

# En Pointe

*by* Jay Faulkner

Personal space was little more than a distant memory as a multitude of people were forced into uncomfortable proximity; little more than cattle. They huddled even closer - for warmth and comfort - bodies pressed together despite the fetid smells of humanity that pervaded the air. Sweat, vomit, urine and other bodily excretions stained clothing and floor alike as people languished in their own filth. Three days inside the wagon, as the train pushed constantly onwards, without food or water had taken its toll mentally, physically and emotionally. Blank faces stared ahead of them with unseeing eyes. Low moans of despair were muted by deprivation and the never ending cacophony of the shriek of metal on metal as the miles of track were eaten up.

Time's passage was marked by the change in light that filtered through the gaps in the wooden walls; the moonlight streaming through the frigid air marking the third night together since leaving Westerbork. Then they had kept themselves separate — family units protective of each other and fearful of everyone else - from the others, brought together by their common heritage and nothing else, the yellow star sewn roughly onto their clothing their only link

And amongst them all one man was even more apart. An oasis in the desert of bodies, he sat alone, back against the door that creaked with a promise of flying open every time the train took a sharp corner; it never did. It was only false promise. His breath fogged out, sending angels of smoke up into the air above him to mingle with the others in the wagon — the only contact that anyone wished to have with him. His eyes stared ahead, watching but not seeing; ignoring and ignored.

Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a small packet, wrapped in simple, coarse brown paper. The noise as he pulled it open broke

through the silence dramatically but no-one reacted. No-one moved. He pulled the hard, crumbling bit of cheese from within its wrapper and took the smallest of bites, savoring the flavor and texture with a small groan as it hit his tongue. His second bit was stopped before it could begin; the cheese was held in a tight grip as, from within the press of bodies, a small form moved towards him.

“What is that?” The young girl asked him, eyes wide — made more so by the sunken cheeks beneath them. She stared at him, unmoving, her hands clutching at the bright pink bundle crushed against her grime-stained dress.

“It is cheese,” he answered sharply, looking around the sea of faces, but relaxing - slightly - when he saw that no one else had moved. “It is my cheese.”

“Can I have some?” Her voice quavered as she moved forward, unconsciously reaching out a small, dirt-encrusted hand towards him. As she did so the bundle slipped from her grip, falling a short distance before the laces of the ballet shoes that were tied around her wrist halted the drop.

“Are they yours?” he asked, pointing with the cheese towards the shoes.

“Yes,” she answered with the shadow of a smile. “Papa said I could take them with me. They are my favourite.”

“So, you dance?”

“Every evening, before my prayers, I practice.”

“That is a good girl,” he said, nodding. “My daughter likes ... liked to dance too.”

“Where is she?”

He looked down at the cheese, head falling forwards and sending his face into deeper shadows that the pale moonlight couldn't breach.

“She is gone, little one.”

“I can't find my Papa,” she said softly looking around the still forms in the wagon. “Some of them say that he was on a different train ...”

“Don't worry, then,” he looked up, his face still. “You will see him soon.”

“I'm hungry.”

“We all are, child,” he said, then held out the cheese towards her. “But if you dance for me, if you show me what your lessons taught you, then you will have this in reward.”

Her eyes took in the lump of hard cheese as, without a word, she sat on the floor and pulled the small shoes onto her filthy feet, smoothing the material along the sides and under the arch. The laces were tied tightly across and around her ankles and then — finally — she stood again. The train swayed, wood creaking and metal rattling; the moonlight played through the gaps and sent slivers of light weaving around the shadows; and she danced.

Her gaunt arms softly rose, sweeping in front of her with movements that were hesitant at first but, as the music that only she could hear took her in its grip, became graceful and assured. With feet flat on the floor she bent her legs, dropping into a low plié before rising up — her left foot resting against her right calf — and turning a slow, measured circle. As the pirouette finished she paused, taking a breath, and then extended her arms towards the man as her body almost seemed to lift itself; toes took her weight — slight as it was — calf muscles straining as her insteps curved and she became en

pointé. Her body stilled, then stopped completely and, for a perfect moment, she stood there; the ballerina that she could become clearly seen. The train juddered and she fell forward, the moment lost.

Brushing the hair from her face, she readjusted her dress, one small hand toying with the star sewn across her heart in bright — dark — yellow. The man looked away, his hand mimicking her movement as he toyed with the sign on his own lapel, against his own heart. Without a word he held the cheese out to her and sat back as she took it back into the press of bodies. She vanished from sight as the train shuddered to a stop, brakes squealing in protest. As everything stilled a murmur of voices got louder from the outside before the door was pulled open and moonlight flooded the inside of the wagon. The man scurried to one side as voices shouted, demanding that everyone move to the platform. When they didn't - couldn't - move fast enough the men from the outside, eyes hard, jumped in and started pulling and shoving until finally the carriage was empty of everyone, apart from the man and himself. He nodded at the hard-eyed men who nodded back as they jumped out of the wagon and started pushing the people away from train; into the night.

Wiping the crumbs of cheese from his hands the man stood up, muscles protesting. He adjusted his uniform - hand catching on the swastika on the lapel - the other hand on the rifle that had never left his grasp. As he jumped down from the wagon, he saw a flash of colour back inside and peered in to see the ballet shoes lying alone; forgotten. He moved to retrieve them but, as the moonlight reflected of the sign on the platform, 'Auschwitz', he simply closed the door. She wouldn't need them.

