

Schindler's list  
- Thomas Kennedy  
Poldek by Sophie

## TWENTY-ONE

Poldek Pfefferberg shared a room on the second floor of a nineteenth-century house at the end of Józefińska Street. Its windows looked down over the ghetto wall at the Vistula, where Polish barges passed up stream and down in ignorance of the ghetto's last day and SS patrol boats puttered as casually as pleasure craft. Here Pfefferberg waited with his wife Mila for the Sonderkommandos to arrive and order them out into the street. Mila was a small, nervous girl of twenty-two years, a refugee from Łódź whom Poldek had married in the first days of the ghetto. She came from generations of physicians, her father being a surgeon who had died young in 1937, her mother a dermatologist who, during an Aktion in the ghetto of Tarnow last year, had suffered the same death as Rosalia Blau of the epidemic hospital, being cut down with automatic fire while standing amid her patients.

Mila had lived a sweet childhood, even in Jew-baiting Łódź, and had begun her own medical education in Vienna the year before the war. They had met when Łódź people were shipped down to Cracow in 1939. Mila had found herself billeted in the same apartment as the lively Poldek Pfefferberg.

Now he was already, like Mila, the last of his family. His mother, who had once redecorated Schindler's Straszewskiego Street apartment, had been shipped with his father to the ghetto of Tarnow. From there, it would be discovered in the end, they were taken to Belzec and murdered. His sister and brother-in-law, on Aryan papers, had vanished in the Pawiak prison in Warsaw. He and Mila had only each other. There was a temperamental gulf between them: Poldek was a neighbourhood boy, a leader, an organiser; the type who, when authority appeared and asked what in God's name was happening, would step



forward and speak up. Mila was quieter, rendered more so by the unspeakable destiny that had swallowed her family. In a peaceable era, the mix between them would have been excellent. She was not only clever but wise; she was a quiet centre. She had a gift for irony, and Poldek Pfefferberg often needed her to restrain his torrents of oratory. Today, however, on this impossible day, they were in conflict.

Though Mila was willing, should the chance come, to leave the ghetto, even to entertain a mental image of herself and Poldek as partisans in the forest, she feared the sewers. Poldek had used them more than once as a means of leaving the ghetto, even though the police were sometimes to be found at one end or the other. His friend and former lecturer, Dr D, had also mentioned the sewers recently as an escape route which might not be guarded on the day the Sonderkommandos moved in. The thing would be to wait for the early winter dusk. The door of the doctor's house was mere metres from a manhole cover. Once down in there, you took the leithand tunnel which brought you beneath the streets of non-ghetto Podgórze to an outlet on the embankment of the Vistula near the Zatorska Street canal. Yesterday D had given him the definite news. D and his wife would attempt the sewers exit and the Pfefferbergs were welcome to join them. Poldek could not at that stage commit Mila and himself. Mila had a fear, a reasonable one, that the SS might flood the sewers with gas or might resolve the matter anyhow by arriving early at the Pfefferbergs' room at the far end of Józefińska Street.

It was a slow, tense day up in the attic room, waiting to find out which way to jump. Neighbours must also have been waiting. Perhaps some of them, not wanting to deal with the delay, had marched up the road already with their packages and hopeful suitcases, for in a way it was a mix of sounds fit to draw you down the stairs – violent noise dimly heard from blocks away, and here a silence in which you could hear the ancient, indifferent timbers of the house ticking away the last and worst hours of your tenancy. At murky noon Poldek and Mila chewed on their brown bread, the three-hundred grammes each they had in stock. The recurrent noises of the Aktion swept up to the

corner of Wegierska, a long block away, and then, towards mid-afternoon, receded again. There was near silence then. Someone tried uselessly to flush the recalcitrant toilet on the first-floor landing. It was nearly possible at that hour to believe that they had been overlooked.

The last dun afternoon of their life in Number 2 Józefińska refused, in spite of its darkness, to end. The light in fact was poor enough, thought Poldek, for them to try for the sewer earlier than dusk. He wanted, now that it was quiet, to go and consult with Dr D. *Please*, said Mila. But he soothed her. He would keep off the streets, moving through the network of holes that connected one building with another. He piled up the reassurances. The streets at this end would seem to be clear of patrols. He would evade the occasional OD or wandering SS man at the intersections, and be back within five minutes. Darling, darling, he told her, I have to check with D.

He went down the backstairs and into the yard through the hole in the stables' wall, not emerging into the open street until he'd reached the Labour Office. There he risked crossing the broad carriageway, entering the warren of the triangular block of houses opposite, meeting occasional groups of confused men conveying rumours and discussing options in kitchens, sheds, yards and corridors. He came out into Krakusa Street just across from the doctor's place. He crossed unnoticed by a patrol working down near the southern limit of the ghetto, three blocks away, in the area where Schindler had witnessed his first demonstration of the extremities of Reich racial policy.

D's building was empty, but in the yard Poldek met a dazed middle-aged man who told him that the Sonderkommandos had already visited the place and that D and his wife had first hidden, and then gone for the sewers. Perhaps it's the right thing to do, said the man. They'll be back, the SS. Poldek nodded; he knew now the tactics of the Aktion, having already survived so many.

He went back the way he'd come and again was able to cross the road. But he found Number 2 empty, Mila vanished with their baggage, all doors opened, all rooms vacant. He wondered if in fact they were not all hidden down at the hospital – Dr D,



Mrs D, Mila. Perhaps the Ds had called for her out of respect for her anxiety and her long medical lineage.

Poldek hurried out through the stables again, and by alternative passageways reached the hospital courtyard. Like disregarded flags of surrender, bloodied bedding hung from the balconies of both the upper floors. On the cobblestones was a mound of victims. They lay, some of them, with their heads split open, their limbs crooked. They were not of course the terminal patients of Doctors B and D. They were people who had been detained here during the day and then executed. Some of them must have been imprisoned upstairs, shot, then tumbled into the yard.

Always thereafter, when questioned about the corpses in the ghetto hospital yard, Poldek would say sixty to seventy, though he had no time to count that tangled pyramid. Cracow being a provincial town and Poldek having been raised as a very sociable child in Podgórze and then in the Centrum, visiting with his mother the affluent and distinguished people of the city, he recognised in that heap familiar faces, old clients of his mother's, people who had asked him about school at the Kosciuszko gymnasium, got precocious answers in reply and fed him cake and sweets for his looks and his charm. Now they were shamefully exposed and jumbled in that blood-red courtyard.

Somehow it did not occur to Pfefferberg to look for the body of his wife and the Ds in that frightful heap. He sensed why he had been placed there. He believed unshakably in better years to come, years of just tribunals. He had that sense of being a witness which Schindler had experienced on the hill beyond Rekawka.

He was distracted by the sight of a wash of people in Wegierska Street beyond the courtyard. They moved towards the Rekawka gate with the dull but not desperate languor of factory workers on a Monday morning or even of supporters of a defeated football team. Among this wave of people he noticed neighbours from Józefńska Street. He walked out of the yard, carrying like a weapon up his sleeve his memory of it all. What had happened to Mila? Did any of them know? She'd already left, they said.

The Sonderkommandos had been through. She'd already be out of the gate, on her way to the place. To Płaszów.

He and Mila of course had a contingency plan for an impasse like this. If one of them ended up in Płaszów, it would be better for the other to attempt to stay out. He knew that Mila had her gift for unobtrusiveness, a good gift for prisoners, but also she could be racked by extraordinary hunger. He'd be her purveyor on the outside. He was sure these things could be managed. It was no soft decision, though - the bemused crowds, barely guarded by the SS, now making for the south gate and the barbed-wire factories of Płaszów, were an indication of where most people, probably quite correctly, considered that long-term safety lay.

The light, though late now, was sharp, as if snow were coming on. Poldek was able to cross the road and enter the empty apartments beyond the pavement. He wondered whether they were in fact empty or full of ghetto dwellers concealed cunningly or naively, those who believed that wherever the SS took you, it led in the end to the gas chambers.

Poldek was looking for a first-class hiding place. He came by back passages to the timber yard on Józefńska. Timber was a scarce commodity. There were no great structures of sawn planks to hide behind. The place that looked best was behind the iron gates at the yard entrance. Their size and blackness seemed a promise of the coming night. Later he would not be able to believe that he'd chosen them with such enthusiasm.

He hunched in behind the one that was pushed back against the wall of the abandoned office. Through the crack left between the gate and the gatepost, he could see up Józefńska in the direction he'd come from. Behind that freezing iron leaf he watched the slice of cold evening, a luminous grey, and pulled his coat across his chest. A man and his wife hurried past, rushing for the gate, dodging among the dropped bundles, the suitcases labelled with futile large letters. *Kleinfeld*, they proclaimed in the evening light. *Lehrer*, *Banane*, *Weinberg*, *Smolar*, *Strus*, *Rosenthal*, *Birman*, *Zeitlin*. Names against which no receipts would be issued. "Heaps of goods laden with memo-



ries," the young artist Bau had written of such scenes. "Where are my treasures?"

From beyond this battleground of fallen luggage he could hear the aggressive baying of dogs. Then into Józefińska Street, striding on the far pavement, came three SS men, one of them dragged along by a canine flurry which proved to be two large police dogs. The dogs dragged their handler into Number 41 Józefińska, but the other two waited on the pavement. Poldék had paid most of his attention to the dogs. They looked like a lean cross between Dalmatians and German Shepherds. Pfeifferberg still saw Cracow as a genial city, and dogs like that looked foreign, as if they'd been brought in from some other and more savage ghetto. For, even in this last hour, among the litter of packages, behind an iron gate, he was grateful for the city and presumed that the ultimate frightfulness was always performed in some other, less gracious place. This last assumption was wiped away in the next half minute. The worst thing, that is, occurred in Cracow. Through the crack in the gate, he saw the event which revealed that if there was a pole of evil it was not situated in Tarnow, Czeszochowa, Lwów or Warsaw as you thought. It was at the north side of Józefińska Street a hundred and twenty paces away. From 41 came a screaming woman and a child. One dog had the woman by the cloth of her dress, the flesh of her hip. The SS man who was the servant of the dogs took the child and flung it against the wall. The sound of it made Pfeifferberg close his eyes and he heard the shot which put an end to the woman's howling protest.

Just as Pfeifferberg would think of the pile of bodies in the hospital yard as sixty or seventy, he would always testify that the child was two or three years of age.

Perhaps before she was even dead, certainly before he himself even knew he had moved, as if the decision had come from some mettesome gland behind his forehead, Pfeifferberg gave up the freezing iron gate, since it would not protect him from the dogs, and found himself in the open yard. He adopted at once the military bearing he'd learned in the Polish army. He emerged from the timber yard like a man on a ceremonial assignment, and bent and began lifting the bundles of luggage

out of the carriage way and heaping them against the walls of the yard. He could hear the three SS men approaching, the dogs' snarling breath was palpable and the whole evening was stretched to breaking by the tension in their leashes. When he believed they were some ten paces off, he straightened and permitted himself, playing the biddable Jew of some European background, to notice them. He saw that their boots and riding briches were splashed with blood, but they were not abashed to appear before other humans dressed that way. The officer in the middle was the tallest. He did not look like a murderer, there was a sensitivity to the large face and a subtle line to the mouth.

Pfeifferberg in his shabby suit clicked his cardboard heels in the Polish manner and saluted this tall one in the middle. He had no knowledge of SS ranks and did not know what to call the man. "Herr," he said. "Herr Commandant!"

It was a term his brain, under threat of its extinction, had thrown forth with electric energy. It proved to be the precise word, for the tall man was Amon Goeth in the full vitality of his afternoon, elated at the day's progress and as capable of instant and instinctive exercises of power as Poldék Pfeifferberg was of instant and instinctive subterfuge.

"Herr Commandant, I respectfully report to you that I received an order to put all the bundles together to one side of the road so that there will be no obstruction of the thoroughfare."

The dogs were craning towards him through their collars. They expected, on the basis of their black training and the rhythm of today's Aktion, to be let fly at Pfeifferberg's wrist and groin. Their snarls were not simply feral, but full of a frightful confidence in the outcome, and the question was whether the SS man on the Herr Commandant's left had enough strength to restrain them. Pfeifferberg didn't expect much. He would not be surprised to be buried by dogs and after a time to be delivered from their teeth by a bullet. If the woman hadn't got away with pleading her motherhood, he stood little chance with stories of bundles, of clearing a street in which human traffic had, in any case, been abolished.

But the commandant was more amused by Pfeifferberg than



he had been by the mother. Here was a little wedge of a Ghettoensch playing soldier in front of three SS officers and making his report, servile if true, and almost endearing if not. His manner was above all a break in style for a victim. Of all today's doomed, not one other had tried heel-clicking. The Herr Commandant could therefore exercise the kingly right to show irrational and unexpected amusement. His head went back, his long upper lip retracted. It was a broad honest laugh and his colleagues smiled and shook their heads at its extent.

In his excellent baritone, Untersturmführer Goeth said, "We're looking after everything. The last group is leaving the ghetto. Verschwinde!" That is, Disappear, little Polish clicking soldier!

Pfefferberg began to run, not looking back, and it would not have surprised him if he had been felled from behind. Running, he got to the corner of Wegierska and rounded it, past the hospital yard where some hours ago he had been a witness. The dark came down as he neared the gate, and the ghetto's last familiar alleys faded. In Podgórze Place, the last official huddle of prisoners stood in a loose cordon of SS men and Ukrainians. "I must be the last one out alive," he told people in that crowd.

Or if not he it was Wulkan the jeweller and his wife and son. Wulkan had been working these past months in the Progress factory and, knowing what was to happen, had approached Treuhänder Unkelbach with a large diamond concealed for two years in the lining of a coat. Herr Unkelbach, he told the supervisor, I'll go wherever I'm sent, but my wife isn't up to all that noise and violence. Wulkan and his wife and son would wait at the OD police station under the protection of a Jewish policeman they knew and then perhaps during the day Herr Unkelbach would come and convey them bloodlessly to Płaszów.

Since this morning they had sat in a cubicle in the police station, but it had been as frightful a wait as if they'd stayed in their kitchen, the boy alternately bored and terrified, his wife continuing to hiss her reproaches. Where is he? Is he going to come at all? These people, these people! Early in the afternoon,

Unkelbach did in fact appear, came into the Ordnungsdienst to use the lavatory and have coffee. Wulkan, emerging from the office in which he'd been waiting, saw a Treuhänder Unkelbach he had never known before, a man in the uniform of an SS NCO, smoking and exchanging sharp animated sentences with another SS man: using one hand to take hungry gulps of coffee, to bite off mouthfuls of smoke, to savage a lump of brown bread while his pistol, still held in the left hand, lay like a resting animal on the police station counter and dark spatters of blood ran across the breast of his uniform. The eyes he turned to meet Wulkan's did not see the jeweller. Wulkan knew at once that Unkelbach was not backing out of the deal, he simply did not remember it. The man was drunk, and not on alcohol. If Wulkan had called to him, the answer would have been a stare of ecstatic incomprehension. Followed, very likely, by something worse.

Wulkan gave it up and returned to his wife. She kept saying, Why don't you talk to him, I'll talk to him if he's still there. But then she saw the shadow in Wulkan's eyes and sneaked a look around the edge of the door. Unkelbach was getting ready to leave. She saw the unaccustomed uniform, the blood of small traders and their wives splashed across its front. She uttered a whimper and returned to her seat.

Like her husband, she now fell into a well-founded despair, and the waiting became somehow easier. The OD man they knew restored them to the usual pulse of hope and anxiety. He told them that all the OD, apart from Spira's praetorians, had to be out of the ghetto by 6 p.m. and on the Wieliczka Road to Płaszów. He would see if there was a way of getting the Wulkans into one of the vehicles.

After dark had fallen in the wake of Pfefferberg's passage up Wegierska, after the last party of prisoners had assembled at the gate into Podgórze Place, while Dr D and his wife were moving eastward in the company and under the cover of a group of rowdy Polish drunks, and while the squads of the Sonderkommandos were resting and taking a smoke before the last search of the tenements, two horse-drawn carts came to the door of the police station. The Wulkan family were hidden by the OD men under cartons of paperwork and bundles of clothing.

Symche Spira and his OD associates were not in sight, were on the job somewhere in the streets, drinking coffee with NCOs, celebrating their permanence within the system.

But before the carts had turned out of the ghetto gate, the Wulkans, fattened to the boards, heard the nearly continuous sound of rifle and small arms fire from the streets behind them. It meant that Arnon Goeth and Willi Haase, Albert Hujar, Horst Pilarzik and some hundreds of others were bursting into the attic niches, the false ceilings, the crates in cellars, and finding those who all day had maintained a hopeful silence.

More than four thousand such people were discovered overnight and executed in the streets. In the next two days their bodies were taken to Piaszów on open platformed trucks and buried in two mass graves in the woods beyond the new camp.