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Opening extract from
The Silver Sword

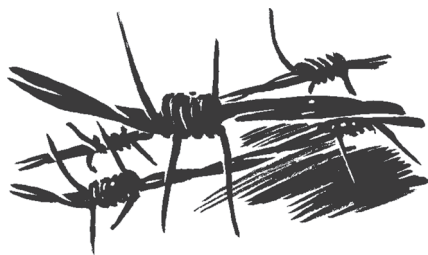
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I. The Escape

THIS is the story of a Polish family, and of what happened to them during the Second World War and immediately afterwards. Their home was in a suburb of Warsaw, where the father, Joseph Balicki, was headmaster of a primary school. He and his Swiss wife Margrit had three children. In early 1940, the year when the Nazis took Joseph away to prison, Ruth the eldest was nearly thirteen, Edek was eleven, and the fair-haired Bronia three.

Warsaw under the Nazis was a place of terror, and without their father to protect them the Balickis had a grim time of it. But worse was in store for them. They were to endure hardships and conditions which made them think and plan

and act more like adults than children. Great responsibilities were to fall upon Ruth. Many other girls had to face difficulties as great as hers. But if there were any who faced them with as much courage, unselfishness, and common sense as she did, I have not heard of them.

First I must tell of Joseph Balicki and what happened to him in the prison camp of Zakyna.

The prison camp which the Nazis sent him to was in the mountains of South Poland. A few wooden huts clung to the edge of the bleak hillside. Day and night the wind beat down upon them, for the pine trees were thin and gave little shelter. For five months of the year snow lay thick upon the ground. It smothered the huts. It gave a coating of white fur to the twelve-foot double fence of wire that surrounded the clearing. In stormy weather it blew into the bare huts through cracks in the walls. There was no comfort in Zakyna.

The camp was crowded with prisoners. Most of them were Poles, but there were some Czechs, Hungarians, and a few Russians too. Each hut held about 120 – yet it was hardly big enough for more than forty. They passed the time loafing about, playing chess, sewing, reading, fighting for

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old newspapers or cigarette stumps, quarrelling, shouting. At mealtimes they huddled round trestle tables to eat their cabbage and potato soup. It was the same for every meal. You could blow yourself out with it and never be satisfied. For drinking they had warm water with bread crumbs in it – the Nazi guards called it coffee. Twice a week they had a dab of butter, and there was a teaspoonful of jam on Saturdays. What use was this for keeping out the cold?

Few had the strength or the spirit to escape. Several prisoners had got away – a few even reached the plains. Those that were not caught and sent back died of exposure in the mountains.

But Joseph was determined to escape. During the first winter he was too ill and dispirited to try. He would sit around the hut, thinking of his family and staring at a few tattered photos of them that he had been allowed to keep. He would think of his school in Warsaw and wonder what was happening there now. When the Nazis came, they had not closed it. But they had taken away the Polish textbooks and made him teach in German. They had hung pictures of Hitler in all the classrooms. Once, during a scripture lesson, Joseph had turned the picture of Hitler's face to

the wall. Someone had reported this to the Nazis. Then the Nazi Storm Troops had come for Joseph in the middle of the night and bundled him off to Zakyna. They had left Margrit and the three children behind. How he longed to see them again!

During the summer his health mended, but the number of guards was doubled. A group of six – he was one of them – tried to break away together, but their attempt failed. For this he had a month of solitary confinement.

The following winter he was ill again, but no less determined to escape. He decided to wait till early spring, when the snow was beginning to melt and the nights were not so bitter.

Very carefully he laid his plans.

It was no use thinking of cutting the wire fence. There was a trip-line inside the double fence, and anyone who crossed it would be shot. If he got as far as touching the fence, the alarm bell in the guard-house would ring. There was only one way out – the way the guards went, through the gate and past the guard-house. His idea was to disguise himself as one of them and follow them as they went off duty. But how was he to get hold of the uniform?

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At the back of each block was a leaky and unheated hut known as ‘the cooler’. It had three or four cells to which unruly prisoners were sent to ‘cool off’. To be sent there you only had to be late for roll call or cheek a guard. It was quite a popular place in summer, as it was so quiet. But in winter you could freeze to death there. In spring, with a bit of luck, you might survive a night or two of frost.

One March day, during the morning hut inspection, he flicked a paper pellet at the guard. It stung him behind the ear and made him turn round. The next one made his nose smart. That was all there was time for. Within five minutes Joseph was in a cell in ‘the cooler’.

For two days he stamped up and down, to keep himself warm. He clapped his arms against his sides. He dared not lie down for more than a few moments at a time in case he dropped off to sleep and never woke again. Twice a day a guard brought him food. For the rest of the time he was alone.

On the evening of the third day the guard came as usual. When Joseph heard the soft thud of his footsteps in the snow, he crouched down on the floor at the back of his tiny cell. He had a smooth

round stone and a catapult in his hands. He had made the catapult from pine twigs and the elastic sides of his boots. His eyes were fixed on the flap in the door. In a moment the guard would unlock it, peer inside and hand in the food.

Tensely Joseph waited. He heard the key grate in the rusty lock of the outside door of 'the cooler'. The hinges creaked open. There was the sound of a match spluttering – the guard was lighting the lamp. Heavy boots clumped across the floor towards his cell.

Joseph drew back the elastic. He heard the padlock on the flap being unlocked. The flap slid aside.

The guard had not seen Joseph when the stone struck him in the middle of the forehead and knocked him down. The floor shook as he tumbled. He groaned and rolled over.

Joseph must act quickly, before the guard came to his senses. He knew the guard kept his bunch of keys in his greatcoat pocket. He must get hold of them without delay. He must lift the guard till they were within reach.

He took a hook and line from under his bed. He had made the line by cutting thin strips from his blanket and plaiting them together. The hook

was a bent four-inch nail that he had smuggled in from his hut.

After several attempts, the hook caught in the top fastened button of the guard's greatcoat. He tugged at the line and drew the guard, still groaning, up towards him ... higher and higher.

Suddenly the line snapped. The guard fell back, striking his head sharply on the floor. The hook was lost.

Joseph had one spare hook, that was all.

He tried again. This time the cotton broke and the button went spinning across the floor.

He tried for the next button. Again the cotton broke.

He had begun to despair when he saw the keys. They were lying on the floor. They had been shaken out of the greatcoat pocket when the guard fell.

Quickly Joseph fished for the ring of keys and hauled it up. A few moments later he was kneeling beside the senseless body, hastily stripping off the uniform. There was no time to lose. Already the locking up of the prisoners had started and he could hear the guards shouting at them outside.

Joseph felt warm in the guard's uniform. The greatcoat reached to his ankles. The fur cap had flaps for covering his ears. He smiled to himself as he locked the guard in the freezing cell. Then, turning up his collar so that the tips touched his cheek-bones, he went out into the bitter night.

He walked through the snow towards Block E, where the Hungarian and Rumanian prisoners were kept. In the dark shadows behind the huts he hid until the trumpet sounded the change of guard.

Hundreds of times he had watched the soldiers of the guard fall in and march out of camp. He had memorized every order, every movement. It seemed to him quite natural now to be lining up with the others.

'Anything to report?' the officer asked each of them in turn.

'All correct, sir,' they answered.

'All correct, sir,' said Joseph in his best German.

'Guard, dismiss!' said the officer.

Joseph dropped to the rear and followed the other soldiers out – out of the great spiked gate and into freedom. It seemed too good to be true.

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Some of the soldiers stopped outside the guard-house to gossip. A few went in. Joseph walked straight ahead, turning his head away from the window light as he passed.

‘Where are you going?’ one of them called.

‘Shangri La,’ he muttered. It was the soldiers’ name for the nightclub in the village where they sometimes spent their off-duty times.

Without looking behind him, he walked on.