

# An Undertaking

Beyond the foundry walls, dawn is breaking but no light penetrates the box. Mara and Joseph huddle close on their bunk, face to face, whispering quietly in the darkness. Above them, Mother lies on her side, eyes open but unfocussed, listening of course.

She was born into a peasant family, and her marriage to Benjamin Kagan took them both outside their class. In '39, when Benjamin sensed that their future was threatened and started to make plans to move the family to England, she had resisted. She remained in Lithuania, ostensibly to finalise the family's business affairs there. In truth, she thought her husband took an over cautious view of the political landscape, and she was not willing to relocate. Since the moment that the Soviets had taken control of Lithuania she had been at odds with her eldest son. She fought to protect their way of living. He fought to protect their lives. She was fortunate that he had inherited her stubborn streak.



Joseph 1931

A knock. Joseph springs upright. All three stop breathing. Time hangs. And then the three further knocks. It's the code. It's safe. It's Vytautas. From below he appears, bringing his natural warmth and light with him. He hands a square steel panel, about 18 inches square, with a hole in each corner to Joseph who nods, "Perfect". Vytautas glances

anxiously at his watch. "I'll leave the rest under the stairs for you to collect tonight." He throws Mara a smile and leaves. Mother turns to face the wall.

She had not just entered the ghetto willingly, she had positively galloped there - believing the German propaganda that the fence had been erected to protect the Jews from the barbarian Lithuanians. Joseph had entered the ghetto at her side when all his instincts had been to flee. In the absence of his father, he felt duty bound to her - but the duty didn't come

laden with a great deal of warmth. As a new order took shape from the chaos, she urged him to take his place in the ghetto hierarchy; to adopt a position of power, to afford them the status to which she was accustomed. He not only resisted her entreaties but actively sought to live beneath the radar. When the Germans put out a call for the ghetto's five hundred brightest and best to form an elite work brigade, men rushed for a place. Joseph did not join the queue, in fact he hid. Mother was furious. Two years later he is still alive. The five hundred are not.

Three days later - night has fallen. Joseph has amassed a pile of the steel panels and begins phase two of his project. He lays four panels side by side on the floor in the area just outside the box. He takes a tape measure and checks the length of the four panels. It is 4'6" - he glances at Mother, to make sure she is watching. He allows himself a smile.

With every downturn Mother and son have been driven closer together. The enforced spiral of proximity has reached its epicentre, here in this box. Now no escape, no respite, no retreat is possible. They fight, like caged cat and dog. She rails against Joseph for bringing her to this unhygienic hell, he curses her for playing fast and loose with their safety. She is terrified of the rats and turns on the light. He is terrified of the light and turns on her. And this war is conducted entirely in fierce stage whispers because in this precarious place, a raised voice can give them away instantly. Battle follows battle, Mara is forced to play mediator. But for several days now – silence. Mother has taken a new tack – one that Joseph fears even more than her rage and her carelessness.

She has declared that she would rather be dead than go on living in these conditions. She is certain they are destined to die in this box and has decided it would be better to go sooner rather than later. She no longer eats, she no longer speaks; she has set about the task of dying. At first Joseph had treated her silence as welcome respite, but she is getting weaker by the day and he has begun to fear that she may actually succeed. Of course her death will be a tragedy – she is his mother and he has taken it upon himself to ensure her survival – but there are more pressing practical problems. If she dies in the hideout they will not be able to dispose of the body and a rotting corpse, in the heat of the summer, will quickly not only become unbearable, but almost certainly alert someone to their presence. But of course, he has a plan.

By daytime they lie silent and still. Each night Joseph returns to his project. He has begun fixing the panels together. He seems to be building a box. Mother is aching to know what he's up to, but she will not breach her vow of silence. Each day her curiosity stretches the boundaries of her self-restraint further. If she

were a cat she would be long dead by now. As it is she is still very much alive, and she is not sure how much longer she can hold out this silence. Finally she can bear it no longer. "Joseph" she blurts out, "What on earth are you doing?"

In the telling of this story he relishes this moment. His eyes twinkle with delight at his victory – even after an interval of 30 years or more – even when she is long dead, long buried. He takes his time...

"Well mother, I'm building you a coffin. Don't worry I've checked the measurements. It's somewhat short but the body will contract a few inches soon after death." Mother has turned deathly pale. Her face is more that of child than mother. "Are you some kind of monster?" "No – I am a practical man concerned with the survival of my family." His face hardens. "If you choose to die, choose to die here – what will we do with your body? We'll certainly not be able to smuggle a dead person out safely. No – you will have to stay here. I'm building somewhere for us to hide your decomposing corpse."

As she looks from her son to the half built coffin she seems to physically grow in stature. Her shoulders square, her chin lifts, her lungs fill with air. No way is she going to give him the satisfaction of placing her in that coffin. She is damn well going to live and prove him wrong.

This is no happy ever after moment. They don't fall into each other's arms and pledge a new start. Nor does she acknowledge that, far from being the terrible son who wished her dead, he is the clever son who used all his guile to bring her back to life. But she does live. The dismantled coffin remains leaning against the wall for the remainder of their time in captivity – an oft-needed reminder of the choices they face.