'

The Pharaoh is speechless.

'Does your mother the Queen know this?'

'I don't - I think so,' said Clesia feeling a cold shiver of fear.

The pharaoh's face is drawn, his eyes glaring at her.

'Why father do you look at me with such anger?'

'I must speak to her, meanwhile I don't want you to see the girl again.'

'But we are friends. I like her very much; she is gentle and kind and knows so much about nature, about the insects, the birds and animals. We have so much fun together, she couldn't do any harm.'

'You are not to see her again. I have spoken.'

It is mid winter, the time when the Nile is at rest. The land lay dormant waiting for the yearly inundation, the miracle of the rising waters. Now the people can relax and enjoy the many activities. Preparations were at hand for the annual camel race that begins at the palace of Amarna and follows a circular course outlined in the desert returning to the start about 30 minutes later. The day was clear with a slight breeze. Over 50 camels had assembled snorting and sniffing at the air. Most were sitting on their haunches at the starting line, waiting to begin.

A royal stand had been set up outside the palace walls to seat the many hundreds of dignitaries who with their several wives and children would enjoy pride of place. They were soon



settled under a shade of interwoven papyrus leaves liberally sprayed with perfume. On the opposite side of the course the labourers happy to be relieved of the burden of work were located. They had constructed temporary shades to protect themselves from the blazing sun. From there they would be able to see the Pharaoh Akhenaten, his Queen Nefertiti and the royal family as they entered the stand to take up their seats high above the course.

Suddenly there was a roar as the royal party arrived perched on a line of slowly plodding camels, highly decorated with large brightly coloured blankets hanging down from their sides. They dismounted and made their way slowly up the stairs to their seats high up in the stand where all could see them. A handmaiden whose task it was to supervise the children accompanied them.

Clesia spied Syna arriving with her family and was overjoyed. Seizing an opportunity when the handmaiden wasn't looking, she managed to escape from the group and ran over to greet her friend and her parents. The two youngsters hugged. They hadn't seen each other since they had been forbidden to meet. Queen Nefertiti watching, saw her daughter reunite with Syna. She recalled the talk she had had with Clesia after the Pharaoh had banned her from seeing her friend.

'Mother I don't understand,' Clesia had said weeping loudly. 'She's just a girl like me; we're friends. I like her very much. Why can't I see her and be with her? Father was so cruel the way he banned me as if in some way she was evil. She's not evil, she's not!' exclaimed Clesia.

'I know dear,' said her mother, 'it's nothing like that. I'll try and explain. You are a very special person. You are the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt a title your father inherited from his father, your grandfather Amenhotep III. He comes from a long line of Pharaohs going back in time to the union of Upper and Lower Egypt several thousand years ago. We are

the guardians of the world and you share that responsibility. One day you may be Pharaoh; your people will see you as their Goddess. It is a great responsibility but a lonely one; it will separate you from them.'

Clesia listened trying to understand what her mother was saying. But she didn't feel special. She felt ordinary, very ordinary, and no different from her friend Syna. In fact they often said how much alike they were, liking the same things, enjoying the same trees and plants. She looked at her hands, how pink and soft they were whereas she remembered Syna's hands were red and rough. She knew that was because she did such hard work not because she was different. That was the only difference she could find. The more she thought about it the more she realised that it made no sense. She was still thinking about it when she saw her mother's glare. I must get back to them before they get angry, she realised. She bade farewell to Syna, turned and made her way back to the stand and her parents.

Clesia was still thinking about that conversation, going over it in her mind when in her haste she didn't hear that the starter had called for the race to begin. She began rushing across the course to get back to the stand. Suddenly she heard the padding of hooves in the sand and looked up to see several camels coming straight at her. She stood frozen unable to move as the beasts were about to collide with her. Suddenly she felt the powerful pull of an arm around her waist. She was thrown to the ground as the hooves of the animal just missed her trunk. One caught her left leg as it flew past. She felt and heard a crack as the bone splintered. A searing pain coursed up her leg and she screamed out. Immediately the race was stopped and the guards rushed to her aid. Her legs were splinted and she was taken to the infirmary to be treated with healing herbs.

*High above, Ecclesia smiled at Synagoga: Unspoken words travelled between them:*

*Ecclesia: 'Synagoga, thank you for being so quick, I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there?'*

*Synagoga: 'You don't have to worry; I'll always look after you. We are bound as if one through eternity.'*

'How are you feeling?' said the infirmary nurse.

'It's a bit sore but the splint has helped.'

'Your friend Syna said she'll come and see you in a few days.'

'I would like that but do you think my father will let her?'

'I don't know. She said she would speak to her mother. She said she is very close to the Queen.'

Next morning, as Queen Nefertiti was being served her breakfast, Syna's mother spoke to her.

'Your highness may I speak with you?'

'Of course, I look upon you as a friend. Before you speak let me first say how much the Pharaoh and I are grateful to your daughter Syna for her prompt action. We think without her fearless act, Clesia could have been killed.'

'Thank you, Your Highness, It is about that, that I would like to speak.'

'Please.'

'As you know our daughters had become close friends even though a gulf separates them and I can understand why the king has banned their further meeting but...'

'You don't need to say another word. I will speak to him and I'm sure he will relent and bless your daughter as I do. Leave it to me.'

That evening the Queen and the Pharaoh ate together in the great hall surrounded by lines of slaves each handling a particular dish. These were served course by course to the royal couple. The room was lit with rows of oil lamps sending flickering shadows across the decorated walls. The meal

started with a choice of sweet meats preserved in spices followed by large cuts of beef, lamb and goat. A wide variety of vegetables including peas, lentils, lettuces and cucumbers were set out in golden dishes from which they ate with their hands, lounging on ornately padded chairs. Between courses they washed their hands in bowls of warm water.

It was after the main courses and when the King was getting a bit drunk that the queen spoke.

‘My lord,’ she began, ‘I have been told that the child Syna has mentioned to you about the dreams she has been having. About a god called Yahweh who has demanded that you let the Jewish slaves free.’

‘Yes, she said something like that but I dismissed it. I said that any God that threatened me would be destroyed.’

‘But my lord do we need to be so harsh. Couldn’t we give the Jews, her people their freedom and let them decide whether to stay or leave?’

‘No!’ He roared, ‘they are less than animals. They are slaves and must be treated like that.’

‘At least let the two girls speak to each other?’

‘No I will not allow it.’

Nefertiti realised that she would have to find another way and the rest of the meal was eaten in silence. She smiled to herself; she had ways of making him change his mind.

*High above the two spirits grinned and embraced each other.*

Clesia was dozing when the nurse said that she had a visitor. She sat up in bed not certain who it would be and then Syna came in with a sweet-smelling bunch of lotus leaves bound with a strip of papyrus.

‘It’s so good to see you.’ The two friends hugged.

‘Dear Clesia, my mother spoke to the Queen and she arranged it. You know how good she is at getting her own way with your father. But my dear friend,’ continued Syna, ‘there is something I must speak to you about. After your father sent

me away, he said something that scared me. He said that he would welcome meeting my God Yahweh and that he would destroy her.'

Syna was unable to rest. Every night she had the same recurring dream. The voice was becoming more insistent.

'If the Pharaoh does nothing I will bring plagues to the country and thousands will die.'

Desperate she confided in Clesia.

'My God won't wait any longer she threatens plagues upon the people of Egypt. You must do something.'

'What can I do? My father is unbending and will stop at nothing.'

You must make him understand this is not a hollow threat.'

*Synagoga: 'don't you remember what happened? Yahweh sent the ten plagues - Water changed to blood, a plague of Frogs, Gnats and lice, Flies, Livestock, Boils, Thunder and hail, Locusts, Darkness and the Death of First born.'*

*Ecclesia: 'Why did he have to send all of them, wouldn't one or two have sufficed?'*

*Synagoga: 'You would have thought so but your father wouldn't listen. It was only when your brother, his only son and heir died and he was broken, that he changed.'*

*Ecclesia: 'In what way?'*

*Synagoga: It broke his heart and he gave up. He realised he was beaten.'*

The word went round like wildfire that the Jewish slaves were free to leave. They began packing up their meagre possessions for the journey ahead. They needed supplies for a long trip. Yahweh had said that it would take forty days and forty nights before they came to a land of peace and plenty.

The people had assembled and were about to move off. Syna was frantic. She looked everywhere for Clesia and finally found her by the river.

‘Come quickly we are leaving, pack your things and meet me by the gate.’

Syna went to leave when Clesia grabbed her arm.

‘No I can’t go with. I must stay here with my family.’

‘Why? I don’t understand. We are friends. We swore we would never part. You must come with us; I can’t go without you. Please change your mind. You said what your father did was wrong?’

‘Yes it was and I am ashamed of it but they are my parents and I love them and must be loyal to them. Now that my brother is dead, I must stay and support them. One day I will rule this land.’

‘I was so sorry to hear about that it was a terrible tragedy. I only wished that it hadn’t happened to him,’ said Syna.

The two friends parted. Syna struggled to leave her friend but the call of her people overwhelmed her. She hadn’t gone far when she looked back and waved.

*Ecclesia: ‘I never forgot you Syna even when I became the Pharaoh. I called myself Hatshepsut, ‘Foremost of Noblewomen’ and reigned from 1473 to 1458 BC. I thought of you often and wondered where you were and what was happening to you.’*

*Synagoga: ‘It was a very long and difficult journey and we had many problems. The people became impatient and began to doubt Yahweh. They even built a golden calf. It was terrible. We almost had a mutiny but our leader was strong and we reached the Promised Land. And it was as Yahweh had promised, a land flowing with milk and honey.’*

## CHAPTER TWO

## MASADA ISRAEL

It's 66 CE. The Roman Empire has extended into the Middle East and the whole of Judea and Samaria are under Roman rule, But it is a time of great unrest as the oppressors make life for the ordinary people increasing difficult. The Zealots, a group of anti-Roman rebels have formed and have begun to harass the Roman forces.

I lived with my family in the Roman camp; my father was the Roman Governor Flavius Silva.

I was an only child and loved to play near the Dead Sea, its tranquility and strangeness appealed to me. It was there that I met Syna the daughter of a local farmer. She was throwing bouncing stones onto the thick salty water. I watched her for a while and then she invited me to a competition: who could bounce the stone the most times and the longest distance? I had never played the game before and at first my stones kept sinking but gradually I learned and after many attempts, I became very good and could bounce the stone up to nine times and for a distance of ten Pes (feet). We used to sit on the bank as the sun set admiring the colours reflected off the small mounds of salt crystals that built up on the shore.

We were both completely unaware of the unrest, which was brewing.

One day Syna said,

'Clesia I told my parents about you and they said they would like to meet you. Will you come to tea this afternoon to meet my family? We live in a stone house in the shadow of the big rock.'

I was a little shy and at first didn't want to go. I thought of asking my parents what I should do but I knew that they would say no because she was a Judean and they are our

enemies. I set off but I had difficulty finding Syna's house as they all looked alike. But happily she saw me coming and called out. The whole family greeted me. Her mother gave me a kiss and said that I was welcome. Her father was distant but not unkind. I ate some strange but delicious food and crept home without telling anyone where I had been.

'I'm home.' My mother was in the kitchen making supper and told me to get ready to eat. Dinner was very quiet; father came in much later after I was sleeping.

I saw Syna a few days later and invited her to my home. Like me she was uncertain how her mother would react so she had made an excuse that she was going to see another friend.

'I live in the camp,' I said, slightly embarrassed.

'I know I've seen you going there. Everybody knows where it is.'

The camp could be seen from miles around and covered a large area. A high fence surrounded it.

'What's it like living there?' Syna asked.

'It's all right, we have a small house so I don't go near the barracks.'

'What about your father he's a soldier?'

'Yes but he's not home very often.'

I met Syna at the camp gate. My mother had spoken to the guard so she had no difficulty. It must have been very strange to Syna.

'Have you ever been in a camp before?' I asked her.

'No but I'm not afraid.'

'There is no need to be, you'll like my mother and father won't be there.'

It was cool and peaceful inside the house, which was built around a central courtyard with a fountain rising from a statue of Venus.



'That's beautiful,' Syna said, her eyes shining with delight.

'Yes we brought it with us from Rome.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'About three years, we came after the conquest.'

The situation in Judea gradually worsened and with it, the siege of the Jewish community began. I receive a message from Syna that she must see me urgently. We met by the banks of the Dead Sea. I could see that she was frantic.

'I have to go; our whole community is in danger. We have decided to retreat to Masada the former fort of King Herod. It would be safer there so I have come to say goodbye. I'm sorry, I can't stay it is too dangerous.'

Saddened beyond belief, we say goodbye.

When I got home I could hear my parents talking.

'I think we have come to the end of our tether, we can't let the Jewish Patriots continue to attack us, they are killing too many of my soldiers.' Father said. 'Now I hear that they are planning to retreat to the top of Masada. I have spoken to Rome and they want me to flush them out.'

'How do you mean?' I heard my mother ask.

'I mean kill them all.'

'Isn't that virtually impossible where they are?'

'No, we could build a ramp. It would take a year or so but it is the only way.'

I couldn't believe what my father was saying. I must warn Syna. I must get to her as soon as possible. I looked for her everywhere but no one had seen her. I suddenly realised where she was. She had already gone with her family on the top of Masada. That night I couldn't sleep. The next day I saw the soldiers and workmen begin to build a rampart. I heard father describing how they were going to build it until it reached the top. He was adamant no matter how long it took.

I made my plans. Before dawn I crept out of the house. I waited until the guard wasn't looking and slid under the camp fence. Then I walked across the sand until I reached the base of Masada. Tentatively I began to climb up to the top. It was a long hard slog. My shoes were soft and soon my feet were bleeding. I wrapped them in some material I had and carried on. I stopped as the sun rose and stood for some while watching as the shadow moved slowly over the land revealing the fields and the desert. In the distance I could now see the Dead Sea glistening in the sun's rays. It was a beautiful sight. Soon I reached the flat top where the Judeans were camping. As I came over the ridge a guard stopped me.

'Halt,' he said raising his stick. 'What are you doing here? This is no place for a girl. Go back to where you belong,' he demanded.'

'I am looking for Syna, I must warn her.'

'I don't know anyone called Syna. Go and speak to the Captain.'

'Where's he?'

'You'll find him in the synagogue he is also the rabbi.'

Ahead of me was a large stone building. That must be it I thought and I entered. It was dark and cool and at first I couldn't see anything. Then I saw him. A tall figure wearing a small skull cap and dressed in a long white gown. I stood and listened as he sang a sad plaintive song in a strange musical language. I didn't understand it but it spoke to me of pain and suffering.

He must have heard me because he suddenly looked around. He had a kind face and smiled at me.

'Hello who are you? Why are you here?'

'I am Clesia. I come from the camp. I am looking for Syna.'

'You know her?'

'Yes we're friends. I have come to warn her.' The Rabbi looked puzzled.

'Where did you meet her?'

'We met by the big salt sea and played together.'

'Didn't you know she was a Judean?'

'I don't understand what is a Judean?'

'I will take you to her. I think she is in the classroom.'

I saw her sitting in a group on the ground; a teacher was talking to them. I watched for a moment and then she saw me. Her face lit up and she rushed over to me. We were so happy to see each other. After the class we sat under an olive tree and spoke.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'You shouldn't be, it's too dangerous!'

'Yes I know.'

'You must go before it is too late, please Clesia you must leave.'

'No, I won't, I won't leave you.'

*Ecclesia: Do you know what happened?*

*Synagoga: The Romans built a rampart high enough to enable them to break into the Judean camp. When they reached the top they found all the people dead. They had committed mass suicide.*

*Ecclesia: What about Clesia and Syna?*

*Synagoga: The Governor found his daughter's body with Syna's. They were wrapped together in death. He was a broken man.*

## CHAPTER THREE YORK

In the year 1370 the people of Eboracum (York) experienced a particularly bad winter. The temperature fell to its lowest level for years. Water froze in the wells and windows iced over. It was the first of many similar winters and looking back future historians would label it, the 'Little ice age'. The snow paralysed the city, the old roman capital of England. The river

Ouse was frozen over so that the whole city had virtually come to a standstill.

At the time, it seemed to the inhabitants to be just a particularly hard winter. Carriages were sliding all over the frozen paths and the horses were struggling to keep their balance. But there was a bigger problem to deal with. The harvest had failed, food was getting scarce and starvation was looming. People queued for hours in the markets and time and again the stalls were empty. No fresh food could be bought in and the villagers were getting frantic. Fights broke out; families were at war with each other. Children were developing hollowed faces, sunken eyes and distended bellies. The government seemed to be helpless to prevent the disaster.

People were looking for the cause and the finger was pointed at the small Jewish community that lived there. It was only a matter of time before more violence erupted. Sermons were carefully crafted to blame the Jews, the historical scapegoat that generations before had blamed. The word went round that Jewish merchants were seen to be buying up all the grain. Soon small groups of citizens began to assemble in the streets outside Jewish shops and houses shouting abuse. The owners cowered behind locked doors praying that the violence would pass. Then word went round that some Jews had been arrested for stockpiling food and soon the mob was out of control. Windows were broken and bricks were hurled. Some Priests called for calm but to no avail. Others seeing the opportunity to gain favour with the people inflamed the situation further by preaching hate against the small Jewish community. Jews had been living in York since 1130 and by 1170 a Jewish cemetery had been established. In 1190 the first attack on a Jewish family was recorded.

Now the same thing was happening again. A Jewish house was stripped of anything that could be moved while the family fled unable to prevent the carnage. Then fires were lit and the house was enveloped in flames. From the outskirts of the city the conflagration could be seen lighting up the sky. It

was the beginning of the worst pogroms that the town of York had experienced. In the end more than three hundred Jews would perish.

Watching from an upper window, Clesia still in her teens saw the violence as men and women presumed to be Jewish were chased and beaten. She saw groups of people running through the streets chasing whoever they thought were Jews. Suddenly out of the gloom she saw a slight figure highlighted in the moonlight dressed in rags running towards her house. As it came closer she could make out the features of a young woman and quickly ran downstairs. Slowly opening the front door she beckoned to her.

‘Here it’s safe come in.’

The girl hesitated, unsure what to do but the danger behind her was too great. Tentively she came inside and stood in the hall shivering. Clesia could now see that she looked no older than thirteen. She was frail, her lips blue and she was shaking with fear. She wore a thin slip and was barefoot.

‘Quick come into the kitchen it’s warm,’ Clesia said, beckoning to her. ‘You must be starving, come and sit by the fire while I get you something to eat.’ She went to the open hearth and ladled some soup into a bowl.

‘Here, this is some hot cabbage broth.’ The girl watched her eyes wide open as a bowl of steaming soup was placed on the scrubbed kitchen table in front of her.

‘Come and eat.’ I am Ecclesia but they call me Clesia. What is your name?’

‘My full name is Synagoga, but they call me Syna.’ She replied her voice almost inaudible.

*Synagoga: You were very kind to me, befriending someone who was seen as an outcast.*

*Ecclesia: You were an innocent caught up in madness. How could I not come to your help?*

Desperately hungry the girl stared at the steaming liquid suspicious that it might be poisonous. She felt a spasm of hunger in her belly, which had seen no food for days. Clesia saw her hesitation and took a spoon and drank from the bowl. She then handed the spoon to the girl. Reassured that it was safe she took a mouthful of the soup but as the hot liquid burned her mouth, she drew back with surprise.

'Is it too hot?' said Clesia, 'wait.' Gradually Syna's look of fear eased and she smiled.

'Thank you I haven't eaten for days. Our house was burned down. My parents were killed and I have been hiding. Why are they attacking us? We have done them no harm.'

Clesia had heard the priest telling everyone that the Jews were evil. His voice was raised as he proclaimed,

'They are the murderers of our Christ the Saviour. They are the cause of this exceptional winter, and the shortages of food, we must be rid of them; our land must be cleansed.'

She listened disbelieving as he repeated that the Jews had killed Christ and that they must be killed so that the true religion Christianity could flourish. She remembered in horror how the congregation had stood up shouting,

'Get rid of the Jews! Kill the Jews.'

Now she looked at this youngster sipping her soup, still a child and was unable to see how this person could be evil. It made no sense.

The girl felt her stare.

'Don't be afraid you are safe here,' Clesia said smiling. At that moment her mother came into the kitchen having heard voices. She was a woman in her forties, her face lined with fatigue.

'I heard you speaking to someone?' Surprised she turned and saw Syna.

'Who is that?' She demanded? 'What is she doing here?'

'Mother she came to the door. She was being chased, her life was in danger so I let her in.'

'She's a Jewess. No, she must go. She can't stay here. She is evil.'

Her mother's voice grew harsher.

Her father heard the raised voices and came into the room. He was a man in his early fifties, grey haired with a white beard.

'What's going on here? I heard you shouting?'

'Yes, she has let this creature, this Jewess into our house.' She said pointing to Syna.

'I don't understand what creature? She's only a child.'

'She may appear to be but our preacher said differently. He said that they are worse than vermin. They killed Christ, they drink the blood of children!'

'Where on earth did you get all that rubbish from?'

'Weren't you listening during Sunday's service? You never do, you fall asleep. You don't know what's going on. The Priest warned us that they look like ordinary people but have been sent by the devil. They are thieving all the food. They brought the icy weather so as to steal from us.'

While her mother was talking, Clesia was watching Syna. The girl's face was ashen with fear and she was shaking and fighting back tears. To Clesia she seemed just a frightened young girl. How could she be a devil? Her mother had stopped talking and for a moment no one said anything then Clesia knew what she had to do.

'Mother and father, this girl is almost a child; she needs to be cared for. Her parents have been killed and she is all alone, she has lost everything, we can't throw her out.'

Her parents looked at each other, neither wanted to be the first one to act. Clesia saw their indecision and went on,

'If you reject her you reject me.'

They were not used to defiance from their daughter and initially ignored it.

'Rubbish Clesia you will do no such thing. Go to your room.'

'No Mother, if you throw her out you throw me out also. I am going with her. Can't you see you are making a terrible mistake? She is just a poor frightened girl not a devil. Please listen to me.'

'All right, she can stay for a few days and then she must go. She can sleep in the spare bed in your room Clesia,' her mother said finally.

Lying in their beds at night they began to share details of their lives.

'I was born in London,' said Syna, 'but my father who was an Historian moved to York where he worked until the troubles started. When the University learned he was Jewish he was sacked. Life at home became very difficult and I had to leave school. My mother managed to do some cleaning which brought some money in but life was very hard. We were always frightened that we would be attacked and then it happened.'

'I was in my bedroom when I heard the commotion, the sound of shouts and running. I went to the window and saw them. Our house was surrounded and they were throwing stones at the windows and trying to break down the front door. We had locked ourselves in and were crouching in the hall so that no one could see us. But that made no difference, the front windows were smashed in and lighted fagots thrown into the room. We tried to extinguish them but our water was frozen. We were forced onto the streets and tried to escape but they turned on my parents and beat them to death. I managed to escape and hid in a ruined building scratching for food.'

Clesia listened disbelieving; she couldn't imagine what Syna must have gone through.

'You are safe here,' she assured her. 'We are friends.'



*Synagoga: Dear Clesia I can't tell you how grateful I was to you for your kindness. I don't know what I would have done without your stand against your parents.*

*Ecclesia: It was the least I could do. You were in danger. I had to help you.*

But it wasn't to be that simple. The word got about that a Christian family was protecting a Jewess and soon stones were being thrown at their windows and graffiti daubed on their outside walls.

"A Jewish she-devil lives here."

'She can't stay here we are all in danger,' said her father finally. 'We must be realistic. There is an empty barn on the outskirts of the town. She should be safe there. After dark tonight when it has calmed down I will take her there hidden in the cart.'

'I am going with her, she can't go alone,' said Clesia, 'I want to stay with her. Please don't fight me my mind's made up.'

It was in the early hours that the two girls arrived at the barn and crept in. It was pitch black and silent but then they heard a whisper. To their surprise there were others there. Syna recognised a friend from school and they greeted each other.

As the early morning light crept into building, Syna could see that there were at least fifty other people all hiding. They had formed a small committee and the girls sat in and listened as an old man spoke as a chairman. Syna recognised him as the doctor.

'Friends, we are facing what is probably the most dangerous time in our lives. We have become the scapegoat and are being blamed for the terrible conditions the people are living under. Needless to say it is not of our making but they will not accept that. Even the church leaders are blaming us as if in some way we are responsible for the weather.' They want us to renounce our faith and recognise Jesus as the Son of

God. My friends each of you must decide your fate, to stay and refuse or to walk into the arms of the enemy. It's a personal decision. No one will blame you if you accept that way out.'

As he finished a handful of people got up and walked to the door. They looked back shrugged their shoulders and left. The remainder sat waiting. Some women were crying fearful of what may be awaiting them. No one knew exactly what was going to happen'

Later that day several of the town's elders came to the barn and suggested that the people move to the Tower, which would be safer and they all agreed.

Clesia and Syna sat holding each other.

'Now you must go back to your family,' said Syna. 'This is not your struggle. Please it is dangerous and I don't want you to be hurt.'

Clesia reached out and held her hand.

'I am not going to leave you. We are friends and I am staying with you.'

The following morning, the lookout noticed that some officials were close to the barn.

*Ecclesia: The people accepted the offer?*

*Synagoga: Yes and for a while they were safe in the tower. As starvation and disease spread in the city, the elders of the church proclaimed that the Jews must be destroyed. They were the cause of the plague, they said. The city would not recover until they had been eliminated. The Jews were unaware that they were in mortal danger until the regular supplies of food and water stopped. Then they realised that they were trapped.*

Under dark a small group of town's people approached the tower with lighted sticks. It was apparent that were going to torch it. Gathering all the families together the leader asked

them to pray and as the flames licked the wooden structure the onlookers could hear the age-old prayer,  
*'Shema Yisroael, Adanai Elohenu, Adanai Echad,'*  
*Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God the Lord is one.'*

Clesia and Syna were together in the tower when the fire began.

'Clesia you must go,' screamed Syna. 'This is not your fight. Go before the flames get too high, before you are trapped. Please go now. Tell them that you are not Jewish and they will let you through.'

'No my dear friend, I will not leave you now not in your most dangerous moment. I want to stay and be with you to the end.'

'Please I beg you leave. I will always remember our friendship even in the afterlife.'

*Ecclesia: Sadly they both died as the flames engulfed over 150 Jews on that fateful day.*

*Synagoga: How did they know?*

*Ecclesia: When the fire burnt itself out. The charred bodies of the two girls were found clasping each other.*

The tragedy is recalled on a memorial plaque at the base of the new stone tower to this day.

*On the night of Friday 16<sup>th</sup> March 1190, 150 Jews and Jewesses of York having sought protection in the Royal Castle on this site from a mob incited by Richard Malebisse and others chose to die at each other's hands rather than renounce their faith.*

## CHAPTER FOUR THE SPANISH INQUISITION

It is the year 1492, a year that you, Clesia will never forget, your life changed forever. You were in your class at school and about to say the morning prayers. You stood up with the rest of the class bowed your head and recited the Lord's Prayer followed by crossing yourself; after all you were a devout Roman Catholic.

Out of the corner of your eye you saw her standing at the back, a small dark haired girl with light brown skin. She looked uncertain, different from the others. Her lips were not moving and she did not cross herself. You were puzzled. The teacher hadn't noticed or had overlooked it but it troubled you. At break you saw her sitting on her own and decided to speak to her. You sat down beside her and at first said nothing. Then plucking up courage you said,

'My name is Clesia what is yours?'

'I am called Syna, it is short for Synagoga.'

'You are not a Christian?'

'No I am Jewish.'

'I have never met a Jew, what do you believe?'

'We believe that there is one God to whom we pray,'  
said Syna.

'What about his son Jesus who was sent to save the world?'

'We don't believe that. We believe that Jesus was a very wise man teaching goodness and kindness.'

You might wonder where Clesia heard that something terrible was going to happen? It was at her home; her father was Tomas de Torquemada, head of the Roman Catholic community. You would have been surprised what he and her mother spoke about in front of their daughter as if she didn't understand. But she did and listened carefully. Her father was preparing a sermon for the following Sunday. It was to describe in detail the proposed Decree, one that would change the people of Spain forever.

Some days later, when the class was over Clesia went over to where Syna was sitting.

‘How are things with you?’

‘I am well I suppose,’ she answered.

How do you explain to someone whom you hardly know that something is going to happen that will have an enormous effect on them, life threatening to all their family and people?

‘Did you know,’ Clesia began, ‘that there is a rumour that a declaration is about to be published called the Alhambra Decree?’

She looked surprised.

‘No, what does it mean?’ She asked.

Clesia hesitated to explain.

‘Please tell me. Don’t be afraid we are friends.’

Clesia warned her and explained what she had overheard.

Clesia, you couldn’t sleep. You had heard rumours that something terrifying was going to happen in Madrid, which would also spread, to the rest of Spain. You had overheard your father the head of the Roman Catholic Church talking to your mother at breakfast. He was reading through the final draft of his sermon for the following Sunday. They thought you couldn’t understand but you were listening carefully.

‘The church was under threat and needed to re-establish its authority in the country.’ He was saying. ‘To do so they proposed to introduce the Alhambra Decree in the same year that Columbus sailed to the West Indies.’

It was a date no Spaniard should ever forget. He was introducing it with the support of the Royal family Ferdinand and Isabella. The church was intent on purging the country of infidels, those not professing the Christian religion. The decree would be akin to a death sentence. All citizens were required

to swear their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church on pain of death.

Syna asked,

‘What choice do we non-Christians have?’ Syna asked.

You would have thought for a moment.

‘Either you must convert to Christianity or leave the country’

‘Where could we go?’ Syna asked. ‘We are Spaniards. My family has lived here for generations, as long as we can remember, my grand parents and their grand parents before them. Why are they doing this to us?’

She knew you could not answer this. You felt the same way but you would obey the law even if it was against everything that Christianity teaches. Against your better judgment, you Clesia would support the ‘cleansing’ of the Spanish people of the Jews to ensure that Catholicism ruled the country.

The Jewish community was divided, some were prepared to convert and others rushed to leave. In all 200,000 Jews left the country, Syna’s family was amongst them. You can imagine the struggle they had to find a passage. She, her brother and parents paid an exorbitant fee for a voyage to Turkey.

You would have been horrified at the pushing and shoving that went on as they boarded the ship at Barcelona some days later. It was a ‘Barco’ a small sailing/rowing boat suitable for about ten people but over fifty had been crammed on board. The captain was a drunk and a bully who treated his sailors cruelly so that once they were out at sea, he ordered them to kill the Jews and throw their bodies overboard but they refused. Others weren’t so lucky and perished during their voyage.

At the same time, Beyazid II Sultan of Turkey issued an invitation to the fleeing Spanish Jews and warmly received the ones who survived the journey. As a result it was estimated

that more than 150,000 arrived and settled in Turkey. They would be known as Sephardic Jews recognising their origin from Spain. They settled in Constantinople and Salonika. Amongst them was Syna's family.

Clesia, your story may have ended there but fate took a turn. You became increasingly aware of the injustice in your own country and when you could you left Spain looking for your friend Syna. You had learned that the Jews had established small close-knit communities in Turkey.

The Turkish people found the newcomers strange with their dress and eating habits and tended to avoid them. The Jews on their part kept themselves apart.

'You must comb the ghettos to find your friend,' an old Turk told you in broken Spanish. 'You will find her there. But travelling in Turkey is hard. The paths are rough and the terrain hostile. You must prepare well with food and water, as these are in short supply.' He had advised.

Despite the difficulties you set off not knowing whether you would ever find your friend. You travelled mile after mile through bush and bracken, your feet were swollen, your hands grazed. You were almost beyond exhaustion when you stopped to rest by the path. You drank your precious water little by little so as to preserve it for as long as possible. Then you continued until night fell when you found shelter to sleep for the night.

*Synagoga: I knew you would look for me no matter how difficult it would be.*

*Ecclesia: We have been through so much together. I had no choice I had to find you.*

You had almost given up hope when one day, after you had been walking for several hours you saw some houses in the distance. You approached the first woman you saw and

asked where you could wash and eat some fresh food. To your surprise the woman invited you into her house and gave you some water to wash. When you were clean and dry, you put on some clothes that the woman had brought for you. The family was very friendly and you managed to explain that you were looking for the Jews.

A look of surprise appeared on the woman's face.

'You mean the wanderers, those strange people that came from far away; they are living on a site by the river. They have built some houses and are growing some crops. Why do you want to find them?' she asked.

You felt reluctant to explain.

'I am looking for a young woman called Syna. We were school friends but we lost touch when she and her family had to leave.'

'Come I will take you to meet them.' The woman said, unexpectedly.

You followed the woman with difficulty because despite her size she was very agile. After about an hour you saw the camp in the distance.

'There they are,' she said, 'I must go back now but I hope you find your friend.'

'Thank you so much for your kindness,' you said.

Someone in the camp must have seen you coming because suddenly you were surrounded by a group of small chattering children who danced around you holding hands. You Clesia were delighted but couldn't understand what they were saying.

A man greeted you,

'Shalom.'

You replied 'Shalom,' meaning 'Peace'

'What brings you here my child?'

'I am looking for a friend, her name is Syna.'

'I don't know anyone by that name but if you go to the large hut over there they may be able to help you.'



You can imagine my excitement as I walked over to the building. I was so happy at the prospect of seeing Syna after so many years. I pushed open the door. You would have expected me to be able to see what was inside the room but it was very dark and it took me sometime to accommodate to the gloom. Then I saw a woman sitting by the curtained window. She was rocking herself in a chair staring ahead.

Though I could not see her completely, I could make out that it was Syna. She had aged beyond her years and my heart filled with sadness. She seemed to be unaware of her surroundings. I leaned forward and kissed her cheek but she didn't respond. She didn't know who I was. I sat holding her hand and speaking softly about the past, the life we had shared together. Time passed. I don't know how long I stayed hoping that in some way my presence would jog some part of her memory. But she did not move or look towards me. She was in a world of her own and there was no place for me. Reluctantly I said goodbye to the friend that I had cherished. Outside the rabbi met me.

'I'm sorry I should have warned you.'

'What happened?'

'We think it was caused by her pregnancy. She had a beautiful little girl but it was a long pregnancy and it damaged her brain. She has been like this for three years.'

'What happened to the child?'

'She's being looked after by one of the other mothers. The father is unknown.'

'I would love to meet her if that is possible?'

'Of course.' he replied.

He left the room and after a few moments returned with a bright little girl with deep brown eyes and light brown skin, a spitting image of Syna. In his hand he had a letter. He handed it to you. Your name was written on the envelope. You recognised the writing and opened it.

'My dear Clesia, I don't know whether you will ever read this letter but if you do you will know that something terrible has happened to me. I know I became pregnant and I think I gave birth but I remember little. If I had a baby and the baby is well I would like you to look after it and bring it up as your own. Give it a name; if it is a girl, I would like it to be named Syna so she will never forget me.

*Ecclesia: You can't imagine how shocked I was when I saw you. I had come such a long way with great hopes that we would be united again. The sight of you aged and haggard and no longer aware of where you were broke my heart.*

*Synagoga: I knew that one day you would come and find me. I was raped by one of the sailors on the boat that took me away from Spain. My pregnancy came as a great shock but I remained clear headed long enough to tell you what I wanted. Thank you for caring for little Syna I know you would have loved her as much as I would.*

Syna was a lovely child, demure and gentle with a gracious smile. You knew that I would love her like my own, how could I not? It was as if you had returned to me as a miracle to grow up together a renewal of our love.

You would have been so happy when you saw how my parents received your child. By that time the horror of the Inquisition had melted away and we had entered a new era of tolerance. You would have thrilled when I first took Syna to the synagogue and introduced her to the elders. The great synagogue in Madrid was restored in 14<sup>th</sup> C on the ruins of the old 13C. Much of the splendour of the old had gone but it was slowly being populated by the phylacteries of the past. The Rabbi came to greet us and took Syna's hand guiding her to the Arc. Standing in front of the carved mahogany doors, he explained.

'This where we keep the sacred scrolls of the law, each sabbat we read a portion from them.

Children grow up so quickly and it seemed only a few years later that Syna was thirteen and preparing for her Bat mitzvah. You would have been so proud of her as she recited her portion. Then we had the added pleasure of her presentation. I know you would have loved to be here.

'My dear family and friends,' she began and then her voice dropped, 'and to my mother who's name I bear. I only remember you dear Mother as a gentle spirit holding me and guiding me. I feel that even today you are with me in everything I do. I have learned more about you since and realise that you gave the greatest sacrifice for me to live. Dear Clesia has told me how she visited you and first learned about me. I also owe so much to her that I can never repay.'

*Ecclesia: It was a beautiful occasion, one that I shall never forget.*

*Synagoga: I was so proud of her. I enjoyed every moment.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE NAZI SCOURGE

Looking back, it now all seems like a bad dream as if I was living someone else's life, as if I was inside someone else's body but at the time it was too real and ghastly. Even now that fear occasionally returns, that inner shuddering, that deep nausea that sweeps through my whole body. For a while I am out of control trembling, shivering, sweating all at the same time. In an instant I can be hurled back to that time when my life stood still, when every minute, every second seemed to be my last, facing an unknown future, alone and petrified. The recollection can happen without warning, a sound, a picture

and a smell; particularly a smell of burning will paralyze my mind. I feel the blood draining from my face and my vision blurring. I'm unable to think or feel but then it passes and I am my old self again

I am twenty years old, a University graduate from Bonn with a degree in Physics. My name is Syna and I live at home with my parents, Sophia and Gerund. I was born in Germany but my parents were immigrants. They came here to find safety and a new life. They were both from Lithuania, a country torn apart by occupation.

My grandfather who died recently used to talk to me about the old country, a land of beautiful rivers, forests and flowing landscapes. He described an idyllic childhood living in a small village and attending the local school. He was one of five children all of whom died or were killed in the Pogroms. It was a word I had never heard before.

Situated between Russia and Germany his country had been the battlefield of innumerable wars between those two countries. Grandpa's voice used to go quiet when he talked about the Russians.

'They invaded us and took over my country when I was a boy,' he said. 'I remember when they came to my school. It was an ordinary day; I don't recall what subject we were learning. Suddenly the door opened and two men appeared wearing black leather coats and caps. They strode into the front of the class and interrupted the teacher who stood terrified. They turned to the class.

'All Jewish students stand up?' There were six of us but only five stood up. One boy at the back remained sitting. The room went quiet we all knew who he was. Then a girl spoke, pointing to the boy,

'He's Jewish, he's a Jew.' The boy whose name was Jacob sheepishly stood up.

'Come here,' the man commanded. As the boy reached him he swung back his arm and hit him sending him sprawling onto the floor, there was a gasp from the whole class. Some girls began to cry. It was terrible. I shall never forget it.'

'From that day all Jewish children were banned from school and all Jewish schools were closed. All non-Christian activities ceased and the synagogues burned with the rabbis fleeing for safety. It was an appalling time and we feared for our lives. The occupiers forbade the use of Hebrew and we were all forced to learn Russian. They tried to destroy our culture and our language but we wouldn't let them.'

I saw his eyes cloud over with the pain of remembering. Staring through the window as if I was no longer there. He continued,

'My parents, your great grand parents stayed to the end but finally it was too much. They refused to give up their heritage and so a large number of families decided to leave. The nearest country was Germany; it was just over the border. They left at night and crossed in the dark. It was very dangerous and some were caught and shot. Luckily in time we all escaped safely and went to Bonn.'

As I listened I couldn't imagine what it would have been like to have to leave your own country. Grandfather apparently left early on his own, planning to establish a home and then to bring his family but he lost contact with them and he never found them again.

Alone in a strange country knowing no one and not speaking the language, he described how he had drifted into a café and sat feeling dejected and confused. He looked around. It was a dingy place with peeling wallpaper, broken chairs and the smell of burnt oil.

A young waitress, who had been watching him for a while as he sat, came over to him.

'What would you like?' She began but could see that he couldn't understand. Then she tried some basic Russian.

‘Chtoby ty khotel vypit?’ His face lit up and he explained to her that he had just come from Vilna and didn’t know anyone. She went away and brought him a cup of sweet tea, then leaning forwards whispered,

‘Come back just before dark.’

He drank the warm tea slowly cupping it in his hands then looked around to say good-bye but she had gone. It was still raining when he went out into the street and stood under a tree looking around. He didn’t want to go far in case he got lost. He saw a park and walked towards it. It was deserted and he said he had never felt so alone and began to wonder if this had all been a terrible mistake. But then he remembered the last day at work when the Russian boss came into the workshop and selected a number of the younger men to work in a munitions’ factory. He realised that if he didn’t leave he would be chosen next and he knew what that meant, up to ten hours backbreaking work, lifting and carrying on meagre rations - labour which only the strongest could survive.

He was waiting for her in the street as she locked up the café. She nodded to him and he followed her in the gloom of the early evening as she crossed the road towards the river. When she stopped to catch her breath, he asked,

‘What is your name?’

‘Griselda,’ she replied walking on in front of him.

‘It’s not far,’ she said pointing ahead of her. She lived on the fourth floor of a rundown block. There was no lift. He said he would always remember the ringing sound of their feet on the concrete steps as they ascended. It was if he was walking to freedom.

The apartment was dark and the air stale as they entered. She put on the lights and then went over and opened a window letting in some fresh air. He found himself in a small living room with a kitchen at the side and beyond a bedroom. He walked over and looked out towards the river brightly lit in the moonlight.

‘It’s small but home.’ she announced proudly in broken Russian, throwing off her coat. It was the first time he had seen her out of uniform. She was wearing close fitting jeans and a loose top. Her fair hair, which had been concealed in a cap at work, now tumbled down her shoulders. She could feel him admiring her and blushed; it wasn’t often that men looked at her in that way. They began to talk after they had sat down to eat, cold meat with pickles and heavy black bread washed down with beer.

‘What are you plans?’ She asked. ‘You can stay here tonight but then you’ll need to find somewhere. There is a Jewish organisation that may be able to find you some work and somewhere to live. Many families have spare rooms.’

Grandfather yawned,  
‘I’m tired dear can we continue the story tomorrow?’

Later he told me how he found a room with a Jewish family and trained as a Cabinetmaker. Then with a twinkle in his eye he said,

‘And of course I married Griselda.’

I continued with my studies but life began to change, at first it was almost imperceptible. At school we had a talk from a German professor of genetics. He drew diagrams showing the difference between pure Germans and other people. Then he divided the class into two groups, those with the features he called pure Aryan he sat in the front and the rest of us at the back. I went home puzzled. It all seemed so confusing so I spoke to my father and he explained it to me. The following day I came into the class and when there was a pause I put up my hand.

‘What do you want?’ The teacher asked.

‘I want to ask a question about ‘Aryans’- I looked the word up in the dictionary. It has nothing to do with race or

superiority; it is just a division of people from Europe and west Asia. Dividing us up like this is wrong?’

As I spoke the children sitting in front began to look around and started to chant,

‘Sit down Jew; we don’t want your people here.’ They started banging their desks shouting,

‘Out Jew out.’ The teacher smiled and said nothing. I was so humiliated I rushed out of the room crying. By the time I got home I had dried my tears and put on a smile.

‘How was your day?’ my mother asked as we were sitting down to dinner.

‘Fine,’ I mumbled but she knew something was wrong.

‘Was it really fine?’

She had heard from some other mums that Jewish children were having problems at school.

‘OK,’ I mumbled. But she didn’t let go.

‘Come on Syna, tell me what happened?’ I began to tell her and the tears came,

‘It’s not fair, we are not inferior, we are as good as them. Why do they treat us like this?’

My mother reached forward and held me. Slowly my tears stopped.

‘Darling,’ she said, ‘sadly this is not new. It has been going on for generations. That’s why your grandpa left Lithuania. It was the same there. He thought that in coming here to Germany it would be all right but we now know that it isn’t.’

‘What are we going to do?’ I pleaded.

‘What we have always done, live quietly, obey the law and hope it will blow over.’

But it didn’t, within a few weeks a decree from the government went around that all Jewish children were banned, forbidden to attend school. It was like history repeating itself. I began to understand how grandpa felt. Then a decree appeared that all



Jews had to wear a yellow star on the front and back of their clothes.

Less than a mile away another young woman was growing up. Tall and slim with long fair hair and blue eyes; Clesia was considered a perfect example of Aryan blood. She attended the same school, as Syna but the two girls didn't know each other. She came from an educated family. Both her parents worked at the University, he as Professor of Economics and she as a Lecturer in Physics. They had met as students and married soon after they had qualified. She was their only child.

Clesia was in the class when the discussion about Aryans occurred. She wasn't paying attention until some of the kids near her began to chant, 'out Jews out.' At first she didn't understand what they were saying but then it became clear. She glanced to the back of the class and saw a girl with dark hair fighting back her tears. It was all very puzzling so when she got home she asked her father what it all meant. He began to explain that there were some people who were superior to others.

'Do you mean because they know more than others?' She asked.

'No not exactly, they are superior by virtue of their birth. We belong to that group we are Aryans.'

'And what are the others?' She insisted.

'They are inferior.' He stumbled over his words.

'In what way are they inferior?'

He was finding more difficulty in answering her.

'They have faulty genes that are damaged and inferior.'

'Dad you're joking aren't you? What you're saying is ridiculous. How can some people have inferior genes it's stupid?'

Suddenly her father turned on her,

'Don't you dare talk to me like that, I am your father and you will respect me, do you understand!'

Clesia stopped; she could see that she had gone too far.

‘I’m sorry Father I didn’t mean to be disrespectful.’

Clesia realised she had to speak to her mother she’ll understand. She found a moment when her mother was sitting quietly reading and her father had gone to work.

‘Mother?’ She began.

‘Yes dear,’ her mother said looking up from her newspaper.

‘Something very strange happened at school a few days ago.’

‘I know your father told me. It upset you, he said and he tried to explain.’

‘I listened to him and tried to grasp what he was saying but it made no sense. He was talking about a superior race, Aryans like us?’

‘Try to understand, some people, clever people believe that there is a master race of Germans superior to ordinary people.’

‘What do you believe?’

‘I don’t know, it’s possible.’

‘Father said that the Jews, the Gypsies and the crippled were all inferior, how can that be true?’

‘Please Clesia your father has strong views, it’s best not to argue with him.’

Clesia couldn’t sleep. She tossed and turned struggling with the problem, “some people are inferior to others.” By the morning she knew what she had to do. I must speak to the girl who challenged the teacher; she thought her name was Syna. When she went to look for her she found that she had left the school. When she asked about her in class no one seemed to know where she lived. Some of her friends wouldn’t even speak about her. Clesia realised it was going to be difficult to

find her. The next day at morning break she went to the school office and spoke to the secretary.

‘Good morning, I would like the address of the girl who was expelled from school; I think her name was Syna. The young women looked up surprised.

‘Why do you want it? You know she’s a Jewess.’

‘Yes I know but I still want it,’ insisted Clesia.

‘I don’t think I am allowed to give it to you, it’s confidential.’ Clesia stood for moment looking at her.

‘I only wanted to say hello you know, she must be very hurt at being expelled from school because of her religion.’

The secretary shook her head.

‘That’s none of my business I am only doing my job.’

She could see that Clesia was upset and without saying anything else wrote the address on a piece of paper. She had decided to make an exception.

I had just finished a math’s lesson with my mother when there was a knock on our front door.

‘Syna will you answer it please,’ said my mother.

Apprehensive and a bit fearful I walked to the door and peered through the frosted glass. Standing on the doorstep was a young woman wearing school uniform. I didn’t recognize her. I went close to the glass and mouthed,

‘Go away I can’t see you.’

Clesia put up her hand and replied,

‘Yes I know, I must speak to you. Please let me in.’

Reluctantly I released the bolt and slowly opened the door.

Clesia came in and the two of us faced each other in the hall.

Hearing our voices, my mother called from the kitchen,

‘Who is it dear?’

‘It’s just a girl from school.’

‘Take her into the lounge and I will join you in a moment.’

We went into the lounge and once we were seated I whispered,

‘What do you want? I don’t know you.’

‘I know, but I know you. I was in the class when you stood up and asked about the meaning of Aryan. I thought you were very brave. I want you to know that I am with you against the others, the Aryans. I tried to talk to my father but he’s as bigoted as they are.’

Slowly I warmed to Clesia and by the time my mother came in we were friends.

‘Mother this is Clesia, she is a friend from school.’

‘Clesia I am very happy to meet you and glad you and my daughter are friends but you’re doing something very dangerous. We are Jewish.’

‘I know.’

My mother took her hand.

‘You do know that you are forbidden to speak to us.’

‘I know that also.’

‘So why are you taking such a risk?’

‘Because what we Germans are doing is wrong and I don’t want to be any part of it.’

‘My dear child, you are either very brave or very foolish. What do your parents think?’

‘They know my feelings but they are Germans through and through and are supporting the regime. I can’t live like that.’

‘Listen Clesia, please be careful. There are people who will want to harm you because of your views. Remember if things get difficult, if you feel you are in danger, you are always welcome here and if it comes to it you can stay with us. It won’t be easy but we will manage.’

Our daily life continued despite the restrictions but the Jewish community knew that it was only a matter of time. This time came early. In November 1938 a number of Jewish shops

were set on fire. This was followed by a series of attacks on Jewish homes and synagogues. It was later called Krystallnacht. It rocked Germany and the western world. I was indoors when it began. I could see from my upper windows the fires burning in the town and palls of smoke drifting in the distance. Soldiers and police were shouting and chasing people running in the street.

Clesia was at home when her father came in.

‘At last it has started,’ he announced. ‘We are cleansing our country of the Jewish vermin.’ Clesia crouching in her room was unable to believe what she was hearing. She rushed into his office and confronted him. He had a glass of schnapps in his hand. She swung at it and smashed it from his hand.

‘What are you doing Clesia, are you mad?’ he shouted.

‘No, I’m ashamed of you. How could you say such things? They are people like us. They are no different, why do you demonize them? What harm have they done us? I feel ashamed when I hear you talk like that.

‘Clesia my dear daughter, I am not a vindictive man but the Jews are the scourge of society. One day you will understand. You are too young to grasp how evil they are.’

But Clesia was no longer listening. All she could think about was getting away.

Shouting at her father she said,

‘I never want to see you again,’ and without hesitating she rushed out of the house into the road.

There the flames of the many fires lighting up the sky confronted her. The flashes of light and the crackling of burning wood frightened her. What have I done? Then she must have remembered my mother’s words, *if you feel you are in danger, you are always welcome here.*

By keeping to the shadows she made her way towards my house, it was the only place where she could feel safe, at least for a short while.

I was in my room when I saw her shadow on the wall outside. I recognised it immediately. I rushed to the back door and eased it open.

'Thank god you're safe.' I cried warming her hands and bringing her into the sitting room where my parents were squatting around a small wood fire. When she had time to calm down I asked her what happened.

'It was awful,' she said. 'I didn't believe that my parents could behave in that manner. I tried to explain to them that we were all the same, all wanting the same things; the same flesh and blood but they wouldn't hear of it. They are different they kept insisting and used words like degenerate and primitive. I tried to close my ears. In the end we had no more to say to each other. It was as if we were living in different worlds so I ran away.'

An uncanny calm descended on our neighbourhood. The radio kept on screaming hate and destruction but for a while at least they left us alone. I stayed in the house as much as possible. Clesia and I played games, told each other stories and wrote our journals. Even if we don't survive at least someone will know what occurred we decided.

Then one night it happened. There was a moonlit sky with cumulus clouds scurrying by. The world seemed so calm, too calm. Then the hammering began.

'Oh my God,' said my mother, 'it's them. They've come for us.'

We heard the front door splinter, then 'Aus Aus,' flashing torchlights and dogs barking.

'Get your things together and come with us,' they shouted. We each grabbed a small bag of personal belongings and ran outside. In the half-light I could see that there were already a large number of people herded together. I recognised many families and friends. But I had no time to

think. I felt numb with fear and uncertainty. Where were we going and what was going to happen to us? The next few hours was a jumble of confused images, people pushing and shoving each other, scrambling over those who had fallen. Small children were crying and all the while the police were forcing us along until we had assembled in the city square where huge searchlights swept across blinding us with their beams.

People were screaming out names of their loved ones from whom they were being separated. We were all trying to stay together by holding hands but as the numbers swelled Clesia and I lost contact with my parents. I had a fleeting glimpse of them and then they were gone. Then the trucks appeared and we were pushed into the back of one falling over each other. No one knew what was happening. Then we were jolting along the road in a convoy in the direction of the station. The lorry swayed and bumped as it sped through the night, throwing us forcefully against each other. No one spoke, we were all numbed by the speed of it all

Ahead I could see lights and then a line of train wagons waiting. Was that for us I wondered? It couldn't be, they were cattle trucks. By the time we arrived at the platform it was already crowded. People were lined up three to four deep opposite the wagons and were being prodded at gunpoint into the empty ones until they were jammed full. Clesia and I managed to stand near an opening by the door where a draft of air could be felt. It had all happened so quickly, one moment we were at home and the next crammed into a cattle truck swaying and groaning as it gained speed.

I don't know how long the journey took or where we were going. I was just trying to stay close to Clesia and survive. Someone had a bottle of water and I managed to get a sip before it was grabbed from me and emptied. We had no food or water after that. My mouth became dry and my tummy

rumbled. Clesia said nothing. When we looked at each other we only wanted to cry.

Hours and hours went by and I lost track of time. Day and night seemed to merge into one. Suddenly I became aware that the train was slowing and glimpsing through the crack I could see a station coming into view.

'We're stopping,' I whispered to Clesia, 'perhaps they will let us out to stretch our legs?' The train came to a grinding halt and as soon as it had stopped, the doors were forced open. Fresh air flooded in but our relief was short lived as we were shoved onto the platform. I looked back into the truck and saw three bodies lying on the floor.

'What are they doing there?' I asked Clesia.

'I think they're dead,' she said calmly.

'Dead? It was only then that I realised what was truly happening to us and I began to shout.

'Be quiet,' Clesia said. 'They'll kill you if you don't stop.'

The next few hours passed in a haze of terror. I watched as people were prodded and pushed into groups, old people, children, young men and young women were all separated. They were herded off and I lost sight of them. I thought I saw my mother desperately hanging on to my father and then they were forcibly separated and I lost sight of them. I never saw them again.

Already the stench of death was everywhere as bodies were being piled up; it was like a human abattoir. It caught in my nostrils causing me to retch. I put my hand across my face to try and block it.

All the time there was a small orchestra playing classical music struggling to be heard over the din of shouts, the crack of whips and the screams of people. Clesia and I clung together and found ourselves in a women's only hut. We managed to find bunks next to each other and tried to stay as calm as possible. All around us women were struggling to do



the same. But we were unable to sleep as cries of pain and fear continually pierced the silence.

We craved sleep as the only way to escape from this existence. But each new day brought the reality of our situation. Death was never far away as the older more infirm succumbed. Seeing them lying there, their faces no longer creased in pain, made me wonder whether that was a better choice than to continue the struggle to survive. Clesia stared at me when I suggested it. She was much stronger than me and wouldn't accept failure.

'We will get out of this alive,' she kept saying, 'we will.' Each day at sunrise we were marched off to work in the kitchens or on the land passing the huge furnaces which burned night and day. We all knew what they were incinerating and I dreaded the day when it might be us.

*Ecclesia: It was so hard to watch this without being able to stop it?*

*Synagoga: We cannot intervene. Even though we have the power we mustn't. We can't change the future. It's up to them I'm afraid.*

That day came sooner than I expected. Both Clesia and I, with a large number of men and women were woken one morning and marched to the shower room to be deloused. Herded in so tight that we could only stand we waited for the water. Nothing happened and after a while with shouts and pushes we were let out into the daylight, apparently the system had failed, as the tins of poison had rusted and couldn't be opened. It was only years later when discussing it with other survivors would I learn that a miracle had saved our lives.

We knew something had changed when the camp went quiet. We no longer heard the guttural orders and the sound of beatings. The compound was erringly silent. Peering out of our hut, there was no one about. The guards had all fled and we

couldn't understand why. People began to drift out slowly from their huts looking around as if it was a trap and that they would be mown down, but the place was deserted. Even the personal belongings of the guards had been left behind in their haste.

Clesia and I followed, supporting each other and dragging our bodies as we were both so weakened by hunger and disease. We were scratching incessantly from an infestation with lice. We wandered around aimlessly not knowing what to do or where to go. I had lost all sense of purpose; the long period of incarceration had drained me of all motivation. Then we heard the sound of vehicles and the noise of crashing as the barbed wire gate was pushed down. Then the soldiers appeared speaking in English; staring at us looking puzzled and uncertain. Everything then seemed to change; medical men and women began to move amongst us giving food and medicine. Clesia and I sat together fearful that we might be separated. After a while we were taken to a field hospital.

Six months have passed and both Clesia and I have regained our health a little. With nowhere else to go it was inevitable that we would return to Bonn our home and the city chosen by the fledgling government as its capital. Luckily the place was hardly damaged and we set off to find our dwellings. I wasn't ready yet to find mine fearing that my parents had been killed and strangers probably occupied it.

Clesia was also nervous about finding her home but for a different reason. Luckily her house was undamaged and looked as if nothing had changed. She led the way to the back entrance and I followed. Suddenly she stopped.

'I'm scared, there's someone in the kitchen,' she whispered.

'Would you like me to look?' I asked.

'Yes would you? Tell me who it is.' I tiptoed towards the kitchen window and peered in. I saw a middle-aged woman at the sink. She had short grey hair; a small wrinkled face and was wearing glasses.

'I think it could be your mother,' I said.

Clesia waited for a moment then came up behind me and looked in.

'It is,' she said, 'she looks so much older?'

'So do we, it was five years ago.'

Clesia looked at me.

'Go on Clesia,' I said. 'Knock on the door, you have come this far you can't stop now.'

'You'll stay close to me won't you?'

'Yes of course I'm right here.'

Clesia went up to the back door and knocked gently. After a moment the woman opened the door.

'Who is it?' she said, removing her glasses. 'Clesia, Oh my God it's you?'

'Yes it's me.' They fell into each other's arms.

I felt a lump in my throat. I was happy for Clesia but doubted I would ever see my mother again.

'Come in, come in, let me see you. Who is this?'

'This is my friend Syna she saved my life. Without her I would have died.'

'Have I met her before?' she said peering at me.

'Yes mother' said Clesia, 'she's the Jewish girl that you and father forbade me to see.'

'Oh I'm so sorry. So much has happened since then, I didn't understand.'

'I know you didn't.'

Then I saw Clesia gazing around and a look of concern appearing on her face.

'Where's father. Is he here?'

'Your father is dead. He had to do something didn't he? Couldn't leave it to the younger men. He enlisted and I got a

letter saying he was killed on the Russian front,' she said, pointing to a note on the sideboard.

'I'm so sorry. I needed to make my peace with him and now I can't,' said Clesia.

I slipped away. Clesia waved to me as I left. I wandered back into the street uncertain what to do but my feet gradually took me to my old home. I was curious to know if it was still there. The moon lit it up as I came towards it. The house hadn't changed and seemed to have avoided any war damage.

I was standing looking at it when I heard a male voice.

'Hello can I help you?'

'No it's all right, I was just looking at the house. I used to live there before the war. I won't stay.'

'Wait don't go, would you like to see inside?' he said, moving into the light, He was a bit older than me with short fair hair and a thin scar on his right cheek. He touched it as he spoke.

'Oh it's OK,' I said. 'I wouldn't want to bother you,'

'It's no bother. I would like to show it to you after all it was your house before it was ours,' he said with a nervous laugh. I wasn't certain, I was afraid to be drawn back to the past with all its terrible memories. But he was insistent and I agreed.

The moment I walked into the hall I knew it was a mistake. The decorations and the furniture were different but the memories of what happened there were overpowering. He saw me falter and took my arm.

'Are you all right? You look so pale, he said, 'sit down and I will get you a glass of water.' It was as if I was reliving the past. I heard the hammering on the door the breaking glass the shouts and saw the flashing lights. He returned and saw that I was about to faint.

'You must lie down let me help you onto a settee.' I lay there my heart pounding. I could feel him reaching for my pulse.

'It's OK I'm a doctor. You must have been through a terrible experience.'

Gradually I began to tell him what had happened. I slowly feel better as I described the arrest of my family and what followed. I could see him gasping for air.

'I am so ashamed,' he kept on saying. 'How could we have treated you so badly? How could we? I am so ashamed. Where are your parents?'

'I think they're dead. They died in the camp.'

'Are you sure?'

'Well no, but I lost sight of them so I presumed.' I could feel him looking at me.

'What are you thinking?' I asked.

'You could be wrong.'

'Wrong?'

'Yes, sometimes people survive the most terrible things as you did, why couldn't they? Don't give up hope, miracles do happen. Where are you staying?'

'I have a friend I am staying with.'

'OK, let me walk you there and when you feel up to it, come back and I will help you search for them.'

That night in bed, I told Clesia what had happened. How I had met this young man who was a doctor and who said he would help me find out about my parents. I thought it was very unlikely.

'It's worth following up you never know,' said Clesia.

'Good night,' and she turned over and was soon asleep.

I lay awake trying to remember. We had all got out of the trucks and were standing on the platform being separated. That was the last time I saw them. The more I thought about the possibility the more excited I became. I fell asleep dreaming that one day I might see them again.

A few day later I went to see the young man whose name was Benjamin. He knew immediately why I came and we sat down and for over an hour I described as much as I could about my parents. When we had finished he said that he would make some enquiries and let me know in a few days. I didn't understand what he hoped to find out but I was hungry for any news.

A few days Benjamin appeared at Clesia's back door. He was very excited.

'Syna, I think I have some news. I have been in contact with the records at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem They received the American records. Apparently when the Americans freed the camp they recorded the names of all the dead and living as far as they could be identified from the number tattooed on their arms. They have found a note that your father survived but sadly no record of your mother. They said that he was apparently sent to a hospital in Germany and then emigrated to America.'

I listened with increasing disbelief. Was it possible that my father was alive? It seemed too good to be true. Clesia was listening as Benjamin spoke. She turned to me and hugged me.

After a pains-taking search of the American records I traced my father to a nursing home in Boston. Three weeks later I was on our way to visit him. Clesia insisted in coming with me.

'Are you sure you want to come? I will understand if you don't want to go all that way,' I said as we entered the airport terminal building.

'Syna my friend, we have been through so much together, I am not deserting you now.'

Entering my father's room at the nursing home was one of the worst and best moments of my life. I had steeled myself to be

prepared for how he looked but at the last moment as we approached his door I faltered. If Clesia hadn't been there I think I would have turned around and gone back. She sensed my fear and held my arm guiding me forwards into the room.

Father had his back to us as we entered. He must have heard our footsteps because he turned and looked at me. For a moment he seemed confused then he recognised me and in a high pitched voice cried,

'Meine liebe tochter.' I ran into his arms. I sobbed uncontrollably. It was a most wonderful moment, to see my father alive. I wanted to say so much but I could see that time had taken its toll. He was now a very old and frail man so I simply sat with him holding his hand and smiling. We didn't need words. We were both so happy to be alive and to be together again.

## CHAPTER SIX

### GAZA

The sound of gunfire pierced the morning calm as the residents of Gaza city woke to a bombardment of shells and bombs exploding all around. The city lay in a cloud of uncertainty, as its future was being discussed thousands of miles away in New York. I had left early for the private Christian school where I taught history. It had been established during the British Mandate and catered for the sons and daughters of civil servants. Not yet twenty I had a great love of the past. I had studied the tortured history of my people and wanted to hand it on to the future generation. I was fascinated by how the past affected the present and the future.

I was in the middle of teaching a history class at school and was telling my students about our country's history. How Palestine came under a British mandate after the First World War but then the Jews wanted their own country back, their ancestral home Israel.

'But that was a long time ago,' I said. Then I told them that this was now our land and the Jews had no right to it.'

'So what has changed, why are we being threatened?' asked one girl.

'It seems that millions of Jews had been displaced from Europe with their homes and towns destroyed. They want to come and live here. They say it is the land of their forefathers given to Moses thousands of years ago. There is going to be a vote in the United Nations, which will decide.'

I heard the door open and the secretary was standing there.

'Clesia sorry to disturb your class, I've got a message. Could you please call your mother?'

Excusing myself to my students I rushed to the Secretary's office. Picking up the phone, I heard my mother's hysterical voice.

'Clesia come home now! It's dangerous.' I tried to ask why but the line went dead. Turning to the secretary I said,

'There seems to be a problem at home I must go. Can you get someone to cover my class?'

Confused and uncertain what I would find, I rushed to our small stone house behind Omar Muktar Street. The air was acrid with the smoke of burning debris from a shell that had just fallen near by. The back door was open and I rushed into the house.

'Mother, what's happened?'

'Syna, I'm so glad you're here. I'm scared. There's a rumour that war is imminent but where and why I don't know?' All the radio programs are off and all we're getting is the sound of our national anthem.

At that moment my father Michael, a bearded heavy built man wearing a tagiya, a small white cap, arrived home looking angry and tense. But he couldn't stop a smile from appearing on his face, as he smelled the familiar Kishik, a



thick meat and vegetable stew bubbling on the stove. At least something hadn't changed.

'What is it dear?' Anna his wife asked stirring the pot, 'you look as if something terrible has happened?'

'It has. I have just heard that those idiots in the United Nations have granted most of Palestine to the Jews to form a new state called Israel. The whole country is up in arms. There is going to be partition unless we do something to stop it.'

'What can we do?'

'We can fight!' He shouted punching the air.' 'Fight like we always have.'

'No, not that? Not another war with killing of the flower of our youth? There must be a better way,' whispered Anna. She remembered the war that killed her parents so many years ago. Even then they believed that fighting your enemy was the answer. It never has been she knew. Why couldn't people learn?

*Ecclesia: Haven't the two sides had enough time to reconcile their differences?*

*Synagoga: The Jews have such a history of persecution that they don't trust anyone. That's why they need their own country. That's what they are fighting for.*

The streets of Jerusalem were deserted. The threat of an imminent invasion had kept everyone in their homes. There was an unusual silence not unlike the silence before the beginning of Shabbat but this had a menacing feel, even the birds were hushed. At the ministry where Syna worked as a secretary, there was frantic activity; files were being locked up and desks cleared. No one knew exactly what to expect. Then the order came to vacate the place and the staff didn't need a second directive, they were frightened and wanted to get home to their loved ones as fast as possible.

She had already returned home from the office when her father Moshe came in breathless.

'The miracle has happened. God has not forsaken his people.' He yelled, his arms waving in the air.

'What are you talking about?' said Anna unused to this show of emotion.

'They have given us back our land. After 2000 years in the wilderness, the Jewish people have returned to the land of our fathers.'

'Who has done that?'

'The United Nations, Resolution 181, the vote to partition Palestine, it has just been won by 33 for 13 against and 10 abstentions.'

'Turn the wireless on!'

*"This morning at 9 am it was announced that the UN have voted overwhelmingly for a partitioned Palestine, a new country called Israel has been born."*

Then the sound of the Hatikva the Jewish national anthem could be heard. Michael stood to attention and began to sing with the radio.

'Kol ode balevav Pnimah,'

*As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart,*

'Nefesh Yehudi Momiya'

*With eyes turned toward the East, looking toward Zion-*

I saw my parents look at each other and then hug, tears brimming in their eyes. I ran forwards and joined them uncertain why they were so happy.

It's a miracle,' my father kept on repeating. 'What a blessing that we should be the generation that lived to see our national home returned to us.' As I watched I felt a cold shiver. I knew somehow that this miracle wasn't going to happen by luck - there would be a heavy price to pay, as always in history. I was to come to understand.

'Mother and father, I must go and find out what's happening,' I said turning to my parents. 'I won't be long.'

'Syna be careful,' said my mother.

Leaving the house I cycled the two kilometers to the military camp. The roads were empty and as I travelled it all seemed unreal, I felt as if I was on a strange deserted planet, even the familiar landmarks seemed unreal. The guard on the camp gate recognized me and saluted. I ducked under the barrier and walked across the parade ground aware of an unusual level of activity. The air was tense as soldiers and civilians passed each other with barely a word, all intent on their purpose.

I stopped someone.

'What's happening, why so much activity?'

'Haven't you heard Syna, they're about to attack us.'

'Who?' I shouted in frustration.

'The Arabs, all of them, they've sworn to destroy us!'

I made my way up the broad stairway to the office on the first floor. When I got there it was apparent that the department was preparing for war. A big map had been nailed on the wall. It showed where the individual army units were being posted, each to a strategic area in preparation for the onslaught. My unit was to be deployed to Jerusalem, which was thought to be one of the first regions to be attacked. The situation was worse than I had thought; the countries surrounding our newly formed state were ganging up on us, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. It was an all out attack by the combined Arab Nations desperate to reverse the UN decision.

I must get home and warn them and then make my way to my unit, but how to tell them? At home my parents were still reeling from the good UN news so it took a moment for them to realise what I was saying.

'Mother, father, listen, I've got to go and join my unit. There is no time to waste!'

‘No Syna,’ my mother cried, ‘you’re too young. In any case it’s a man’s war.’

‘No mother it’s our war, a war we must win. When I joined up as a volunteer and trained to be a soldier, I knew that one day I might be called upon to fight.’

My parents had disapproved when I had volunteered to join the Haganah, the paramilitary organisation established during the British Mandate of Palestine from 1920-48. In 1945 after a difficult period of in fighting, it joined up with Irgun and Lehi to form the Jewish Resistance movement under a joint command. It was to become the core of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) with Palmach as an elite commando force. During that time it had organised illegal immigration with up to 100,000 Jews being brought into the then Palestine.

*Ecclesia: Why did you have to get involved? Can't you ever leave it to others?*

*Synagoga: It's my people. How can I stand by and do nothing?*

Jerusalem was uncannily quiet when I jumped off the army truck and made my way to the advance post. The streets were deserted and the shops closed. The only sounds were the Police tannoys calling out for people to remain calm and to stay in their houses. I had been allocated to the unit chosen to retake Jerusalem despite the fact that part of the partition plan was to designate Jerusalem an independent capital under international control. I knew that my people would never let Jerusalem be divided again.

The first indication that the town was under threat came when the Jordanian army began to enter eastern Jerusalem ignoring the Partition. My unit found itself under heavy fire. Another soldier and I were trapped behind a wall and were unable to move. We exchanged heavy fire but were pinned down. After we had been held for over an hour, my companion told me to run for cover. He would throw a grenade to divert

attention. I waited until the grenade exploded and then set off running towards a nearby building which unknown to me was occupied by the enemy. As I ran I felt a sudden sharp pain in my right leg and fell, blood poured from it.

'I'm wounded,' I shouted but the only voices I heard were Arabic.

'It's a women get her.' I found myself being dragged along the ground into the building and then bundled into the back of a truck. I must have fainted because I remembered nothing else until I was lying on a hard surface looking up at a canvas tent.'

'Where am I?' I asked in broken Arabic.'

'You're a prisoner in a forward hospital. How are you feeling?' Asked a gentle female voice. I looked up into the face of a young nurse with blue eyes and fair hair that peeped out of her cap.

'OK I suppose, my leg is very painful.'

'It will be for a while, you've broken the main bone but it has been set so you should soon be up and about.'

But I had other thoughts; I must get back to my unit. I couldn't stay here; I needed to tell my parents I was Ok.

One night after the lights had been put out, the nurse came to check on me and we got talking,

'My name is Clesia', she said 'I am a teacher in a Christian school but I volunteered when I knew the war was imminent.

Surprised I asked her,

'What are you doing getting involved in this war?'

'This is my country my family have been here since the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. We were here before the Arab conquest so this battle is my battle. I don't want my country to be split into pieces and given to foreigners by some committee in Europe. We've had enough fighting we want peace. But wait, I could ask you the same question. Why are you fighting us?'

'We are defending ourselves.'

'Against whom?' Clesia said angrily.

'The armies that are attacking us,' I retorted.

'We are only trying to take what is rightfully ours,' answered Clesia.

'It all depends where you start. The last occupiers were the British after the Second World War,' I said.

'And before that, this land was mine,' said Clesia angrily.

'And before that? I'm talking about the past' I said.

'Long before the war in Europe, didn't the bible say that this is the land of milk and honey promised to Moses and the children of Israel when they escaped from Egypt so many years ago?'

I was dreaming that I was at home running on the beach with the wind blowing through my hair when I felt myself being shaken.

'Wake up Syna, wake up. You've got to leave,' said Clesia.

'Why what's happening?'

'The staff have been ordered to prepare all the patients who can be moved for a journey. I know what that means,' said Clesia. 'We have sent patients with the military before and we never hear from them again. They were taken to a prison and left to die a lingering death. I can't allow that to happen to you. We must hurry. Get dressed and I'll be back.'

*Synagoga: Clesia, you took quite a risk getting me out of the hospital.*

*Ecclesia: You knew that I couldn't leave you to be killed.*

I slipped into my outdoor clothes carefully avoiding disturbing my neighbour who was snoring softly. Suddenly Clesia reappeared pushing a laundry basket.

'Quick get in and cover yourself,' she whispered. I struggled to get over the high side of the trolley and fell into the bottom awkwardly, stifling a cry of pain. Then I pulled some sheets over me and lay still. Clesia wasted no time in

rushing the trolley out of the ward. At the end of the corridor she was stopped. There was a barrier guarded by two armed soldiers standing with their guns raised.

'Stop, what have you got there? Where are you going?' One shouted.

Steadying her voice, I heard Clesia say.

'It's some dirty linen. I'm taking it to the laundry.' One of the soldiers leaned over and prodded the bundle with his rifle. I felt the cold metal of his gun pass across my back. I held my breath frightened to move.

'Ok,' he said finally, 'you can go.'

Clesia must have felt the fresh air on her face as she pushed the trolley through the swing doors out into the open. She looked up at the clear sky full of sparkling stars. She recalled so many happy occasions when she marvelled at the universe but tonight it felt very different. The stars now looked down defiantly as if questioning what was going on beneath.

Clesia was scared; she had impulsively done something that could threaten her own life. She had assisted an enemy to escape. Not waiting for the answer, she pushed the trolley across the car park into the cover of some trees beyond.

Stopping to catch her breath, she whispered to Syna,

'We are almost there.' Once no longer visible from the hospital, Clesia leaned into the trolley and helped me out. It was a struggle as my movements were still very restricted because of pain.

It was the first opportunity I had, to thank Clesia for helping me escape. I clasped my new friend by the neck and hugged her.

'Thank you, thank you so much, I don't know how I can ever repay you for what you have done for me.'

'I had to do it. To leave you there for them to take you away was unacceptable. We must get to a safe place. I would love to take you to my home but I know my parents wouldn't understand. I think we should go to my brother's place, it's not far from here.'

Clesia's brother Luke was asleep when we arrived at his back door. All was quiet and seemed normal. Clesia knocked gently not wanting to wake the neighbours and after a while the light went on and he peered through the door.

'Who is it?' He called.

'It's me Luke, may we come in.' Luke opened the door.

'What on earth are you doing here Clesia? Who is this?' He said pointing to me. 'What's wrong with her?' he said, noticing the bandage on my left leg.

'This is Syna, she is an Israeli soldier.'

Luke's face turned livid. He went mad.

'An Israeli! Are you crazy? She can't stay here, don't you know we're at war. She's our enemy.'

'Luke calm down. I'll try and explain. It's complicated,' pleaded Clesia.

'Yes I'm sure it is,' he said leading us into the small parlour.

'Please we need to rest. We are hungry and thirsty. Let us stay for a while and I will try and describe what happened later.'

Luke brought out some bread, cold meat and cheese. We were famished and wolfed the food down together with cups of hot tea.

I could feel him watching me as we ate. I felt him looking at me, not with anger but with curiosity.

*Ecclesia: I couldn't stay out of it. I had to intervene.*

*Synagoga: You see it's difficult to remain on the sidelines. It's not in our natures.*

Clesia realised that the time had come for her to try and explain to Luke why I was there.

'Luke, before you say anything listen to what I have to say.'

'I'm listening.'



'As you know I volunteered to become a nurse assistant and was attached to the military hospital. Soon after the war began Syna was brought in having been shot in the leg. She was on my ward and I was allocated to look after her. I had never heard about them but to see a Jew in the flesh and wounded really upset me. I wanted to know more about her and we, you know, became friends. She tried to explain why she had joined up and I tried to explain why I had volunteered. We realised that it was all a mistake. The whole war was a terrible mistake but we couldn't do anything about it. When I heard that the soldiers were going to take her to a military prison I knew I had to do something. Can you imagine what would have happened to her before they killed her? I couldn't let that happen.'

'How did you get her out?'

'I had read about a prison escape when a man was bundled into a laundry basket and I did the same. It worked a treat. Before we knew it we were outside the hospital hiding in the woods. Then I thought of you.'

'What are you going to do with her now, she can't stay here?' insisted Luke. 'It's too dangerous; the neighbours will see her.'

I was listening closely to the conversation.

'Take me back to Jerusalem where my unit is.'

Luke looked at Clesia,

'I think that's a great idea but it's too risky, we'll all get shot. Look it's late. Let's get some sleep and think about it tomorrow. You can both sleep in the spare room, the bed's made up.'

But neither of us could sleep as the flashes of rockets and bombs lit up the room. We lay still not speaking. I reached out and held Clesia's hand. It was trembling. She said nothing.

The news of my capture was delivered to my parents. Both were grief stricken assuming it would only be a matter of time before they heard that I had been killed. They knew about the

cruelty of war and how prisoners were usually executed. At breakfast the next morning Moshe said to Anna,

‘I can’t just sit here and wonder what has happened to Syna. I must do something.’

As soon as he could he made his way to the Camp and demanded to see the commander. General Ellet was aware of what had happened and assured him that they were doing all they could to find me and bring me back. He explained that they had contacted Mossad and sent three agents dressed as locals into Gaza to look for me,

‘Don’t worry if any one can find her they will, they’re the best.’

Under cover of darkness the three men entered Gaza and contacted their local man. They learned that after I had been wounded I was taken to a field hospital. After two days travel they found the place and after dark entered it. A nurse on duty remembered me, the Jewish soldier,

‘She was wounded and in ward 4 but she disappeared one night with one of our nurses a young woman called Clesia. I don’t know whether they went together or if it was a coincidence but they both disappeared the same night.’

The Mossad agents reported back to their base:

‘We have found a trace of the girl. She was taken to a field hospital but disappeared with a nurse. We are following it up. Contacting the girl’s parents drew a blank. They knew that their daughter had been injured and captured but no more, it was a terrible shock to them. We assured them we would find her alive and bring her back.’

‘The hospital nurse said that she thinks the missing nurse had a brother and may be they have gone there. She gave us an address. Finding the house we camped out at night to watch. Several nights passed and no one seemed to be living there. Then one day we noticed that three people had

arrived and gone in, two girls and a man. They seemed to be on friendly terms.'

The Mossad agents immediately recognised me from a photo they carried. That's her they realised. The other girl must be the hospital nurse with her brother, they decided.

They reported back to base and got the following reply.

'Get the girl and bring her back safely the others don't matter, kill them if you have to.'

Meanwhile Clesia, her brother and I were totally unaware that we were being watched and that a plan to capture me was being hatched. Luke couldn't take his eyes off me. He said he had never met anyone quite like me. He struggled to understand who I was. But I wasn't thinking about him. All I wanted was to get back to the safety of my home and family.

Thrown together by fate it was inevitable that we would all become friends. I could see that Luke wanted more from me but I couldn't, not then and not with the enemy, because that's how I viewed him, someone not to trust.

My freedom came sooner than I expected. After Israel's victory, I was allowed to go home. I left the army and continued my teaching and for a while at least we had peace.

For many years I lost touch with Clesia but never forgot her. Occasionally I would read about her in the newspapers or see her on TV. She stayed in the Nursing profession and rose to become the most senior nursing officer responsible for organizing the nursing services in Gaza.

Some years later, I read that she was presenting a paper at a nurse's conference in Jerusalem. It was an opportunity not to be missed. I was so excited at the prospect of seeing her again and decided to attend. The meeting was to be held in the Moriah hotel and I arranged to book a room for

the weekend. As the time approached I became increasingly agitated. Would I recognize her? Had we changed? Would we still have things in common? It was after all a long time, ten years?

I booked in just after noon and went to my room to tidy up. I came down to lunch and was sitting in the foyer enjoying a cup of coffee when I saw her. It was a moment I shall never forget. She looked a little older but age had if anything made her more attractive. I watched as she walked towards the dining room and as she passed me I stood up. For a moment she was confused and then she recognised me.

'Syna,' she screamed, 'my God it's you. I've thought about you so often.'

'What are you doing here?' She exclaimed.

'I came to meet you. I read that you were attending this meeting and I couldn't not come and see you.'

'Luke's here, he came with me. He'll be so excited to see you. He's never stopped talking about you. But then you know that. Here he comes.'

'Hi Clesia,' he said, 'are you ready to go in to lunch?'

'Luke I've got a surprise for you, look who's here?'

I stepped forwards.

'Hi Luke, how are you?'

'Syna my God, you look beautiful. What a wonderful surprise. What are you doing here?'

'I asked her that,' said Clesia, 'she came to see me,'

'And me I hope?' Luke butted in.

Of course Luke,' I said smiling, 'although I didn't know you would be here.'

*Ecclesia: You were genuinely pleased to see Luke I could tell.*

*Synagoga: Yes, I was, very much.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## ISRAEL

I first met her on a plane to Israel. We were sitting next to each other so it was natural that we would speak. I told her that my name was Clesia and that I was eighteen years old. I was born in a small town in Nevada, the eastern part of the States, a dry desert, long neglected by nature so that the soil was brown and parched and we struggled to grow our needed crops. My family were committed Christians and believed in the word of the bible.

She listened as I spoke, occasionally interrupting. In a soft voice she told me about herself.

'I am Syna, a name derived from the word 'synagogue' the meeting place of the village.' She spoke with a slight foreign accent.

'I was born in Germany and am going to Israel to find the grave of my brother who was killed in the 6-day War.'

I had never met a Jewish person before, not that I knew of anyway but I had assumed that they were different. I had heard so many stories about them. My father used to say that it was the Jews that ran America and that they had stolen land and money from the ordinary people. When I looked puzzled and asked him how he knew he said impatiently,

'Everyone knows it's true.'

So I was surprised to find how normal Syna seemed to be. She didn't have a big nose or a lot of money and she was modest and unassuming, just like anyone else in fact if she hadn't told me I wouldn't have guessed that she was Jewish.

'Why are you going to Israel?' She asked me after we had been served a drink. I paused before replying, I felt a bit embarrassed.

'I have read so much about Palestine the birth place of Jesus that I wanted to find out for myself, to see the land, to sense the breeze that Jesus smelled, to stand on the banks of

the Galilee and imagine the scene when he walked on the water. I can't wait to get there.'

'You know he was a Jew?' Syna said suddenly.

'No he couldn't be, he was the first Christian.'

'Maybe that's what they taught you but he was in fact preaching Judaism to a people whom history tells us had lost their way.'

'How could that be?'

'They had forsaken their God for earthly things. What you call Christianity began much later perhaps 50-100 years later. It practiced the Ten Commandments that were handed down to Moses from God on Mount Sinai.'

'It's all very mixed up isn't it?'

'Yes but if we all believe in the same things, that's what matters,' I admitted,

We were now beginning our descent into Ben Gurion. I tightened my seat belt and held my breath. It was the first time I had flown and I was still very nervous. I watched awestruck, as the runway seemed to rush up towards us as we descended. A sudden screeching of tyres, a loud roaring as the engine's reverse thrust came on and we slowly taxied to a halt. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I saw the seat belt light go off and suddenly the calm was broken. Everyone got up and retrieved their hand luggage from the overhead lockers. Soon we were filing out of the plane. I tried to keep Syna in my view but lost sight of her. By the time we were in the terminal she was nowhere to be seen. Then I regretted we hadn't even exchanged phone numbers.

I passed through customs, retrieved my luggage and stood waiting for my contact who would be carrying a flag. I was joining a group of Christian pilgrims visiting the sites of significance. I suddenly saw our tour guide, a young man no more than twenty wearing a T-shirt and Jeans, not the dress

that I had expected. Somehow I thought he would be wearing a cassock and a rope belt a bit like Jesus would have worn. He was standing waving a small flag of Israel and I walked over to him.

'Hi I'm Clesia from the USA.' I said shaking his hand.

'Welcome. I hope you had a good flight.'

Other travellers began to join the group until about twenty of us had assembled. They were mainly American and much older than me. We followed our guide to a minibus parked behind the terminal and were soon on our way to our hotel in Tel Aviv. It had just stopped raining and the road was glistening in the streetlights as we approach the city with its high-rise buildings. It had a very modern look like any American city.

Our hotel was a small family run dwelling with about 30 rooms on three floors. My room was on the second floor. I would be sharing it with a woman many years my senior called Betsy. She was a plump friendly lady and I could see we would get on easily. I was just getting out of the shower when the phone rang. Betsy picked it up and turned to me,  
'It's for you.'

Who knows I am here? I wondered. At first the voice was not familiar but then I recognised it as Syna's.

'Hi, what a wonderful surprise, how did you find me?'

'I checked at the desk in the terminal. I was sorry to have missed you. We all left so quickly and didn't have time to exchange telephone numbers.

'I know and I was sorry, let's do it now.'

We didn't know when we would see each other again but promised to keep in touch. For now our paths were separating.

I was so excited I could hardly sleep although my neighbour's snoring didn't help. Israel! I was here at last. I lay listening to the sounds of the city below, the cars hooting the occasional raised voice everything was new and thrilling. As the light crept through our curtains I got up, I couldn't stay in bed any longer.

The unknown was calling me. I stood looking out across the streets at the houses; coloured pink from the rising sun, a new day and a day I will never forget beckoned me.

I was one of the first down to breakfast and wandered around examining the buffet that had been laid out. It was so different from anything I had seen. So many dishes I had never met before, pickled Herring, Hummus, mixed salads of tomatoes cucumber and peppers, cheeses, cold meats the list went on and on, I wanted to eat it all. I came back time and again to the feast sampling as much as I could.

Returning to my room my roommate was just rising and we exchanged a sleepy good morning.

I was boundless with energy. I couldn't wait to get started. The itinerary showed that the tour would begin with a visit to Jaffa the old city before driving North to Caesarea the site of the ancient city much of which is submerged. What remains are the Roman theatre and the chariot track. Then onto Megiddo the ruins of a city that dated back to 7000 BC. It had been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times over the ages. Walking among the ruins I tried to imagine the thousands of people like myself who had lived and died there, it was all too confusing. Our final stop for the day was near Lake Kinneret. I will never forget the moment when our small bus reached the top of a hill, rounded the bend and there before us was the Sea of Galilee, an oval stretch of shimmering water. It was an unforgettable moment.

'Stop,' I shouted. Please I want to stop and get out.'

I stood with the others looking down, completely mesmerized by the scene. It had a magical stillness. Only the slight hum of the wind and the fluttering of passing birds disturbed its tranquility. I had imagined it for so long and now there it was in front of me unchanged for over two millennia. We drove down



to the bustling town of Tiberius named after the emperor, a statue of whom we passed on the roadside. Then we passed through the town and around the lake to Nof Ginosar a modernized Kibbutz hotel. That evening, standing in the cool air looking across at the lights of Tiberius I wondered where Syna was.

She had made some enquiries while at the airport desk and was directed to a tourist Office.

'I am looking for the cemetery where the fallen from the six day war were buried?' she asked. The young lady apparently looked baffled and then turned and went into the office. Minutes later she appeared with an older man with a grey beard.

'You are looking for the military cemetery?' he asked in broken English. 'May I ask why?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'My older brother Isaac fought and died in the six day.'

'Was he an Israeli?'

'No he was German, he came as a volunteer.'

He touched her arm.

'He was a brave man,' he muttered. 'Wait here.'

A few minutes later he returned wearing an outdoor coat and carrying an attache case.

'Come,' he said, 'I will show you.' Syna followed him down some stairs to a car parked outside. She was beginning to get a little concerned but her curiosity over came her. They stopped beside a small Fiat.

'Get in I will take you.'

After a ten-minute drive along a winding road they arrived at the gates of the Kiryat Shaul Cemetery. The sign above the entrance still said "Central Cemetery."

'Wait here,' he said and limped off to a small office carrying her brother's details.

Syna looked around at the rows of gravestones. She felt a shiver as she thought of the thousands of people buried here: many generations of one family; young children; so many different lives lived and now just a plot and a memory.

She was beginning to feel distinctly apprehensive. She had come so far and now she was about to see what she had longed dreamed about, her brother's grave. Back home, she had been shown photos of it, a simple white limestone block next to others in a field of memorial stones.

'Follow me I have the details,' the old man said and set off to the east where the Military burials were. She followed him to the far edge and watched as he read the letters and numbers. Then he stopped,

'Here he is,' he said, 'your brother lies here,' and then he began to recite the Mourner's Kaddish,

*'Yit'gadal v'yitkadash sh'mei ruba, b'al'ma di v'ra khir'utei ....*(May His Great Name grow exalted and sanctified....

He then shook her hand and wished her long life. Suddenly she found herself alone standing looking at the small memorial. It seemed so insignificant, so inadequate to encompass a life even one as young as his, She looked around and found a small stone and placed it carefully besides the others near his name, her tears falling like heavy raindrops.

The old man later returned and said,

'Come please, I want you to meet my wife.' Syna was surprised and at first felt reluctant. I don't know this man she thought but she couldn't resist his insistence and agreed. They stopped outside a small apartment block and she followed him climbing two flights of stairs before reaching his front door.

'This is my home,' he announced as he unlocked the front door. 'You are welcome, come and meet my wife Ruth, I can hear her in the kitchen.'

A stocky elderly woman with a big smile greeted her,

'Welcome, Jacob told me all about you. You are a brave young woman coming all this way to honour your brother's grave,' and she gave Syna a big hug.

'You have arrived just in time for dinner. You will honour us please?'

To Syna, meeting Jacob and Ruth and sharing their food was like a dream. During the meal, Ruth said something that surprised her.

'You are German and a Jew, how is that possible?'

Syna explained.

'During the Second World War my family fled to Russia and returned in 1946 to a Germany that was in ruins. My brother who was much older than me was born in 1949. He became a staunch Zionist and when the six-day war started he had no doubt what he wanted to do. I was too young to remember but my mother told me about the day he left for Palestine. It was after breakfast when he appeared dressed in his uniform with his packed haversack. My mother screamed at him,

'No no I won't let you go! Tell him Dada, tell him.' But my father said nothing. He knew that my brother's mind was made up and nothing would deter him. Secretly he admitted later, he was very proud of my brother. That was the last time we saw him.

The notice of his death came weeks later through the JNF (Jewish national Fund), my parents were heart broken. It was then that I decided to find his resting place.'

'You were so young. It affected you so much?' Ruth said sadly.

'Yes. I have learned so much about Israel's fight for freedom and the many wars that she has fought to survive. I began to understand what motivated my brother. He became my hero, someone I desperately wanted to emulate and then this year the opportunity came and here I am.'

The chiming of a clock on the mantle piece suddenly interrupted the conversation.

'It's late,' said Ruth. You must stay here tonight, we have a spare room.'

Syna's protests were ignored and soon she was asleep in a soft bed somewhere in Tel Aviv thanks to the hospitality of two complete strangers.

The next time I heard from Syna we were both in Jerusalem but on different quests. She was reconnecting with her Jewish past at Yad Vashem, the Jewish Museum and the wall. I was on the way to the Via Dolorosa.

Before our group started on the journey our guide gave us a brief history and pointed out that the route we were going to take might not be the original one; evidence had been recently obtained to show that Jesus may have taken a totally different path.

What I and thousands like me thought we were doing, was reliving the final hours of our Lord's life before he was crucified. Were we taking the wrong route? We wanted to experience the actual journey so it was important that we were tracing the correct path. I overheard a conversation that really shook me. One of the pilgrims in our group was saying that for him it was faith and not fact that guided him.

*Synagoga: Ecclesia don't you think you were taking it all to seriously?*

*Ecclesia: I didn't think so at the time.*

The group decided to start the walk early in the morning before it got too hot but many other people had the same idea so we joined a large crowd jostling for position. It was not how I had expected it. This was becoming like a sport's crowd. I was still confused. My faith was being challenged and I didn't know how to deal with it. I fell in step with a man wearing

priestly garb and we began to talk. I told him about my doubts and worries.

'I have many doubts,' he said. 'Is faith real or just something we were taught as a child that we should have? What does it really mean to have faith? You will have doubts all of your life. Your journey is to navigate this doubt while knowing in your heart that your faith is your guide.'

He was correct of course it was just that I had been brought up to believe that it was all straightforward and what I read in the bible was true. Nothing made sense to me anymore. We walked on together in silence and then parted.

Then something strange began to happen. I was moving along as if in a wave and then the people around me seemed to fade away and I was retracing that journey of our Lord on my own. I completed the fourteen stations feeling exhilarated and humbled. On the way I felt a light touch on my shoulder but I was frightened to turn to see whom it was. I know it was He walking with me step by step bridging two millennia. Even as I recalled it later my skin shivered, I can't believe it really happened. But I have no doubt that it did.

Now I was back in touch with Syna, I told her about our group's plan to climb Masada and was she interested to come along. She said that she had read about it but knew little else. I explained that there were two routes, the snake path on the East side and the Roman Ramp on the west. Everyone suggests we go early before dawn so as to see the sunrise, by all accounts a magnificent sight. We arranged to meet at 4 am.

*Ecclesia: This is not the end. Our journey will continue through time as each generation reinvents the intolerance of difference.*

*Synagoga: But we will never stop in our quest until all people are united in their common needs.*

