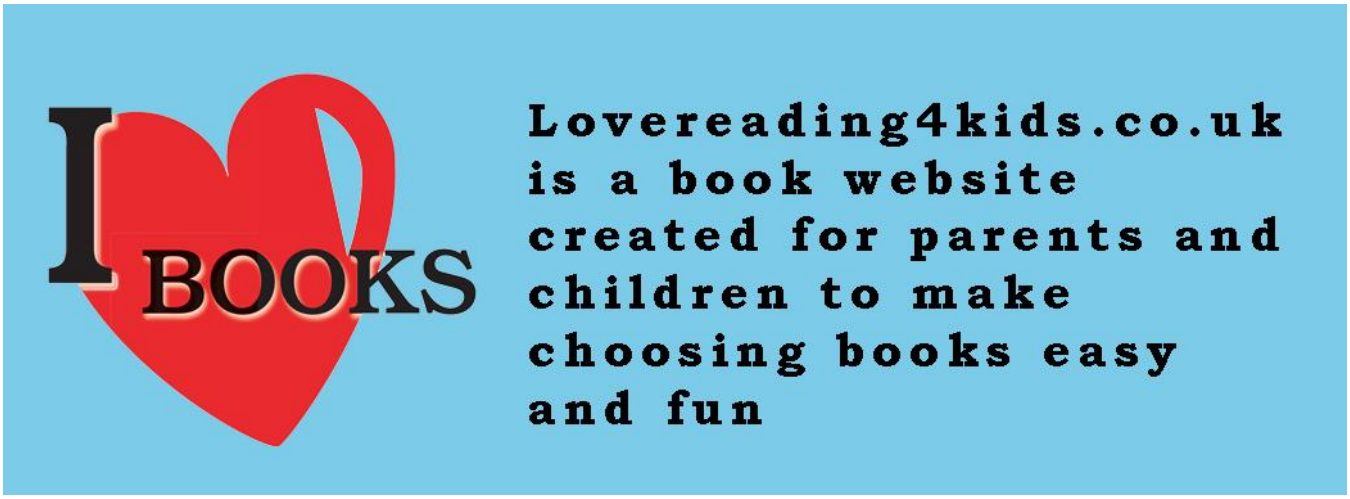

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Anna and the Swallow Man

Written by

Gavriel Savit

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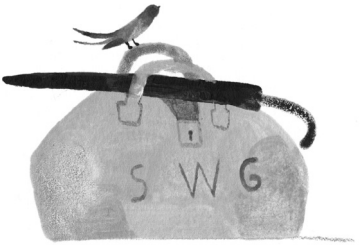

What Do You Say?

When Anna Łania woke on the morning of the sixth of November in the year 1939—her seventh—there were several things that she did not know:

Anna did not know that the chief of the Gestapo in Occupied Poland had by fiat compelled the rector of the Jagiellonian University to require the attendance of all professors (of whom her father was one) at a lecture and discussion on the direction of the Polish Academy under German sovereignty, to take place at noon on that day.

She did not know that, in the company of his colleagues, her father would be taken from lecture hall number 56, first to a prison in Kraków, where they lived, and subsequently to a number of other internment facilities across Poland, before finally being transported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany.

She also did not know that, several months later, a group

of her father's surviving colleagues would be moved to the far more infamous Dachau camp in Upper Bavaria, but that, by the time of that transfer, her father would no longer exist in a state in which he was capable of being moved.

What Anna did know that morning was that her father had to go away for a few hours.

Seven-year-old girls are a hugely varied bunch. Some of them will tell you that they've long since grown up, and you'd have trouble not agreeing with them; others seem to care much more about the hidden childhood secrets chalked on the insides of their heads than they do about telling a grown-up anything at all; and still others (this being the largest group by far) have not yet entirely decided to which camp they belong, and depending on the day, the hour, even the moment, they may show you completely different faces than the ones you thought you might find.

Anna was one of these last girls at age seven, and her father helped to foster the ambivalent condition. He treated her like an adult—with respect, deference, and consideration—but somehow, simultaneously, he managed to protect and preserve in her the feeling that everything she encountered in the world was a brand-new discovery, unique to her own mind.

Anna's father was a professor of linguistics at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, and living with him meant that every day of the week was in a different language. By the time Anna had reached the age of seven, her German, Russian, French, and English were all good, and she had a fair amount of Yiddish and Ukrainian and a little Armenian and Carpathian Romany as well.

Her father never spoke to her in Polish. The Polish, he said, would take care of itself.

One does not learn as many languages as Anna's father had without a fair bit of love for talking. Most of her memories of her father were of him speaking—laughing and joking, arguing and sighing, with one of the many friends and conversation partners he cultivated around the city. In fact, for much of her life with him, Anna had thought that each of the languages her father spoke had been tailored, like a bespoke suit of clothes, to the individual person with whom he conversed. French was not French; it was Monsieur Bouchard. Yiddish was not Yiddish; it was Reb Shmulik. Every word and phrase of Armenian that Anna had ever heard reminded her of the face of the little old *tatik* who always greeted her and her father with small cups of strong, bitter coffee.

Every word of Armenian smelled like coffee.

If Anna's young life had been a house, the men and women with whom her father spent his free time in discourse would've been its pillars. They kept the sky up and the earth down, and they smiled and spoke to her as if she were one of their own children. It was never only Professor Łania coming to visit them; it was Professor Łania and Anna. Or, as they might have it, Professor Łania and Anja, or Khannaleh, or Anke, or Anushka, or Anouk. She had as many names as there were languages, as there were people in the world.

Of course, if each language is for only one person, then eventually a girl begins to wonder—what is my father's language? What is mine?

But the answer was quite simple—they were speakers of other people's languages. Everyone else seemed tied down to only one, at best to two or three, but Anna's father seemed to be entirely unbound by the borders that held everyone else in the wide and varied landscape of Kraków. He was not confined to any one way of speaking. He could be anything he wanted. Except, perhaps, himself.

And if this was true of Anna's father, well, then it must have been true for Anna, too. Instead of passing on to his daughter one particular language that would define her, Anna's father gave her the wide spectrum of tongues that he knew, and said, "Choose amongst them. Make something new for yourself."

In none of her memories of him was Anna's father not saying something. He lived, in her memory, like a vibrant statue, molded in the shape of his accustomed listening posture: right knee bent over the left, elbow propped against the knee, his chin in his palm. He adopted this attitude frequently, but even when so silently bound in attention, Anna's father couldn't help but communicate, and his lips and eyebrows would wriggle and squirm in reaction to the things people said to him. Other people would have to ask him what these idiosyncratic tics and twitches meant, but Anna was fluent in that language, too, and she never had to ask.

She and her father spent so very much time talking together. They talked in every language in every corner of their apartment, and all throughout the streets of the city. Of all people, she was certain that he liked talking to her best.

The first time Anna realized that a language was a com-

promise shared amongst people—that two people who spoke the same language were not necessarily the same—this was the only time she could remember asking her father a question that he could not manage to answer.

They had been making their way home from some outing or other, and it had been growing dark. Anna didn't recognize the part of the city where they were walking. Her father was holding on to her hand very tightly, and his long-legged strides forced her to trot to keep up. His pace quickened, faster and faster as the sun dipped beneath the rooftops and then the hills beyond, and by the time it happened, they were practically running.

She heard them before she saw anything. There was a man's voice laughing, loud and jolly, so genuinely amused that Anna began smiling as well, excited to see whatever it was that was making the laughter. But when they came to the street from which the sound was coming, her smiling stopped.

There were three soldiers.

The laughing soldier was the smallest. She didn't remember the two others very clearly, except that they seemed impossibly large to her.

"Jump!" said the smallest soldier. "Jump! Jump!"

The grizzled old man in front of them did his best to follow this direction, hopping up and down pointlessly in place, but there was very clearly something wrong with his leg—a bad break, perhaps. It was plain to see that he was in terrible discomfort. At great expense of effort, he kept his voice silent each time his shoes hit the cobblestones, despite the pain that twisted his expression.

This seemed to delight the small soldier even more.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this memory was the pure and unreserved delight of that laughter—in Anna's mind, the soldier was speaking, and for that matter, laughing, in Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's language.

Herr Doktor Fuchsmann was a fat, nearly bald man who always wore a waistcoat. He had spectacles, and a cane that he used to help him shuffle around his small pharmacy all day long. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann was a man who giggled, and whose face was almost always turning red. In the short time that Anna had known him, he had snuck her more cookies than she had ever even seen in any other setting.

And the small soldier was speaking Herr Doktor Fuchsmann.

Anna was confused. She could understand neither the soldier in the context of the doctor, nor the doctor in the context of the soldier. So she did what any child would do in such a situation.

She asked her father.

If Anna's father had not been the man that he was, and if Anna had not been hearing and speaking and thinking, in part, in German for as many of her seven short years as had the potential for speech in them—in short, if her accent had not been so compellingly native—this story might've ended before it began.

"Papa," said Anna. "Why are they laughing at that man?"

Anna's father didn't answer. The soldier turned his head.

"Because, *Liebling*," he said. "That is not a man. That is a *Jude*."

Anna remembered that phrase exactly, because it changed

everything for her. She thought she knew what language was, how it worked, how people pulled in different words out of the air into which they had spoken in order to shape their outlines around them.

But this was much more complicated.

Reb Shmulik didn't say *Jude.* Reb Shmulik said *yid.*

And this soldier, no matter what language he was speaking, was as different from Herr Doktor Fuchsmann as he wanted everyone to know that he was from Reb Shmulik the Jew.

In 1939 a group of people called Germans came into a land called Poland and took control of the city Kraków, where Anna lived. Shortly thereafter these Germans instituted an operation entitled Sonderaktion Krakau, which was aimed at the intellectuals and academics of the city, of whom Anna's father was one.

The day appointed for the execution of Sonderaktion Krakau was November the sixth, 1939—Anna's seventh year—and all Anna knew that morning was that her father had to go away for a few hours.

He left her in the care of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann shortly after eleven o'clock, and then he did not come back again.

It was not uncommon for Anna's father to leave her with his friends when he had some pressing business to attend to. He trusted her enough to leave her alone in the apartment for brief periods, but on occasion, of course, he needed to be gone for longer. She was still very young, and from time to time someone was needed to look after her.

Anna's father had done his best to insulate her from what had been going on in the city, but a war is a war, and it is impossible to protect a child from the world forever. There were uniforms in the street, and people yelling, and dogs, and fear, and sometimes there were gunshots, and if a man loves to speak, eventually his daughter will hear the word "war" spoken, furtively, aloud. "War" is a heavy word in every language.

Anna remembered vaguely that there had been a time before this heavy word had descended on every side of her like the weighted edges of a net, but more than the figure or face of any particular person—more even than the brief impression she had managed to form of her mother—what principally characterized her memory of that time was the vibrant outdoor life of an exuberant city: chatting strolls in public parks and gardens; glasses of beer, or cups of coffee or tea, at tables on the sidewalk; mothers and lovers and friends calling names out across reverberant stone streets, hoping to catch and turn a beloved head before it disappeared around a corner. Those had seemed like days of perpetual warmth and sun to Anna, but war, she learned, was very much like weather—if it was on its way, it was best not to be caught outdoors.

In his final months Anna's father spent quite a bit of time inside with her, talking and, when the inevitable need for silence arose, reading. He meant very well, but most of the books he had in the house were still far beyond Anna's level, and so she spent much of her time with one particular book, a thick volume of children's stories drawn from every source. Whether they were from Aesop or the Bible, or Norse myth or Egyptian,

they were all illustrated in the same comforting nineteenth-century hand, with pen and ink, reproduced there on thick, heavy paper.

Anna missed that book as soon as she was separated from it. Even before she missed her father.

For the first two or three hours after noon on the sixth of November, Herr Doktor Fuchsmann acted just as he always had toward Anna, teasing and laughing over his spectacles while the shop was empty, and immediately ignoring her as soon as the bell on the door rang a new customer inside. There were many fewer cookies now than there had been in past days, but Anna understood—Herr Doktor Fuchsmann had explained the dearth with reference to the war. This was a common practice, one with which Anna had already become quite familiar—whenever someone remarked something out of the ordinary lately, it seemed to be explained by pointing out the war.

Anna still was not certain what precisely was meant by this word "war," but it seemed, at least in part, to be an assault on her cookie supply, and of this she simply could not approve.

The shop was much busier that day than Anna had ever seen it before, and the people who came in after Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's relief seemed mostly to be young Germans in subtly differing uniforms. Even some of the older men in suits came in speaking a bright, clipped-sounding German that, though clearly the same language as the Herr Doktor's, seemed to Anna to lean forward with tight muscles, where his sat back, relaxed. It was all terribly interesting, but Herr Doktor

Fuchsmann became nervous when she paid too obvious attention to anything his customers had to say, and so she did her best to look as if she weren't listening.

He tried to mask his growing anxiety as the day drew on, but when the time came to close down his shop and Anna's father had still not returned to collect her, Herr Doktor Fuchsmann began to worry very openly.

Anna was not yet terribly worried, though. Her father had been gone for longer before, and he had always returned.

But now there were gunshots in the streets from time to time, and dogs barking always. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann flatly refused to take Anna home with him, and this was the first seed of worry in her. He had always been so sweet to her before, and it was confusing that he should suddenly turn unkind.

Anna slept that night beneath the counter of Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's shop, cold without a blanket, afraid to be seen or to make too much noise as the streets filled up with German in the growing night.

She had trouble falling asleep. Her worry kept her mind just active enough to prevent her from nodding off, but not quite so active that she could stop herself from growing bored. It was in this never-ending threshold of a moment that she missed her book of tales.

There was a story near its back, a story at which the cracked binding had grown accustomed to falling open, of a spindly wraith called the Alder King. Anna loved to stare at his picture until her fright reached a nearly unbearable height and then to shut it away. The fright disappeared reliably with the Alder

King, trapped there between the pages of his book, and she longed to shut up her gnawing little worry with him now.

In the morning Herr Doktor Fuchsmann brought Anna a little food. It comforted her, but by lunchtime it became clear that he meant not to keep her around. He was very apologetic, told Anna that he would send her father straight along if he came back to the shop for her, but that he just couldn't have her in his shop anymore.

Everything he said made sense. Who was she to argue?

Herr Doktor Fuchsmann locked the door of his shop behind him when they left to walk Anna back to her apartment. When they arrived, it quickly became apparent to her that her father had locked his own door when they had left for Herr Doktor Fuchsmann's the day before. Herr Doktor Fuchsmann never learned this, though—as soon as they were within sight of the apartment building, he excused himself and hurried back to his shop.

Anna sat in front of the door to her apartment for a very long time. There was still a part of her that was sure that her father was on his way back to her, and she tried as best she could to prune back her worry and encourage this certainty to grow in its place. Surely, he would be back soon.

But he did not come.

Whenever she felt her surety fading, Anna tried the apartment doorknob. Over and over she tried it, each time becoming slowly, thoroughly convinced that, in fact, her father had not locked her out, but that she had simply not turned the knob hard enough.