

WAITING TO DIE

NEIL GOWING

Chapter 1

The noise from the train was deafening as it clattered into the prison grounds sending large plumes of dust into the sky. The bright spring sunshine broke through the clouds of dirt inside the isolated camp as Nazi soldiers rushed across the open ground from the wooden huts and stood in line along the train tracks. An SS officer screamed instructions to the men as the train finally screeched to a halt. The enormous black engine hissed loudly as steam poured into the dusty morning air. Behind the engine were fifteen or so trucks, all bolted shut, lined up along the seemingly endless train track. Anna Wodjakowski and her family, her mother, father, older brother Jacob and younger sister Carla, huddled together inside one of the cramped trucks with dozens of other prisoners.

They were all Polish Jews who had been forced from their homes by the invading German army and herded onto the trains with no idea what was to happen to them. Many of their people had fled their homeland to escape the Nazi persecution and those who remained behind were terrified by the constant rumours of Death squads and Prison camps. The Wodjakowskis

were a middle class family, devoted to each other and to their religion. Zaccariah, Anna's father, was a well respected Banker in their local community, a quiet suburb of Warsaw. He had married his wife, Eleanor, at the age of twenty and together they had raised their three children in a strict but loving household.

Eleanor was strikingly beautiful and despite her plain clothes and conservative hairstyle she always appeared radiant and confident in herself. Jacob, her eldest child, had inherited his mother's looks and had confidence in abundance. He had just finished school and was training to follow in his father's footsteps as a banker. His career choice was born more out of respect than desire. He was very much conforming to his father's wishes but planned to make a successful career in banking and then one day follow his heart and travel the world. Anna and Carla were also fortunate enough to have their mother's features. Both were blonde with an olive complexion. Both were tall with slender figures in perfect proportion. The two girls, of course, still had years to develop but everyone was sure that they would both grow into beautiful young women.

Anna, despite looking like her mother, had more of her father's character. She was intelligent and driven, aspiring to be a writer or journalist. She thought deeply about everything, never rushing a decision, never acting in haste. The current political situation and the all enveloping war in Europe troubled her young mind. Whilst many teenagers her age didn't understand what was happening or begin to comprehend the possible impact on their lives, Anna was fully aware of just how precarious their position was. Carla, two years younger than Anna, was far too young to understand the

implications of the advancing German army. She was bright and full of mischief, blissfully unaware of the dark cloud that approached them and threatened to engulf their very existence.

In recent weeks, news of the advancing Nazis had become more frequent and more vivid in its threatening detail. Zaccariah realised that his family were in grave danger and had begun making plans to leave their home and seek sanctuary elsewhere. The speed at which the Nazis moved from town to town caught Zaccariah by surprise and before he was able to finalise his plans the terror had arrived on their doorstep and despite his best efforts to hide his family from the invading soldiers they were captured in the dead of night hiding in the cellar of the bank where he worked.

Throughout the following weeks the Wodjakowski family were confined to one of the many ghettos around Warsaw established by the invading German army to segregate Jews from the rest of the population. Life inside the ghetto was far removed from the comfortable surroundings the family had been used to. They found themselves sharing a building with several other families and a single bedroom became their home. The two young girls slept on a mattress on the floor, Jacob made do with an old armchair and their parents shared a single bed made from wooden crates and an old mattress.

The ghetto population quickly became desperate for food and basic medication. Sickness and disease spread throughout cramped accommodations and even the strongest and fittest amongst them grew weak and malnourished. The German officers,

responsible for maintaining order within the ghettos, promised the desperate population that they would soon be transported to a safer and more comfortable location. Day after day hundreds of Jews, desperate to escape the conditions within the ghettos, queued for hours to board cattle trains destined for this promised land with no idea where they would be taken.

Jacob listened intently from the darkness inside the truck, desperate to know what was going to happen to them. He looked towards his father who was holding onto his family, clinging to them, desperate to protect them.

“Father, I am scared. I have heard terrible stories.”

“Hush my son, do not alarm your sisters.” Zacharia spoke to his family.

“Listen all of you. They will try to break us and we may be separated but you must trust in God and remember they cannot take your soul. No matter what we are about to face we must trust in God.”

Suddenly the door to the truck slid open and the daylight flashed in piercing the darkness. The sudden brightness caused the startled prisoners to cover their eyes. A large dog jumped up at the open side of the truck barking ferociously and the silhouette of a German soldier appeared in the sunlight. The group were terrified as the soldier began shouting towards them.

“Quickly get out, leave your belongings here. They will be returned to you shortly. Quickly move towards the gate.”

Jacob's father grabbed his arm.

"Jacob, hold onto your sisters, we must stay together."

The soldiers began forcing the disillusioned prisoners onto their feet and out of the trucks. Many struggled to stand after being sat almost crushed into the tiny space for what had seemed like days. The soldiers shouted over and over whilst the dogs continued to bark and snap at the terrified Jews. The scene was one of complete chaos as prisoners were herded from the trains onto makeshift wooden platforms. Families tried desperately to stay together in the crush as the German soldiers forced them apart with rifle butts and large sticks. Women and children were wailing and screaming as they became separated from their loved ones. A German SS officer emerged from the chaos and stood on a raised platform. He began shouting instructions to the hundreds of people that were now gathered before him.

"We need to move the elderly and the sick first. All those unable to walk the long distance to the camps must move towards the Trucks on the right. Do not be afraid you will be driven to the camp and reunited with your families later. If you are elderly or you are unwell you must move towards the trucks." The massive crowd of prisoners were brutally forced into separate lines. To the right all the elderly and sick were being loaded onto waiting trucks and driven off along a dusty road running the length of the camp fence. To the left the younger men, women and children tried desperately to cling onto their loved ones, not knowing what was to become of them. The Wodjakowski family held onto each other determined

to stay together but as they were hustled along a young German Soldier approached them.

“Old man, move to the right, and the woman, quickly. Get on the truck quickly.”

Jacob tried in vain to hold onto his mother but with a swift thrust of his rifle butt the soldier forced Jacob to the ground and shoved his parents into the long line of elderly people waiting to board the trucks. Zacharria turned and looked deep into his son’s eyes.

“Jacob, Look after your sisters, be strong. Trust in God my son, Trust in God.”

Eleanor began wailing loudly.

“No, No, not my children, we must stay together, we must.”

Zacharria put his arms around his wife and tried to comfort her.

“Sshh, my darling we must be strong for the children, we must.”

As he spoke softly one of the soldiers forced them apart and hauled them one by one onto one of the waiting trucks. The siblings looked on helplessly and held onto each other tightly. The two sisters began crying uncontrollably. Jacob fought back his tears as he clutched his sisters close to his chest not wanting to ever let them go. He took a huge gulp of air and shouted to his parents as the truck they were aboard began to move off along the dusty dirt track.

“We love you mother and you father. I will protect them. Be strong father, be strong.”

Zaccariah summoned all his remaining strength and stood up on the back of the truck. He shouted back to his distraught children,

“Be strong my children, they will not take our souls. They will not take our souls.”

Immediately a German soldier struck him with his rifle butt to silence him and knocked him to the floor of the truck. Anna screamed and hid her younger sister’s face in her coat as she saw her father collapse onto his knees. Jacob clasped his hands around Anna’s face,

“We will get through this Anna, we will”.

A German soldier shouted constant instructions as the prisoners were shoved forcefully along towards two separate gates.

“Move along. Keep the lines moving. Quickly move towards the camp gates. Quickly.”

At the gates the German soldiers began separating the men from the women and children and herding them into separate camps. Anna saw what was happening and began to panic. She grabbed Jacob firmly by the hand.

“Jacob they are taking you from us, please Jacob do something.”

Jacob struggled as the soldiers tried to drag his sisters away from him.

“No, No. Leave them alone.”

He turned to his terrified siblings.

“Anna be strong. You must be strong for Carla ..you must.”

Anna began screaming hysterically,

“Jacob!Jacob!”

Glancing down she realised that her screaming was making it worse for Carla. She took a long deep breath and tried to compose herself.

“Its alright darling I will never leave you, never.”

The sisters held onto each other tighter than ever as they were shoved through the tall metal gates into the courtyard of one of the camps. They looked around realising that in this camp there were only female prisoners. There were hundreds of them, all terrified all unsure what was going to become of them.

A German officer appeared on a raised wooden platform at the front of the courtyard.

“Quickly stand in line. You will all be well looked after and will come to no harm as long as you follow our instructions. Do not be afraid, you have been brought here for your own protection. Your families will join you soon. The German army is here to ensure your safety.”

Anna turned to her young sister and put an arm round her shoulders.

“There, you see, do not be afraid. Everything is going to be all right. We will see our family soon.” As she spoke softly a soldier struck her in the back with his rifle butt and yelled into her face,

“Stand in line. No talking.”

Anna winced in pain but looked straight ahead. Once the soldier had moved further down the line she whispered to Carla,

“Its okay, Carla, its okay.”

Carla didn't speak she just sobbed and tears streamed down her face. Anna wiped the tears from her own cheeks as the soldiers continued to yell instructions at the hundreds of women now assembled in the courtyard.

The officer on the platform once again addressed the women.

“You will now be washed and re-clothed. Your belongings will be checked and returned to you as soon as possible. You will follow the guards to the showers. When you are instructed remove all of your clothing and proceed into the shower block. You will not be harmed as long as you follow instructions.”

The women were led from the courtyard towards a row of buildings towards the back of the camp. The guards pushed the woman along knocking many of them off balance and mocking them as they picked themselves up out of the dust.

“Move quickly scum, come on quickly you are starting to smell like pigs.”

The long lines of terrified women and children began to move towards the shower block flanked by guards and barking dogs. The women were weak through exhaustion and hunger and many struggled to keep moving. The guards continued to taunt them and kept them in line with the force of rifle butts and large sticks.

As they approached the shower block the terrified prisoners were instructed to remove all of their clothes and their footwear before being herded through a large wooden door into the dark concrete room with dozens of showerheads hanging from the ceiling. Many of the women protested trying to maintain some dignity for themselves and their children. The protests were met with brute force as the guards forced them to strip naked and shoved them into the shower room still kicking and screaming. Anna realised that resistance was futile and did her best to remain composed and reassure her sister that everything would be okay.

As they waited in line, naked, outside the shower block Anna noticed the trucks carrying the elderly stopping at the other side of the camp. She could see the prisoners being stripped naked and forced into a similar looking concrete shower block. She tried in vain to spot her parents but the other shower blocks were too far away to pick out any real detail. As she scanned the distant scene she noticed a large cloud of black smoke suddenly appear from somewhere behind the concrete structure. Before Anna had time to make sense of events unfolding before her eyes she was pushed forcefully down a ramp into the darkness of the shower block. At the far side of the concrete room another door opened and the previous group of prisoners left the showers still naked, still wet and shivering in the stiff breeze blowing across the open space between the camp buildings.

That night, having been showered in scalding hot water and left standing wet and naked whilst their heads were shaved, the women were led to their sleeping quarters. Inside the cold damp huts were rows and rows of metal bunks with wooden bases and no mattress. Each prisoner was given a dirty grey blanket and ordered into a bunk.

Anna and Carla climbed onto their bunk beds. Anna went onto the top whilst Carla lay on the bottom. They were both wearing thin ill-fitting camp issued clothing with holes and missing buttons. Everything had an uncommon smell. Anna didn't know what the smell was but it made her think of death. They lay under their thin dirty blankets awake but too afraid to speak. Anna

waited for the last of the guards to pass and then plucked up the courage to speak to her sister.

“Carla, Carla, can you hear me. We must be strong. Remember what father said. Carla are you listening darling.

Carla fought back the tears and spoke for the first time since they had arrived in the camp.

“I know what Father said but where is he, where is mother. They are dead aren't they Anna. They are all dead and we'll be next. They're going to kill us all Anna.”

Carla was beginning to get hysterical. Anna leaned down from her bunk,

“Sshh now princess. You must not think like that. God will see us through this. We must believe that Carla, we must believe.”

Carla's raised voice caught the attention of one of the guards. As the sisters talked he slowly walked over to their bunks and crouched down to Carla. As Carla cowered beneath her blanket he began to stroke her hair.

“Do not cry little one .I will look after you .You can be my special girl.”

Carla tried not to move but the guard suddenly slid his hand under her blanket and started to touch her. Anna saw what he was doing and jumped down off her bunk.

“No! No! Please don't hurt her she is only a child. Please have mercy on her. Please leave her alone”

The guard stood up and pushed Anna back against the metal bunk. He thrust his hand up her flimsy top and grabbed her breast squeezing it tightly until she gasped. He pushed his face up against hers,

“Oh I see you have a bit of fight left in you, this could make it interesting.”

He put his other arm around her throat and began to drag her across the floor. She tried to struggle but the huge man overpowered her easily and dragged her into another room at the end of the hut.

Anna begged him to let her go as he forced her through the door.

“No. Please No. Leave me alone. No!

Carla saw what was happening and screamed for her sister,

“Anna!”

Carla was too afraid to go after her and she pulled her dirty grey blanket over her head, brought her knees up under her chin and sobbed uncontrollably.

As Anna heard the door slam shut she realised she was inside the guards’ quarters. Another guard was sitting by a large open fire drinking from a tin mug. Anna felt the grip around her neck loosen and she twisted and kicked as she was flung onto the floor. The guard who had dragged her into the room leaned over her and attempted to remove her shirt. Anna screamed and kicked out at him.

“Get off me you animal, leave me alone.”

The guard laughed and called to the other man who was by now standing and taking a keen interest in Anna.

“Hey! We have a lively one come and hold her down. Come on, hold her. We will have some fun with this one.”

The second guard strode towards Anna and she continued writhing around on the floor and kicking out at the two men trying to keep them away from her. The second guard laughed loudly at her feeble attempts.

“She’s wild, just how I like them. Quick throw her on the table.

The two men grabbed Anna from the floor and lifted her towards a dirty wooden table in the middle of the room. Anna continued to struggle.

“Get away from me get your filthy hands off me.”

Anna spat directly in the guard’s face as she tried desperately to get free. The guard laughed and pushed her back onto the table squeezing her face tightly. The second guard grabbed her wrists and held her down. The guard pushed his body against hers and with one forceful movement ripped off her flimsy trousers. Anna tried in vain to stop the attack but she was powerless. The guard unfastened his braces and dropped his trousers. Anna struggled but she was far too weak and was easily overpowered by the two men. The Guard pressed his huge frame against Anna’s frail body and brutally raped her. He moved his face closer and attempted to kiss her. She plucked up all of her energy and sank her teeth into his cheek as hard as she could causing blood to gush down his face. He threw back his head in pain and responded with a fist directly into Anna’s face. She lay semi conscious on the table with blood pouring from her mouth as the two men took it in turns to rape her over and over again. Anna closed her eyes tightly trying to block out her pain. As she prayed to god to let her die, in her mind she saw her father’s face.

“Trust in God. They cannot take your soul.”

Her father’s words echoed in her ears giving her a glimmer of hope as she tried desperately to ignore the

laughing and groaning of her attackers and somehow detach herself from the ordeal.

Anna lay naked on the table, shivering, drifting in and out of consciousness. She pulled her knees up to her chin, curling up instinctively into a defensive position. She prayed that her abuse was over as she watched the two men share a bottle of vodka apparently toasting each other triumphantly. As Anna's mind drifted back and forth she was suddenly startled by the tight grip of the guard on her arm. She tried to scream but her frail body was too weak to create a sound. The guards dragged her off the table and back out of their quarters. They lifted her back onto her bunk bruised and semi-conscious. As she collapsed onto the bunk she thanked God that her torment was over. Little did she realize that her faith was about to be pushed beyond its limit.

Through the blood dripping into her eyes she was just able to see the two guards carrying Carla off to their room. Carla was silent still clutching her dirty blanket trembling with fear. She glanced back at Anna with tears streaming down her face as the guards' door slammed shut. Anna's heart sank but she was unable to move. She lay motionless, tortured by the unpleasant sounds now coming from behind the door.

As morning approached Carla lay on her bunk having been brutally raped by the two men. She tried to call out to her sister in the bunk above,

“Anna, Anna. Are you there?”

Her voice was barely a whisper and Anna was unconscious unable to hear her sister's faint cry. Carla lifted her spectacles from her bruised face. The frames were twisted and lenses were now broken. As she tried

to straighten the thin wire frame the glass fell out into her hand. Although trivial, the broken spectacles somehow seemed like the end of the world to Carla. With tears welling up in her eyes she looked up to heaven and took the broken glass to her wrists. She mustered one final cry,
“Sorry Father.”

Anna was awoken by a guard shouting
“Get up. Quickly .Get up. Outside all of you into the court yard.”

She raised her swollen head from the bunk and shuddered as the events of the previous evening flooded back. Her thoughts immediately turned to Carla. She tentatively climbed down from off her bunk trying to block out the pain. She knew that she must be strong for her sister’s sake. She focused on the guards, not looking directly at Carla, terrified of looking into her eyes and seeing the torment that she knew she too had suffered.

“Carla. Come on my darling we must obey their instructions. If we keep our heads down they may leave us alone. Come on Carla please we do not want to annoy them.”

Not getting any response Anna turned to help Carla from her bunk. She gasped unable to breath as she saw the bloodstained blanket. Anna fell to her knees and screamed as she pulled back the blanket and grabbed her sister’s lifeless body.

“No! No! My lord why. Why have you let this happen? Why?”

Anna held her head against her sister’s cold bloodstained cheek.

“Mother, father, where are you .Why am I alone now when I need you most”

As she cradled her lifeless sibling a guard rushed over, alerted by her screams. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to her feet

“Get up, quickly. Get outside, outside now. You have work to do. Quickly.”

Distraught, Anna tried to hold onto her sister but, overpowered by the guard, she was just able to grab Carla’s broken spectacles from the bunk and shove them into her pocket as she was forced to leave her body behind and go outside with the other women. Anna would never see her sister again.

In the courtyard the sun was just appearing beyond the distant hills. The women huddled together to keep warm as the cold morning air pierced their flimsy garments. The camp guards screamed instructions as their dogs jumped up and barked at the women who were now being herded into single file. At the front of the courtyard an SS officer bellowed instructions to the prisoners.

“Get into line, quickly. We need to count you. Quickly. Stand in line, do not speak. Silence!”

The guards began to walk along the rows of women who were stood shivering in the courtyard. One of the guards walked along the line in which Anna was standing. As he walked he counted the women aloud,

“One, Two, Three, four....”

As he counted each woman he struck her with his baton causing some of them to collapse on to the dusty floor.

“Get up you filth, stand up! Stand up! Five, six, seven.....”

The SS officer scanned the scene watching the head count take place. He continued to rant loudly at the women,

“When you have been counted we will bring the new prisoners into the courtyard. You will make them welcome and ensure they understand the rules of this camp. If anyone steps out of line you will all be punished.”

The guard approached Anna and struck her with his baton as he continued his count.

“Fifty seven, fifty eight.....”

Anna fell to her knees. As she fell she clutched the piece of broken glass from Carla’s spectacles. She looked up to the sky and brought the glass to her wrist.

“Father, please forgive me...”

As she was about to slide the broken glass across her vein the guard struck her again knocking the glass from her hand into the dirt.

“Get to your feet scum!”

Anna stumbled to her feet sobbing uncontrollably prompting a slap across the face from the guard. Anna held her head in her hands and wept as the courtyard filled with more women prisoners being herded from the cattle trains arriving outside the camp gates. Anna looked down at the floor as her tears dripped into the dust. Her spirit was extinguished and she prayed for death to come quickly.