

THE BOX

by marci stillerman

The last candle had burned down to a pool of wax. There was a small wick but no matches to allow even the few minutes of light the remaining wick could have provided. Some daylight filtered into the basement room from a narrow window near the ceiling.

The red and white striped shoe box lay in the darkest corner of the room, behind the dried stalks of a large plant in a clay pot, concealed, Anna and David hoped, in case of a search. The box could have been on the table in the middle of the nearly bare room, so conscious of its presence were the man and woman who lived there.

The woman, Anna, not young, but not as old as she looked, was pale, dull-eyed, her skin waxy. She had lost a great deal of blood giving birth. The baby died and she told David it was for the best. He'd agreed and they'd shed no tears in each other's presence.

David found the shoe box in a trash bin, an unusually lovely box, and brought it to Anna.

"It's the right size," she said.

They talked of nothing but the shoe box. Where to take it. It must not fall into the hands of the Gestapo.

They would have to decide, soon, what to do.

"There have been transports nearly every day," David reminded her. "It will soon be our turn. It's inevitable."

"We must hide the box."

"But where?"

"Bury it. In the park. It's been raining. The ground will be soft."

"It's too large. I'd be seen digging the hole."

"Do it at night."

"The curfew."

"Then we'll burn it."

"We have no matches. We used our last. Where could we get matches?"

They'd been over the same ground a hundred times.

"We could just leave it here," David said.

"Never." He'd known she'd say that.

"Or take it with us."

"And have them take it? Absolutely not."

"Well," they were back to the same place, "we'll have to decide on something."

One night, while Anna slept, David thought of a plan. He spent the remaining hours of the night thinking it out and it seemed a good solution for what to do with the box. He decided he would act without telling Anna. She would object as she did to his every suggestion for disposing of the box, and there was no time left for argument. Once it was done, she would have to accept it, and eventually, she would agree that it was the best solution.

Anna slept much of the day in the twilight room, and soundly all night. It was, David reasoned, not only that she was still terribly weak, but it was her way of escaping the terror of their days, the anxiety of not knowing when the SS would come for them. Perhaps also a rehearsal for death.

David seldom slept. He could get no release from the turbulence in his brain. His mind ran like a machine out of control. Panic, hate, fear of torture, memories, plans for survival, hope, hopelessness churned in his brain until he feared for his sanity. Disposing of the glazed, red-and-white striped box might give him some relief.

In the morning, David prepared to act on his plan. Anna was still lost in sleep. He had no idea what time it was, but the room,

densely black at night, had greyed. He would have to wait several hours, until noon. The streets of the ghetto would be busy then. A small, bearded man wearing a yellow star on his ragged jacket and carrying a striped shoe box, would not stand out from the crowds crossing the Gniezmar River bridge at the edge of the ghetto..

When he judged that the right time of day had come, he checked to make sure Anna still slept. Pushing the clay pot aside, he took the striped box under his arm and replaced the pot exactly where it had stood. When Anna woke, her eyes would race to the corner to make sure the box was still concealed, just as a mother, upon awakening, rushes to the crib of her baby to make sure he is safe.

David, the box under his arm, (he was surprised at how little it weighed), pushed open the door of the basement room. The brightness of the sun stunned him. He'd lived in darkness for how many days? When he could open his aching eyes, he noticed with satisfaction that the street was full of people. He carried the box lengthwise under his arm to hide as much as possible of its shiny surface. It could attract attention. What would a shabby little Jew be carrying in such a fine box? He walked, pressed against the sides of buildings where ever possible, shifting the box to the arm next to the building.

As he'd expected, traffic on the bridge was heavy. Trucks and farm wagons, and automobiles moved slowly. There were only two lanes for traffic across the bridge and narrow walkways on either side so that people crossing walked single file into and out of the ghetto.

Avoiding the bridge, David climbed down the embankment to the muddy edge of the river. The badly polluted water was the color of dark beer. Dirty patches of yellowish foam had built up into small mounds, trapped by twigs and branches of trees. Cans, bottles, scraps of paper, gray scum, the glistening bodies of dead fish floated in the sluggish current. A stink of decay rose heavily from the sick river.

David stood on the slimy bank clutching the box to his chest. Maybe it wasn't a good idea. The thought of giving the fine,

gleaming box to the filthy river repulsed him. His stomach churned and bitter bile burned his throat. But where else could he put the box to be sure the Gestapo would never find it?

He tested the box-top. It fit snugly. The box itself was strong. It's glossy surface would keep it waterproof for some time before it would melt in the river. The box weighed hardly anything and would float indefinitely on the thick, foul surface.

David made his decision. He kissed the box, stooped and gently placed it in the water. He scooped up a handful of dirt and scattered it on the top of the striped box. He found a long stick on the ground and with it pushed the box as far from the bank as he could. The red-and-white striped box, shimmering in the noonday sun, floated gracefully, like a small jeweled craft, casting its sheen on the ugly face of the river that bore it.

David bowed his head and chanted the Kaddish, Yitgadal ve-yitkadash, Shmei rabbah, the Jewish prayer for the dead. Please, God, let the current carry the box to the sea. May our baby rest in clean blue water. Anna will accept that.

