

*The
Girl
From
the Train*

IRMA JOUBERT

TRANSLATION BY ELSA SILKE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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To my son Jan-Jan

SOUTHERN POLAND, APRIL 1944

“Let go!” her grandmother said.

She held on for dear life. The metal edge bit into her fingers. Her frantic feet searched for a foothold in the air. The dragon swayed dangerously from side to side.

“Gretl, let go!” Her grandmother’s shrill voice cut through the huffing noise of the dragon. “We’re nearly at the top, you must let go *now!*”

The child looked down. The ground was a long way below. Strewn with sharp stones, it sloped down into a deep gully.

Her arms were aching.

Her fingers were losing their grip.

Then her grandmother pried her fingers loose.

Gretl hit the ground. Shock jolted through her skinny little body.

She fell, slid, rolled down the embankment, stones grazing her face and legs. She clenched her jaw to stop herself from screaming.

At the bottom she slid to a stop. For a moment she lay panting, her heart pounding in her ears. It was so loud that she was afraid the guards might hear.

“Roll into a ball. Tuck in your head and lie very still,” her grandmother had told her. “And don’t move until Elza comes to find you.”

She rolled into a ball. The earth trembled. Beside her, around her, she felt sand and stones shifting. She kept her head down. Above her the long dragon was still groaning and puffing up the hill, spitting smoke and pumping steam. She could smell its rancid breath, but she didn't look.

It was at the top now. She heard it panting, the iron wheels *clickety-clacking* faster and faster on the track.

She was very thirsty.

It was dead quiet.

Slowly she opened her eyes to the pitch-black night. There were no stars.

"What if we're afraid?" Elza had asked.

"Then you think about other things," Oma had said.

Mutti had just cried, without tears, because she had no more water in her body for tears. *I'm not afraid*, Gretl thought. *I escaped from the dragon. First Elza, then me. I'm brave. So is Elza.*

Carefully, painfully, she rolled onto her back and straightened her legs. They were still working, but her knee burned.

At the next uphill, Mutti and Oma would jump out as well. Then they would all go back to Oma's little house at the edge of the forest. *Not* to the ghetto.

There was sand in her mouth. No saliva. If only she could have just a sip of water.

Gingerly she rubbed her smarting knee. It felt sticky and clammy.

The water had run out yesterday, before the sun was even up. At the station the grown-ups put their arms through the railings of the cars and pleaded for water. But the guards with their rifles made sure that no one gave them any. The dogs with the teeth and the drooling jaws barked endlessly. And drank sloppily from large bowls.

The train had filled its belly with water.

"Don't look, think about other things," Oma had said. Oma's face looked strange, blistered by the sun. She had lost her hat.

Her voice had been strange as well. Dry.

Later Mutti stopped crying. Just sat.

It was hard to think about other things.

Gretl wasn't afraid of the dark. "Darkness is your best friend," Oma had said. "Get as far away from the railroad as possible while it's still dark. And hide during the day."

But now there were no stars at all, and the moon appeared only briefly from behind the clouds. Now and again there was a flash of lightning.

She wasn't afraid of lightning. Maybe it would rain soon. Then she would roll onto her back, open her mouth, and let the rain fill her up until she overflowed.

She had to think about other things.

Oma had a little house at the edge of the forest. Like Hansel and Gretel's, but without the witch. In the forest they picked berries. She knew there was no wolf, but she always stayed close to Mutti or Elza just the same.

Maybe she should sit up and softly call Elza's name. The guards and their dogs were gone, over the hill. She no longer heard the *choo-choo* and *clickety-clack*. Elza would never find her in this blackness.

She sat up slowly. Her head ached a little. She peered into the curtain of fog that surrounded her, trying hard to focus. She could see nothing.

"Elza?" Her voice was thin.

She took a deep breath. "Elza!" Much better. "Elza! El-zaa-a!"

Not even a cricket replied.

Jakób Kowalski moved the heavy bag to his other shoulder. Flashes of lightning played sporadically among the dense clouds. It was their only source of light. The terrain was reasonably even underfoot, but as soon as they started the descent toward the river they would need to see where they were going. He ran his fingers through his black hair and screwed up his eyes.