

She was cold, tired, and scared. She clutched the Star of David close to her chest, the silver chain cold against her neck. Everything was silent, other than the deep roar of planes overhead or the occasional whimper of her younger brother, clinging to their mother's frayed, white dress. It was December, 1944 and the Muller family was already safe in the bomb shelters beneath the town, but Mia and her family had to remain in their cold, dark basement. Mia wondered if there was another family of Jews like hers, hiding in a basement and praying that the high pitched screams of the bombs would keep distant.

"Why can't we go to the bomb shelters if it is safer there?" she asked through tears, even though she already knew the answer.

"Because," said her mother, "If anyone sees us they would know that the Muller's are protecting us. Then they would be punished just as terribly as we would."

A whistle followed by a low boom made the foundation of the house rumble as a bomb landed in the distance. She tightened her grip on the necklace, the only thing other than the clothes on her back that she could bring from home. Mia and her family had been hiding in the cold, dark basement for nearly a month now. She knows not to complain. It is not her parents' fault that they were the wrong religion. According to Hitler, her family didn't even deserve to be alive.

Often she found herself sitting in the dark basement, deep in thought. She thought about her home, now the empty shell of the place she spent her childhood. She tried to imagine the books on their shelves, filled with the words she had read so many times on those rainy days she was not allowed to go out and play. She remembered sitting on the creaky wooden stools at the kitchen table, singing songs with her mother and father while they prepared meals in the small kitchen. She thought about school and spending the breaks during class giggling with her friends and playing the silly games they made up together.

She glanced over at her brother, sleeping softly, his small figure pulled tight to their mother's side. Mia thought of the days he would run

around the yard pretending to be a soldier, or playing with his small toys on the floor while she did her school work, laughing and enjoying every second of life. Now he merely clutches his mother's hand and waits in fear for what is to come next, the joy drained from his now gaunt, pale face. She longed for the days where they all were happy and safe; however, she knew that they could never go back to their lives of cheer and comfort.

It had been two hours since they heard the last explosion, and Mia's eyes grew heavy with sleep. She hadn't had a night of restful sleep since the war had reached her town. The ground in the basement was cold and her back had begun to ache. Every night, she would go to bed hungry, having only eaten the few scraps the Mullers had managed to save for her. Her dreams were plagued with the sound of bombs raining down on her home and visions of her family being taken away from her and dragged down the long halls of the camps she had heard rumors of.

She awoke abruptly the next day to the loud sound of fists pounding on the front door, then footsteps followed by muffled voices just outside. The door to the basement, just feet away from where she sat. She held her breath. "*What if it is the Nazis here to take us away?*" she thought. She heard Mrs. Muller call for her husband. The voices grew louder. She woke the rest of her family as quickly as she could, but it wasn't fast enough. Loud boots stomped down the stairs down into the dimly lit basement where her family sat, frozen with fear. The loud words of the tall uniformed soldiers all melted together and before she knew it, two of the soldiers had grabbed Mia by the arms and pulled her up the stairs. She kicked and screamed, grasping at their uniforms, but it was no use. The men seemed untouched. She was too weak from hunger to resist. The soldiers lifted her into the back of a truck overfilled with others she could only assume were Jewish like herself. She watched as the rest of her family was dragged from the house and put in another truck just in front of her, but felt as though it was miles away.

The road was bumpy. Some people whispered amongst themselves, others held their families close, some cried softly, their tears spilling on the metal floor of the truck. Mia felt sick. The rough movement of the

truck mixed with the fear of what is next made her stomach ache. Mia felt the gentle tap of the girl seated next to her. She looked up to find a pretty young girl with long dark hair and chestnut skin holding out a jar of water to her. "*She must be a gypsie,*" she thought as she took the cool glass jar. She was parched from the journey, which had taken hours, and took sparing sips from the jar. Before she could thank the girl, the truck came to an abrupt stop. She heard yelling from the truck in front of hers, the one holding the rest of her family. Before she could react, she was absorbed into the sea of people being herded off the truck by Nazi soldiers calling them names like, "*Filthy Jews*". Mia was confused and scared. Why is it that Hitler thinks her religion is wrong? What did she do to deserve such awful treatment? What did *she* do wrong?

The crowd of people flooded through the looming metal doors of the concentration camps, pulling Mia along with them. Once she entered the towering doors, she saw clusters of people huddling together and she heard the loud boots of marching soldiers. Suddenly she was grabbed by the arms and thrown into a small cell with three other girls. She glanced up at her new cellmates and recognized one as the kind girl from the truck.

"Where did they take my family? What's going to happen to us?" Mia asked, hot tears brimming her eyes.

"I don't know. They took my parents too. My name is Florence," Said the girl.

"My name is Mia," she responded.

"My family is from Rome, but my father thought it would be safer if we left home," Florence said, fighting back tears with a thin mask of false bravery across her face.

The group of girls waited for hours, fearful when thundering footsteps came down the long hallway of the dimly lit prison. Occasionally they would hear the pleas of other prisoners to passing guards begging for freedom or for a glimpse of a missing loved one. Suddenly, after four hours of waiting in suspense, a young German guard, no older than herself, with crisp, blond hair and icy, blue eyes instructed

the girls to stand. He ushered them down the long hall of cells holding innocent families just like hers.

Mia took a quick glance and caught eyes with the young guard. She saw something in his pale, piercing eyes. It was fear. Or something else. It was remorse.

She built up the courage and let out her burning question.

“W-why do you help them?” She inquired.

The boy looked shocked. Utterly surprised that a prisoner, nonetheless a Jew, would dare speak to him in such a manner. But then, his face changed and a new look flickered across his face.

“I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t have to, believe me,” The boy said his face growing red, tears brimming his eyes, “My father would have lost his job had I refused and we all would have been brought here. I am sorry.”

Mia believed him. Why would a young boy want to spend his youth in a dark, cold place, having to see the looks of despair and fear on so many innocent faces.

The pale faced guard divided the group, putting Mia and Florence in a cell with even more people, appearing thin and gray.

As night fell Mia became even more worried about her family. There was no telling where they were or if they were alive at all. She settled into the corner of the confined cell and tried to sleep.

She was woken from a restless sleep by the hushed whispers of her cell mates. She caught bits and pieces of their conversation. She heard the rumors of Soviet and British troops freeing the prisoners of the camps. One person, she couldn’t see who through the dense darkness, said that American soldiers had arrived in the southern end of Italy and were bringing aid to Germany. She felt her heart leap with even the slightest hope that she would be released. Even the thought of seeing her parents and brother again was enough to fill her chest with a swelling hope.

Weeks had passed, as she was doing the back breaking labor assigned to her by the Nazi guardsmen, she heard yelling followed by gunshots. Her stomach lurched in fear as the guards took up arms and

ran off to see what was happening. Suddenly, soldiers in uniforms that she didn't recognize and speaking in a language she didn't understand burst through the door. They began ushering everyone out the ominous steel doors that she came through what felt like years ago.

She was helped onto a confined train car and given a blanket and a bottle of clear, icy water. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw them. Her mother carried her younger brother on her hip, both looking more frail and gray than before.

“Mama!” She shouted, over the commotion around her.

“Mia!” Her brother exclaimed, pulling their mother towards Mia by the sleeve.

They hugged and wept and told stories of their traumatic time behind the stone walls of the camp.

The joy of the reunion only lasted momentarily as she was told about her father. He had been taken. Taken along with many other men and women, led down the dark hallway that only the Nazi soldiers returned from. Her father was gone. They had stolen the person that protected her family from harm and left them helpless. The person she confided in and made her feel safe. She was afraid. Her family had no way of supporting each other. Without her father her family had nothing, no way of paying for food or shelter. Mia was heartbroken.

On the bumpy ride to a camp that Mia had gathered was for “displaced families”, Mia remained silent. She knew that this wasn't over. Her family was torn apart and tortured for months because they weren't seen as human. She still didn't understand why being Jewish made her into a monster. She looked around at the gray faced people around her. All of them had been bruised and beaten, broken and scarred, all because others needed someone to blame.

As she was sitting there, a man spoke up, breaking the near silence. He began to pray, his low voice rising over the crowd, silencing the low whisper of conversation. He prayed that the loved ones lost in the camp found rest. He was praying for his daughter, her father, Florence's mother, and everyone stolen from life by the soldiers in green,

supporting the Swastika on the chest of their uniforms and carrying the blood red flag. He prayed for the safety of those sitting right there with him. Mia knew that his words had touched the hearts of everyone there who was grieving and hurting. Mia thought as she listened. She knew that millions were still suffering just the same as she had. Millions were still being tortured. Mia knew right then that she had to help. She would make it her life's ambition to save just one small, Jewish family, cowering in a cold, dark basement, just like hers, praying for rescue.