

The Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. That same year a baby girl named 'Liloush' was born in Łódź, a factory town located in central Poland. Sometime in the winter of 1941 Liloush's mother was marched from Łódź to Germany where she was forced into a labor camp. Having been labeled 'volksdeutsch' by the occupiers, this young Polish mother, with three small children tied to her waist with ropes made of cloth, struggled to keep living while winter beat against her body and against her soul. She would reach the camp with all but her youngest in tow. Along the way, in desperation, the mother handed little Liloush to an S.S. officer. "Save this one", she would later recall begging. In her beaten mind she thought that she was giving her youngest a chance to survive. After the war, Liloush, rejected as racially unsuitable, was found by her mother in a displaced persons camp. The effect of the separation and the experiences she endured were readily apparent on Liloush's face. Her mother would hold this precious little girl tightly, but nothing was given in return. When she looked into her daughter's beautiful green eyes – there was only distance. Sadly, Liloush would never find her emotional way back.

That little girl is my mother ...



Liloush
Łódź, Poland 1941

Spring Zephyrs and Broken Beginnings

My favorite time of the year comes when spring taps winter's shoulder to move over. Sweaters replace coats as nature yawns and stretches her arms while wisps of warmth brush across her face. Birds return singing their songs of joy in anticipation of glorious new life. I watch them dance in the sky and wonder how their journey has been. I wonder at the adventures left behind at their winter retreats. For me, this transition is filled with wonder. In childhood it was filled with mystery.

There is nothing more central to a child's life than mother. I would watch mama closely as spring came calling. For her, most things in life are not easy but spring's appearance was most troubling. I remember walking with her to school one morning and crossing through a playground. We were new to town and she wanted to make sure I found my way. As I entertained visions of fun and games on the new playground, a zephyr danced around us warming the air ever so slightly. For mama it was a gentle wind that would take her away to visions of her own – visions far from my own.

Mama began to stagger as we neared the classroom entrance. She reached out to brace herself on the stairwell. I knew what was coming. I helped her down onto a stair. Sitting there, her breathing would race to outpace the images that played in her mind. My little hands would take her chin, as I'd go nose-to-nose with her, trying to get her to come back. Looking right at me, she did not see me. When I was younger this would scare me but I had learned that eventually mama would come back. But for now all I could do was wait; mama was gone.

Inside I felt a familiar dread. Why did this have to happen now - my first day in an American school? America was a familiar stranger - I was a military child who had been stationed on foreign bases, with a foreign mother. I had had so many hopes about this new beginning. It wasn't easy always being different. I knew that on this day my physical features and speech would not betray my difference - but surely this sight of my mother would. 'Oh mama', I thought, 'please get up!'

The teacher opened the door to greet us and was rightly startled at the sight. I felt childish embarrassment rush over me. In that moment I wished that I too could go away with mama. I was torn. Good impressions held the promise of acceptance but bad impressions never did. I looked inside the door to see other 3rd graders looking back at me. What do I say? What do I do? It wasn't long before I saw the all too familiar pointing and looks of bewilderment. My earlier visions of fun and games rapidly dissipated as mother's visions continued to pursue her. 'So much for a good impression', I thought. A normal impression would have sufficed but I was back to being different again.

When Teacher tried to talk to mama she knew that something was wrong. I tried explaining that my mother didn't speak English in hopes that that would somehow answer the questions in Teacher's eyes. When asked what language my mother spoke, I told her Polish, German, or Russian. I could see something like doubt rise in Teacher's southern eyes and arched brow. She asked me to interpret for her and I did. "Are you okay? *bist du okay?* What can I do to help? *was kann ich tun, um zu helfen?*"

An uncomfortable space came between Teacher and I as mama sat there, struggling with images no one else could not see. I told Teacher that I'd be in in just a minute, mama just needed to rest.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes Teacher, I am sure." And with that Teacher slowly turned and left to manage the uproar that had begun in her room.

As different as mama was from the other children's mothers, she was nonetheless mine. I knew that she would eventually return with apologies in her eyes. Mama wasn't much with words so it was to her green eyes that I'd say, 'It's okay mama; you're okay now'.

Although I've never been directly privy to the visions that haunt mama, I do have some idea of what they are. They say that those that suffer severe childhood trauma also suffer the compulsion to replay it - as if the trauma can be managed or fixed in some distant place, some distant time. I know this to be true. What mama was not able to escape she would subsequently replay for her own little girl's eyes to see.

Mama was always going away.

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