

BOBBI NICOTERA

Cecylia

*History is nothing more than the belief in the senses,
the belief in a falsehood.*

—Nietzsche

Cecylia Helitski pulled her mother's rosary beads from the bottom of her canvas shoulder bag, touching the small crucifix lightly. Moments later, as the bag settled on to the crumbled pavement, she and Aleksi Dziura peered over a partially collapsed wall that had been, just a few months before, the north façade of an apartment building near the center of town, and saw a black cross pass by slowly. They watched the tank on which the cross was painted chew up, then spit out the plundered remains of the city: A three-legged chair, some broken china, a brown suitcase, the owner of the suitcase.

Four blocks beyond this scene, amid the thick smoke billowing from yet another pile of rubble which was all that remained of the Haberbush Brewery, several soldiers, their red and white armbands identifying them as members of the Home Army, unfurled a Polish flag from the top of a barricade that had been constructed on Zilazna Street. After five years of occupation, the struggle for Warsaw had begun.

—It's a pity, Cecylia thought, that Mama and Papa are not here to see this.



[Michał, Jozef, Maria, Cecylia]

But before this moment in time unfolded and spread out like that defiant flag, before the tanks rolled through town, before the Red Army stalled on the Eastern Banks of the Vistula, when this photo of the Helitski family was taken (in 1938, if the smeared date on the back can be trusted), Warsaw was not unlike most European cities at the time—trembling on the fragile edge of peace and prosperity. At times, unsure of whom to pledge allegiance. But mostly an agreeable place. And like most in the city, the Helitskis carved out a life of hard work and simple pleasures. Papa played the violin and wanted nothing so much as to have his daughter accompany him.

In the evenings, Cecylia's mother would look up from her sewing.

—Jozef, leave the girl alone. She'll play when she is ready.

But even as the Helitski's moved through moments like these, even as they did their best to compose a separate peace, three hundred miles away a mad German slouched eastward, thinking he'd found a masterful solution. Purging the world of the faulty, the defective, the not-right, would make enough room for the ideal, the flawless, the *perfekt*. Naturally, he'd need somewhere for all his perfect people to live. *Lebensraum*. And one day he noticed that Poland looked perfect indeed—after all, it wasn't being used by anyone of importance. But as everyone knows, before new tenants can move in, the old ones have to be removed. So like the slumlord he was, the mad German set about getting rid of them.

And young Cecylia Helitski saw it all.

She saw planes flying overhead. Just after the air raid sirens roused her from sleep. Or dinner. Or play.

She saw signs posted all over her city. In shop windows and restaurants, doctor's offices and bakeries, screaming in red and black, "*Nur für deutsche!*"

She saw rows and rows of soldiers marching, their round helmets like snail shells set low over identical stony faces, their heels striking the cracked pavement like the claw-end of a hammer.

She saw the shattered remains of Levin's storefront, glass like precious stones scattered and glittering on the sidewalk. Then she saw Levin, face down on the street in front of his shop—the street he used to proudly sweep clean every Monday morning—his wife and children surrounding his body like points on a yellow star.

And Cecylia wished she had not seen the things she saw.



[Great Grandfather Jozef]

But the one thing Cecylia saw that she truly wished with all her heart that she had not seen, wished with all her heart that she could wipe from her memory, wished until she reached those moments in her life when she was not able to remember even the most mundane details of the previous day, much less what happened sixty-five years ago, happened very early one morning in 1942. It was so early, in fact, that the moon was still visible from the bedroom window of the Helitski's third-floor apartment. It was on this particular morning that Cecylia awoke to the sound of wood splintering and a herd of hobnail boots galloping through her home.

On this particular morning, she saw a blue-eyed soldier grab her father by the hair, pull him from his bed and drag him down the stairwell. Moments later, as she heard the crack from the Lugar that was nestled at the base of her father's skull, Cecylia wished very much that she had learned to play the violin.



[Perhaps she is standing outside the courtyard
where my grandmother once lived]

A few weeks later—after her father’s bedroom arrest, staircase trial and back-alley execution—Cecylia, on her way to stand in line for stale bread and three rotten potatoes, was approached by a young woman named “Maria.” Cecylia would find out it was not her real name, that no one in the Resistance used real names.

Her father’s name was “Frasza.”

During that brief meeting, Cecylia would also learn that “Frasza” had smuggled medical supplies into Headquarters on Moniuszko Street. Bandages, sheets, a few vials of morphine, some rubbing alcohol. All for *Armia Krajowa*. The Home Army.

—Be very proud of your father. When the Rising begins, the supplies he provided will save the lives of many soldiers.

Cecylia was not old enough at the time to know the word “bittersweet.” But one does not have to know a word in order to feel it. And even though she did know the word “helpless” and did indeed feel that way, Maria could not convince Cecylia to join the AK that day, could not convince her to follow in her father’s unfortunate footsteps. So Cecylia watched Maria slowly walk away, watched her figure gradually fade and lapse into the hazy air, a ghost floating among the skeletons of the city. And as the young woman blurred into the distance, Cecylia’s own body became heavy with shame. She wanted to run after Maria, pledge her help as bravely as her father had. Instead, she remained rooted—the only stationary object in all of Warsaw.

Cecylia would eventually seek out Maria. A year or so later, after Cecylia’s mother disappeared, after fear and guilt gave way to frustration and rage, she would find herself standing in front of a building in ruin, a building in the process of

becoming not a building, the address matching the one on the slip of paper Maria had given her.

Cecylia's mother left one morning to get water. In occupied Warsaw, a simple task like going for water could easily take all day. The line at the water station—which was several miles from the Helitski's building—was interminably long. Often, there was not enough water for everyone, and after several hours of waiting, a soldier might suddenly appear and dismiss them with a wave of a plump hand. Those who still did not have water would have to walk several more miles to yet another location and yet another long line. This is possibly why Cecylia did not begin to worry until night fell and her mother had not yet returned.

By the third day, Cecylia knew her mother, like her father, was gone. Never again would she see her, kneeling, as always, in the pre-dawn darkness, the rosary threaded through her sturdy fingers, her lips moving almost imperceptibly in prayer.
—Hail Mary, full of grace.

Cecylia looked at Michał, asleep on a nest of damp and musty blankets in the corner of the cellar where the family had moved after that terrible fall morning, and she suddenly felt like the walls of her city—blown apart, crumbling and broken.
—We are orphans now, she thought.

Maria was her mother's name, too.



[Grandfather—before or after the occupation?]

A young man stood in the shadows of the entrance to an old nightclub the AK had turned into a command post. Even though Cecylia did not know the password (it was *blyskawicz*, lightning), the young man understood.

—Wait here while I get Commandant Maria. She'll be happy to see you.

The young man's eyes were a deep sea-green. As he disappeared behind the fractured spine of a wall, Cecylia felt peculiar. Not the kind of peculiar one feels when one knows she has suddenly become the sole provider for her twelve-year-old brother. No, Cecylia felt a different kind of peculiarity. One that made her fingertips tingle. And, for the first time in months, she smiled.

Later, Cecylia would learn his real name was Aleksy Dziura. And later still, perhaps as preparations for the Rising began to rush forward, as Cecylia learned how to assemble a weapon or stem the flow of blood from a bullet wound, she would roll that name around in her mouth, allowing her tongue to linger on the *l* of his first name, or roll the *r* of his last name longer than necessary. Or possibly she would concentrate on her own name and merge it with his. Had this not been Warsaw 1943, had Cecylia been merely a schoolgirl and not a messenger for an underground army, she would have written the name *Cecylia Dziura* in the margins of a notebook, surrounded it with a heart, pierced it with an arrow.



[“znajomi w Warszawie”]

On her first day as a member of the partisans, Battalion Commander “Theo” (the one holding the dog, perhaps?) gave Cecylia a canvas shoulder bag, a bicycle and a different name. The bag had a pocket sewn into the bottom of it. It was here that “Lucia” was to hide the messages she would carry from one command post to another.

—If we do nothing, the city will become the battle ground between the Germans and the Red Army. We must seize control of Warsaw and return it to Poland before it's too late!

Because the insurgents were scattered all over the city, Cecylia, like the hundreds of other runners working for the Underground, had to keep all posts communicating with one another. But instead of telegraph wire, she used a simple canvas bag and a bicycle.

—And the AK will pave the way for the triumphant return of the Polish Government! Theo claimed.

After her indoctrination speech, Cecylia's instructions were to return home and wait for further instructions.

—What about my brother?

—He should wait, too.

And so she returned to the cellar with her new bag, her new bike, her new name and a new feeling.

—Where's Mama? young Michał asked. I'm hungry.

A few days later, Aleksy arrived with more information. He sat next to Cecylia in a corner of the cellar, away from the other families that had emigrated from above-ground as the occupation grew increasingly unpredictable. Cecylia's first mission was to transport a message from Headquarters to the Propaganda Department across town. Even though the German street detachments were not very smart and would probably not suspect anything of a young girl in a sundress and sandals riding her bike, the patrols were impulsive and brutal, known for shooting civilians on sight, without warning or provocation. So Cecylia still had to be quick and inconspicuous. If the soldiers caught her, what would become of Michał? In the days and weeks to come, it was the thought of her young brother that kept her going. Mama and Papa were gone. She could not disappear, too. In those moments, as she pedaled across town, maneuvering around the piles of abandoned furniture and overturned streetcars, around groups of inattentive German soldiers and heaps of unattended bodies, she felt as if a trench had been dug deep inside, dividing her. One side left to mourn her parents, the other to worry about Michał. One side facing the past full of memories, the other side facing the future empty of certainties.

Cecylia did not like being away from Michał, leaving him in the damp and dark cellar of their apartment building with only the rats for company, so after a few weeks, she moved them both into the old nightclub where she first met Aleksy. The two remaining Helitskis found space amid soldiers tending to weapons and young women organizing food supplies. A few of them prepared a first aid station. Maria

and Theo and the other commandants issued orders from this makeshift command post as well.

—Michał, go help Marta with the canned goods.



[Did the Helitskis have a front porch?]

It had been nearly six months since she last saw her mother, six months that Cecylia spent seeing her face in the faces of strangers that passed solemnly on the street, finding her scent in the aromas that drifted in through a cracked window while Aleksi told her more about the insurgent's operations. In those moments Cecylia's thoughts would drift back to her home, to days with her parents.

Like most young girls her age, Cecylia found it increasingly difficult to get along with her mother. As she grew older, she longed for freedom from her mother's watchful eye, her constant instructions and reprimands.

Often, the two Helitski women, after bickering over some petty or inconsequential chore or request, would barely speak, going for days exchanging only a few words between them.

And now the young girl found herself alone, with so much to say.

As the insurgents prepared for their final battle, Cecylia carried out several missions. Packets containing coded messages were placed in the hidden pocket of her canvas bag. Barley was poured on top of those packets as a counterweight and disguise. Again, she transported as quickly and furtively as possible the communiqués from one outpost to another. Aleksi would sometimes follow behind, the red and white armband of his uniform hidden beneath an overcoat.

Aleksi was always behind her. That is what she would think. Convince herself he was there, even when she knew he was not. At times, she felt as if there would be a tomorrow. She understood this in a way she could not verbalize, yet somehow, she

felt it to be true. In the way she was suddenly conscious of herself, the way her blood pulsed at her temples, the way her lungs filled with air after months of holding her breath.



[Found in “The Key of Heaven, A Manual of Roman Catholic Devotions”]

Almost every night, Cecylia would lie in the darkness, thinking. Sometimes, when the drone of planes overhead subsided, or the machine guns in the distance were silent, she could almost hear her father playing a sweet and slow melody on his violin, or hear her mother’s voice in prayer. Then Michał’s even breathing would soar over to her in the stillness, blasting a hole in the wall of her thoughts. He had begun to suck his thumb again, as he had done as a toddler.

Cecylia would return to headquarters, edgy and afraid. Often, on her way back to base, she would find things—some bread, a potato—and bring it to her comrades, sometimes returning with more contraband than when she left. Once she found a prayer book, torn but intact. Another time she found bandages. Real bandages in the alley behind the hospital. They were sooty and ripped, but they would be of use. Cautiously, she stuffed the rolls into her bag as she imagined her father had done once, and perhaps for just a moment she felt a little less like the broken landscape surrounding her. Cecylia would empty the contents of her bag for her comrades to pilfer, and then Michał would put his head on her lap, his hand in his mouth and drift off to sleep, an infant once again. Cecylia tried to remember what her mother had done, not so many years ago.

—How can it hurt, Cecylia? Alekski would ask.

—It’s not good for him.

—Let him go. Maybe he is dreaming of a big supper!

—And when he awakens hungry?



[The back reads “10 Ulica Miła, 1944”]

On the last day of July 1944, Cecylia had orders to report to “Marushka” at District Command on Kopernik Street.

Pedaling across town, she saw heavy cumulus clouds hanging low. The darkening streets were silent. No sirens, no shouting, no people gathered in restless groups outside smoke-blackened buildings. Even the stray dogs that roamed the city in packs were nowhere in sight. She made it across the deserted streets faster than she ever had before. Inside, the post was a hive of energy—as if the storm clouds that had been gathering in the late summer sky were suddenly hovering in the room, crackling with electricity.

Runners gathered around Marushka.

—Take this information to your Battalion Stations: August 1, 1500 hours.

Cecylia grabbed her shoulder bag—it was somehow heavier now, bursting with the importance of their cause. And as she pedaled furiously back to her home station, she truly felt the weight of what was to come. Her mind was noisy with thoughts—of Michał and Aleksy, of Mama and Papa, of her life and her future. She thought about the things she did not want to think about. What happens when someone dies? Mama always talked about God and Heaven and Jesus. She said good Catholics would go to Heaven. Is that where she is now? With Papa? Can they see me? Do they know? Are they proud of me?

—If I die, do my memories die too?

Cecylia was breathless and exhausted as she rounded the corner. Michał and Aleksy greeted her amid the rubble and debris of the building’s portal. Soon Aleksy would get his orders, too.

From several blocks away, she heard shouts and the low hum of a Panzer's approach.



[more “znajomi”?]

The insurgents had anticipated a forty-eight-hour battle. Perhaps a few days. No more than a week. But the struggle for Warsaw would continue for nearly three months.

And then, perhaps on one cool morning in late September, as Cecylia was retching into a chamber pot, Maria would understand. Perhaps she would secure papers for all three—Cecylia, Michał and Aleksi. They would board a Red Cross train and head north. Were the trains running anywhere but to internment camps then? Perhaps they escaped on foot through the forests to the south. Three bandits posing as a civilian family, their forged papers recasting them—*nicht partisan*. Cecylia and Aleksi would say goodbye to Alfonse and Kasper, their comrades. And as they ran silently through streets lit only by the smoldering flames of distant fires, Cecylia longed to return to the relative safety of the apartment, to sit with the men who had become close friends. To listen to the stories they told of their activities for the Underground. How Kasper found himself working for the Germans in an arms factory in Praga. How he would deliberately assemble the shells incorrectly, rendering them useless. Or maybe it was Alfonse.

Cecylia would feel her mother and father slip from her. As Poland gave way to Lithuania, so too, thoughts of her family would blur, images fluttering from her mind like papers out of her canvas bag, a bag too full of the necessary things—clothes and money and forged papers—that it could no longer hold so many memories. Her life in Poland would be reduced to what little she could carry on her shoulder, what little she could carry in her memory.

Cecylia was almost eighteen years old.



[Who is holding my mother in this photo?]

Irena Dziura was born in London, in June 1945, just a year after the Allies landed in Normandy, two years after her grandmother disappeared on the streets of Warsaw, three years after her grandfather was pulled from his bed. Cecylia and Aleksy were married one week later at the Chelsea Register Office.

They sailed for America on Irena's first birthday and settled briefly in Elizabeth, New Jersey, all four of them sharing space with a colony of cockroaches in a tenement on Perl Street. Then, when Michał was old enough to get work, probably about one year later, they moved to Pottsville, Pennsylvania, where Aleksy and Michał worked side-by-side in the coal mines.

The Dziura's would have no more children after Irena.



[Found in a silver frame on the fireplace mantel in my mother's house]

This story is, of course, almost entirely conjecture. Yes, Cecylia Dziura (née Helitski), my grandmother, my *babcia*, was born in Warsaw and, if my history books taught me anything, she was a young girl during the occupation. What I do

know: She managed to flee the city with my uncle Michał (we called him Michael) and my grandfather Aleksi and the little family landed in England after a handful of months in Switzerland. I know that my great-grandparents were not with them but I don't know why. Perhaps they truly had been killed by the Nazis.

It's not much, is it? These facts. Not enough to fill in a whole life. Cecylia passed away early this morning. The Schuylkill Manor Nursing Home in St. Clair called me, her *wnuczka* and her only living relative. Irena, my mother, seen in this photograph with Cecylia in 1948, passed away last spring. My grandfather was killed in a cave-in at the Pine Forest Mine not long after this photo of his wife and child was taken. Uncle Michael survived the cave in, but, still, he is gone too. Old age is the ultimate tragedy of life, I suppose.

So I sit at my kitchen table, staring at the shoulder bag Baba gave me years ago. At the time I was both bewildered and embarrassed—why a senile old woman would bequeath to me such a dirty and disintegrating piece of canvas as if it were a treasured heirloom, I had no idea.

By the time I found the photographs folded into a brittle, yellowing envelope and tucked into a secret pocket at the bottom, it was too late. My mother was dead of cancer, my *babcia* could not even recognize herself, much less identify anyone in those photographs. And whatever may have transpired between those dots in Cecylia's history, whatever she might have witnessed, endured, tolerated, performed, thought, felt, dreamed will remain unconnected. A picture never to be fully painted.

The evaporation of her mind rendered the history book of her life blank.

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