

This is an excerpt from the near the end of Part 2 of **Lament: A Soviet Woman and Her True Story**. The setting is the final days of the Jewish ghetto at Obodovka, Ukraine, during the Nazis' retreat from the Soviet Union. With her nephews, two year-old baby and a girl thief who's joined their family, Musya Kotz the heroine has no choice but to hide underground.

[\(Courtesy of Nostalgistudio\)](#)

...one dawn. . .she and Sender Kotz were heading out to the day's forced labors. All at once Elkie appeared and pulled them from the line, out of earshot. "Not today," she confided, would there be laboring in town. "And no tomorrows. All those contacts are voided," she said. "It's done. Their last line broke already—the Germans are almost here."

Sender gasped. How terrified he looked, Elkie too, by this news. Which was truly untimely, having arrived both many days sooner than expected and dangerously late, long after the fact, Musya realized. For her part she'd been wholly unaware of its approach, though she'd known just as well what was coming. The bigger surprise was to learn the date, already February

1944. Beneath the sameness of the snows she'd lost time. Now everything that had been passing was done. Here they were, in the least safe place possible. Alarm, kindled, spread. The first sharp cries sawed through a cold fog with tones she recognized from previous massacres—pogrom voices, as her mother would have said. Someone trying to ring the work bell by hand was banging on it with a metal serving spoon or something of the kind. Every sign pointed towards a day soon to become one of the worst yet.

Only now she observed a lot of bags in the snow—Elkie's luggage. More terrible news: "You're leaving?" Musya asked dejectedly—at first. "Wait! Can we go with you?"

Elkie said, "There's no time, we might not get far enough. Listen, Musya, you remember what I told you before, about the room next to yours?" Her voice dipped low. "Under the firebox, that old dugout from after nineteen."

"But what about the secret root cellar?" said Musya. "We could fit more easily." But Elkie was already shaking her head.

"Too many people know—all those gendarmes were down there already, remember? It's bound to fill up right away. But the dugout, I've been in it, we could fit all your children along with you and me. And Eidel. We could probably even fit more." The long cheekbones were left streaked with a brick-red blush like savage war paint as Elkie finished a little desperately, Musya could hear.

"Oh. Of course, yes," she answered. Now here came Eidel's purple coat, her black fur collar and impractical boots. Among

her shawls the teacher cradled Elkie's oil lamp with its glass chimney.

"Please be careful with that," Elkie said. Eidel said, "I am being careful." Then she listened with her eyes darting around at the unsettled crowds as Elkie told her of their seats in Musya's dugout. "Good." She nodded tensely. A woman in another street screamed and kept screaming. "Good."

But Sender said, "Hodeh won't like it."

"Fortunately," said Eidel, "it's not her decision to make."

Musya was looking past Eidel's shoulder, she'd recognized pretty Roza coming their way with bags and bundles. She hailed her and the girl stopped. "Roza, how are you—how is work at the clinic?"

A pained puzzled frown. "The clinic? I haven't worked there in forever—I quit that job," she went on, seeing Musya's confusion. "A long time ago." Now Roza glanced uneasily at the rest of the group. "Please tell your orphan children goodbye from me, I need to leave now."

"No, wait. Listen, Roza." In a rush of sincerity, Musya entreated her rival. "We have a hiding place where I live with extra room—why don't you come, too? It's safer there. Come hide with us." She reached but the girl snatched away her copper-braceleted wrist with a rattle. Her big eyes darted back and forth between the two from Tauber's.

"I don't think so," she said. "Not if—no."

Eidel snorted. "Fine. Die," she said.

"No, Roza, don't die, come with us." But Musya couldn't

persuade the poor girl from the road. Her yellow skirt left a long stain in the ground fog.

She felt a tug on her sleeve and Sender said, “Don’t invite anyone else until we ask Hodeh.”

“Ask me what?” All three costumed in beggar rags for the Obodovka high street’s morning shopping hour, Hodeh came up with the two younger Kotz brothers at her heels. Red-auburn ear-locks, grown long for professional effect, were on display. Hodeh was looking around. “What’s going on?”

Everyone except Musya answered at once: the Germans were close—too close—and the whole Red Army to follow—a double rampage, at least—with the locals to add an unknown quantity. Hearing a pause, Musya said, “Hodeh, I’ve invited Elkie and Eidel to hide with us in that dugout next door.”

“No,” said Hodeh.

Elkie made a noise, then said, “We have supplies.”

“How much?” Hodeh looked them over and her head went back and forth. “No. It’s not enough for both of you.”

“Of course it is!” Eidel cried. “This shouldn’t even be a question—it’s preposterous—Elkie—Musya, you’ve made this decision, the decision is made, yes?”

“Not really,” she admitted.

Anton spoke up. “I don’t want her in with us.”

He meant Eidel, they all knew before he pointed. There was a grudge between the two. Eidel said, “Very nice. Very nice behavior.”

Hodeh said it was decided. “She’s out.”

Musya made an unaccustomed effort to impose herself and said no, she wasn't. "You all like Elkie, you want her to be there, don't you?" A strong brave capable lamp owner: of course her children wanted Elkie around, they weren't stupid, their lamp was smoky and much smaller. "So, you want one, you get both. That's done, it's final. Yes wah-wah-wah. You want Elkie and her lamp, you get her friend too."

"I've got the lamp," Eidel said. "I've got the lamp."

In an urgent voice Sender told Hodeh that Musya was inviting everybody. "She already asked Koorvah Roza but she said no. Thank God."

Musya said, "Don't call people that. And if we have extra room—"

"Get her inside," Hodeh said.

Over all her protests they steered Musya back to Krutonog's. The old inn, so far indestructible, loomed. She cast a wild look up to catch some final glimpse of sky but the doorway eave had already eclipsed it. Next she found herself standing by the shifted firebox. The empty cubicle next door to hers was full of people with their eyes on a dark square opening in the earthen floor. The initial blasts of moldering fungoid reek from its depths had subsided to an ice-cold gush. She held a candle in one hand. Another set of hard uncontrollable shivers made her eardrums ring.

The others said the same thing again. "Get in the hole." They planned to hand items down to her while she prettified the space, she could whip up some comforts. The only way they

could guarantee her silence, they said, was to have her safely underground. No more heartfelt invitations, no one else was to know. Elkie claimed to have already dug out a dirt toilet, whatever that was. “We don’t have time, Musya, you’ve got to stop arguing,” she told her. The rest of them would be very busy in attempts to secure every supply that would fit and carry whatever water they could there, right up to the last possible moment. Again they swore it wasn’t so bad in the hole, they’d all gone down and had a look. Even Eidel said it could be worse. “It could be much more grave-like,” she said.

Lost for the words to tell them that none of this would be necessary, that their present alarm had no future except as rescue would confound it, Musya said, “No. . . Wait! No—no!” Musya the Golden Bride struggled in their hands. “Let’s follow the rest of them—let’s go—Sobansky will help us!”

Eidel stared. “Who?”

She said, “From the palace outside town—the Sobansky house. He’ll hide us until the Americans get here.”

An impatient shout broke from Elkie’s throat: “Not this again! There hasn’t been a Sobansky living in that house since two wars ago—she’s seeing ghosts again. Musya, stop this.”

“Really,” Eidel agreed.

“No.” Musya tried to move. She felt words fail one by one. “No of course not.” Her children’s faces all four began to look relieved. Freezing rot bubbled and boiled up around her.

She was climbing down into the dark. . .

Imprisoned Jews left undefended to face their mortal enemies marauding in defeat, they were lucky to have a hole to hide in. Pogrom after pogrom after pogrom for centuries and this was the best modern culture could offer. What sort of betrayal by the rest of humanity did their plight represent? Here was a problem for thought without limits. Realistically seen the situation offered no one to blame, only immediate peril.

From the lower ladder steps people more and more resembled grave markers for the way they stood around the edge up there. Touching bottom made Musya so afraid they planned to yank out the ladder and bury her alive that for a long time she wouldn't let go. At last, keeping one foot on the bottom rung, she got the candle lit. The dugout was even worse than she'd expected, far more soil-based. Stones and knob-ended roots stuck out everywhere. Dank irregular walls met at many superfluous angles. The roof at least was wood, wide wooden boards and a single thick crossbeam, all buried in the earthen floor above. The boards were sagging and a lot of rootiness and drips and icicles of rime were coming through the cracks between them quite naturally, she supposed, after twenty-five years.

"Musya, look!" she heard. Her children and the room above were vanishing as they pulled the firebox frame across the slot. Closed in alone, she couldn't find the breath to scream. "*Look—look!*" she kept hearing their voices. Shadows fluttered overhead against a brightness: in the chamber up there her children's hands were waving her attention towards a small hole

cut through the firebox and covered with a piece of screen. It would show them night and day and nothing else. She called: "Yes, good. Now open it again." Her candle-flame lit up a bad dirt floor of uncertain dimensions. Big the place wasn't. Having almost no distance to go the walls closed in swiftly. "Open it!"

But open or shut made no difference, Musya was still in the ground, alone with tenacious fears of abandonment and live burial that only company's arrival would quiet. Fortunately, some things couldn't be tossed into the hole, they required to be carried down.

First was Sender Kotz with her wedding quilt she'd requested and the collected tailoring tools they'd need if their family lived to make its honest parnosseh. He resembled a flower standing there cradling it all like a sand lily with its leaves. He said, "Don't put the sewing kits anywhere, just keep them out for me, I'll hold them." He had his own kit now, Morocco leather, a birthday gift from Babiak's.

"Just put them somewhere. We could be in here for days, Elkie said, maybe a week," she objected.

It didn't matter. "I said I'll hold them. Listen. I'm worried about Russvelt."

"Why? Russvelt is indestructible."

"He is not." At her shrug Sender continued, "I want to run to Babiak's and look for him, I'll find him and bring him back here. There's time and there's room."

"No," said Musya. "It's a terrible idea. And there isn't room." There wasn't.

“But you asked that Roza that our family doesn’t even know and we see Russvelt every day. And he’s my best friend!”

“You’re not going anywhere.” She wouldn’t argue. “What does Hodeh say about it?”

“I thought it’s up to you,” he sniped.

“It is—and I say no.”

“Then promise me.” Now he’d take no refusal. “When we get out of here, we’ll go find him and he can stay with us. Promise.”

She tried, “No.”

“Yes.”

“Fine,” she promised.

It was true, they had no room to welcome Russvelt. The former housemaid had exaggerated its spaciousness, in fact the dugout would just fit their seven. The traffic of a dozen feet in the chamber overhead kept sending clay dust showers from the cracks between the roof boards—the atmosphere inside was murky even with the top wide open. Elkie fanned a view clear in it and pointed at the screened hole in the firebox frame. Designed to let some fresh air through, it would just as vitally admit the warning smell of smoke once they were closed inside. Fire by arson was their biggest possible and not unlikely problem, Elkie warned. Should Krutonog’s old fruit canning shed happen to catch they’d have no choice but to climb out and make a break through the nearest wall. Two hand axes, Tauber’s greatest treasure, she set by the ladder. “No touching. Tell your children,” she said.

Anton joined her next wearing the tiger skin he’d entrust to

no one else around his shoulders like a Hercules. Unwound and folded, he put it in the center of the overcoat she'd laid as a floor rug and said, "That's my spot. Don't move it anywhere." He picked up an axe to swing around.

Musya was thinking back to Anton's tormented air-raided nights. When the loud noises arrived, this ordeal to come would be hardest on him, she feared, without the sweet wine he'd learned to rely on then. Trying to recall her role in any decision to dose him, Musya felt like she'd lived as a sleepwalker once in Odessa. Where had she been? She said, "Fine. But I'm not in charge of seating."

Anton knew that. He put down the axe and she watched him assume the uncomfortable look that said his business was still incomplete. Their eyes connected, his glowing. "Is Papa coming with the Red Army?" he asked.

"Possibly, yes," she answered without hesitation. "We'll see."

"And then can we go home with him?"

She nodded her head. A winter short on food had worn down the fattest child in Obodovka, he didn't look so solid as before. "Home?" she said.

"Yes, to Siberia."

She said, "Yes, but I want to go back to Odessa first."

"For what?"

"Because I want to see the ocean." It was true.

"For what?"

"I have my reasons. Then we'll go to Siberia."

"With Papa?"

“If Papa wants, of course with Papa.”

“Promise.”

She considered. Her thought took the shape of a newsreel map with moving arrow. Straight to Vladivostok and on to America—Musya crossed her fingers. “I promise.” Even Boris might be willing to try America now.

They sent down her carpet-sided bag full of books and papers and most of the luggage pile, the Manchukuo dishware, the heater, the bucket. Mrs Drobitz’s tin pitcher arrived brimming with cold well water. It was bothersome to have to keep ducking underneath the crossbeam. Every peek the others took left them critical of her arrangements. They and everything they owned would be filthy in two minutes. “I’m not finished yet,” she kept saying.

“Mamenyu!”

The baby was teetering alone at the edge of the ladder. Her voice rose in horror as she went to catch him: “Mamenyu’s here!” But he kept his balance and then insisted on clambering down by himself, every rung, while she kept her hands around his ribcage. Samuel Nemo was exhausting lately. Safe at the bottom he threw himself onto the dirt floor and rolled around until he was filthy. This took five seconds. She dragged him to his feet and he looked at her, handsome as a boy-god disguised as a penniless student of Torah, with the faded blue-trimmed hem of the sailor blouse he wore under Anton’s old worn-out brown sweater touching his knees. His wide mouth was twisted, his big eyes searched her face. “What do you want?” Musya

said, at which he burst out crying. She knelt to clasp him to herself and kiss him, her child from her body, a circumstance which amazed her and left all her anxieties increased. “What’s wrong?” One of his ear-locks brushed her lips again. Mother and son, they were almost like strangers. She had no idea what might have upset him so much, usually Samuel Nemo enjoyed family activities, she knew that. The words he was sobbing she could barely make out as he clung to her and shook:

“I don’t like! I don’t like! No good—it’s no good!”

At last she thought she knew. Samuel Nemo was afraid but had no words for saying so. He’d never spent an hour in school except to eat cake and fear was not in his vocabulary. Holding him, Musya made comforting noises until he grew calmer. “Mamenyu’s here,” she chanted. “I’m here.”

“He’s supposed to be up here!” Hodeh was firm in pursuit at the top of the ladder. “Send him back up—Pretzel, come up here, we need you.”

The baby snuffled and moved to obey. “For what?” Musya objected, holding on.

“For asking people for things,” Hodeh said.

She said, “Ask for them yourself, I need him here, I’m his mother.” But he was pulling away towards the ladder and up—he liked work.

Parting with her baby’s ankles Musya found herself alone again. She let out a scream when a dirt clump dropped from the ceiling to the floor beside her. No one responded.

Then no one liked her arrangements. Comfort and

satisfaction were nil. Inside the hole was a muddle of shoving and cross-purposes. Listening up top for the Germans' arrival, Elkie told them every half-minute to hush down below but their voices kept rising disputatiously. Eidel wanted half the space for their couple, she'd claimed it and now she wouldn't budge because she didn't understand why everyone ought to be equally crowded. "Where is it written?" Eidel said. A moment later they all heard a loud bang.

"Grenade," Elkie said, swinging onto the ladder, "This is it." Dirt showered them as she pulled the firebox frame across.

Darkness, chill, decay: Elkie struck a match and held it to her lamp wick. The tiger stripes leapt. Eidel gasped. "Are you crazy? I don't want to be asphyxiated." They all stared at her. "We need light, we need heat," Musya said. But no: Elkie was reaching. Off went the kerosene heater lit only minutes before, they'd had hardly any relief but enclosure made it too dangerous. "I don't know why," Elkie said, "every time, Eidel, you jump to think the worst." Eidel replied, "I'm logical—I know facts—I'm sorry—can I help it?" Musya's nerves sent warning aches of overstrain. "We wouldn't asphyxiate that fast," she said. "That's what they all say—don't you think?" Eidel said. Musya said no, she didn't. Elkie said, "We need to get organized. There isn't much time." But what could they do? Everyone asked Elkie at once. Too small for both sides to be right, the dugout had no room for compromise. Either half was too much for two or it wasn't.

"Split is no good," Samuel Nemo observed unexpectedly.

Elkie was much more interested in laying out the principles and use of her makeshift latrine in the far corner. She'd rigged up an old door curtain to supply some privacy and she thought they could keep a candle end burning inside, at least by day. Correct use would still leave them very grimy and bothered by stink, there was no doubt about that. All at once the Kotz family's share of the dugout didn't seem so bad since it was further from the dirt toilet. With the lantern turned down to its lowest blue flame the candle-glow behind the curtain strengthened alarmingly. Eidel said she felt sure the Germans would see. Elkie's disastrous response was to ask Musya's opinion at which Eidel cut in: "It's not enough to invite her gigantic family in here when we can ill-afford the oxygen—you have to put her in charge of our lives as well?" Musya objected: "Invited us? What are you talking about? This is our space." "Actually," Eidel said, "it isn't." Then Elkie admitted that since the dugout at Tauber's was in such terrible repair, she and Eidel had been planning all along to use this one; just if they had to. "If you weren't using it. We've been saving supplies," she added. Musya said she didn't recall Elkie's saying a word about this to her and asked, "Did you?" Elkie said, "No. I'm sorry." But Eidel denied any cause to be sorry. "Why mention it? We had our plan. Presumably they had their own plan," she said. "Yes," Hodeh said. Wondering what Hodeh's plan had been Musya said, "Of course. Of course we did."

Into the momentary lull came four deliberate rifle shots.

Dozens of other Jews electing against flight from the ghetto

had likewise concealed themselves inside the familiar fabric of their prison. Sadly, not all were well-hidden. There'd be a hunt, Elkie guessed. "And the more people they find the longer they'll keep looking." The dugout listened to silence for a few moments until Musya said, "Don't worry, they won't find us." Eidel said, "Don't you think everybody says that, too?" Before she could reply a spray of bullets overlapped another, closer, overhead: a hunt with machine guns.

A boy's high voice rose and whispered in stammered Ukrainian: Sender Kotz, a sinner, asking mercy one, two, three times, begging for it from a son of God. The foreign syllables grew quieter and spilled with smoother rapidity from his lips. The repetitions didn't stop. "He's goy too now?" Elkie asked. "You're goy, probably," Musya reminded her. The other children had begun to grow alarmed. "What is that?" Anton demanded. "Why is he doing that?" She said, "Oh, he learned it from a girl at work, it's mystical prayer." Eidel said, "It's superstition. Keep your voices down." Anton made a noise. "But for what? Ask him!" The quick chant ceased. "For protection, Antosha. You should say it too. It's the heart prayer," Sender explained. Eidel was scoffing. "It's famous. You say it to Lord Isus Khrystos all the time constantly and when you think of something bad, it makes it go away—it's not garbage, miss, it's from the Philokalia, it's older than Europe."

"Oh please," Eidel said.

"Can we say in mame loshn?" Hodeh asked. Sender said yes. "The language doesn't matter." Anton asked, "They really go

away? Bad things?” Eidel said of course not but Sender disagreed. “I think the more people who say it, yes, maybe.” To which Anton and Hodeh said, “Teach us.” They’d made up their minds. Eidel thought it disgraceful and in especially poor taste given the circumstances; but her friend found it amusing, so long as they kept their voices down, to hear a Yiddish prayer said to the goy Lord Jesus. “Why not?” Elkie added almost cheerfully. “Our Lord—Jews’ I mean—is their Lord’s papa. It’s the same family.” Eidel corrected her. “The same backward delusion, you mean. Why not recite the multiplication tables instead?” The rest ignored this suggestion. Minutes later, with Samuel Nemo doing the best he could, the heart prayer dribbled from six mute mouths, a liquid thing of Yiddish tongue clicks. The impregnable front door of Krutonog’s boomed under blows. No one was getting in that way. The Jew-hunters and their guns would have to use the side doors or come around to the back through the kitchen garden.

Elkie put the candle out.

This, now, was waiting for Germans. Compared to this, Musya considered, her waiting of the previous weeks and months had been nothing but time passing. She’d let it paralyze her all the same. When Germans were coming there was nothing to be done, no place to run safe enough; she’d learned this lesson. Any will she’d ever had to behave otherwise was long gone, she could no more run than Yankel Weissbein could now. Hitler had convinced her heart against which prayer words rang as when hailstones strike the bronze suit-front of a Party

saint on a town square plinth, shattering against her unbelief in anything but German barbarity. Fact: here it was, almost upon them. And only emptiness remained when she thought of the wedding plans that had kept her from reality until today. Just that morning, only a few hours ago, she'd chosen the flowers—white lilac—and for the candles, very simple, some painted silver embellishments; she'd been so pleased with both decisions.

She and Sobansky had really mistimed things, however; and Musya couldn't blame herself so much. He was the one who lived in the world—a dreamer, granted, a typical Pole that way. Her usual smile at his national foibles faltered as she began to wonder what delayed him; for even a dreamer can take action. So why hadn't he taken the Obodovka ghetto into his palace already by now? And it was true, any big party night might have done as a pretext, nothing required her to sacrifice and give herself in marriage except that he'd wanted it. Or had he?

Her heart kicked the prayer off her lips. For here she was, Musya had to acknowledge, still as single and imprisoned as she'd been—jilted, possibly, abandoned even in her perfect dream by a man who couldn't love Jews after all, the old hates were too strong for his weak nature, maybe. One thing was certain: she'd never regret him again.

Samuel Nemo was hungry, he said. They all were, they whispered. And Elkie, bending to her stores, said, "Why not?" Everyone got a dry biscuit which all but Sender sucked on first so as not to make crunching sounds; his prayer continued, his

biscuit untouched, slipped into his sewing kit. They heard a crash upstairs—a door, a door frame. “Keep saying the words!” he urged them. Biscuit crumbs flew as pattering quick chant resumed in every mouth, even Eidel was saying something. “The threes—the multiples,” she explained. Anton said, “No! Don’t confuse Lord Khrystos.”

Musya sighed. How her sister Liza and their husband Boris Kotz would have hated equally to hear everything in this minute! She supposed on their behalf she ought to raise some strong objection. But she didn’t object; only she found prayer grew tiresome. “Is this all it is?” she whispered to ask. “Just saying the same thing over and over?” “Self-hypnosis,” Eidel said. The others hushed them and Eidel started on the fives.

Strange men swarmed the wooden halls in heavy boots and made the dugout’s dirt sides thud in sympathy with the old inn’s foundations. Stairs creaked, cupboard doors slammed, shelves and their contents crashed onto floors. Screams stripped by distance and obstruction to their bird-call cores broke out: the hunters had found someone. Musya pictured Germans, their eyes mad and pale, the knuckles of their meaty hands livid from gripping gun stocks; pot-boiled homogenous men. Where was Doctor Zev? Where was his sardonic mouth with its capacity to deliver incongruously soft kisses of the perfect duration? Left behind by his pretty nurse with a handful of patients, he’d play the Jewish hero now, she feared. Crazy with thoughts of injectable drugs the retreating fascists would converge on the ghetto clinic soon enough, no question. Always given to uneasy

joking at the preponderance of brains over brawn in his own make-up, Zev was liable to overcompensate with some defiant rash self-sacrifice. That he believed Musya lost to him didn't help. He didn't know she'd dropped Sobansky, she hadn't had a chance to tell him. Removing his spectacles with a calm hand he stood in the clinic doorway to greet Death.

Her breath caught—everyone's breath caught. Footsteps overhead, very loud and rapid, the boot heels slippery, not in good repair, the floorboards told them. Dirt sprinkled them twice: there was the briefest pause at every cubicle, a continuation as if down a spine to the end of the canning shed corridor, a reversal and an exit. Quiet returned except for the rampage and screaming elsewhere up above.

They exhaled and Sender Kotz had time to say, "You see?" before a horrible burst of noise reached them through the ground itself. The secret root cellar was discovered. Worse came next from almost overhead. It was the kitchen garden where many feet thudded and screaming bodies crashed through snow cover to clawingly uproot the frozen grass. All this was bad enough but then horrified consternation swept the dugout: Eidel and the children recognized a voice, a certain Simon they all seemed fond of, among the youngsters' screaming voices. His name was a blank to Musya, after the rat-eating Pearl she'd mostly lost track of her children's friends. To Eidel of course he'd been a student and maybe something of a pet, she seemed so frantic. "Pray again!" Elkie commanded. "Pray or multiply." Their lips moved. Men were raping Simon's

mother on the ground, they heard clearly. Then someone killed her with a blade. What they were doing to the little boy meanwhile was hard to understand. From Musya's point of view what this Simon needed was a doctor—and she knew a great one. He was a doctor in need of being needed, her green-eyed love. Zev was right: this was a day for Jewish heroics.

She climbed to her feet and said, “Don't worry.”

One step cracked her forehead smartly on the crossbeam. In a fireworks show of hurt she staggered backwards to collapse against the wall. A few instants later she came to herself again, she was weeping. “*Quiet!*” she heard. Small dirty hands grasped at her mouth from all directions in the dark to still it somehow; moving her head to evade them was agony. “*Quiet!*” The others were upset with her but the pain was too much, Musya's sobs grew louder until finally Elkie crawled across and put her in a smothering embrace; the noise stuck in her throat as the housemaid's never-ending heart prayer thundered in her throbbing brain. Headfirst into a lightless underground sea of tears she dove and swam towards the depths until she burst and drowned. She floated there, one with grief.

“What is wrong with you?” The ground was still. Candlelight caught in her eyelashes, dazzling her. She was thirsty. Eidel's voice came again: “Seriously—what is going on inside your head? Don't you understand? Your children need you.”

“My head,” she rasped. She'd awoken alone, wrapped in a tiger skin on the freezing dirt floor. “Of course you need her.”

Now Eidel was arguing with her children who were saying no, they didn't. Musya felt terrible in every way. The little patch of screen was dim, the short day was almost done. Not a sound came from the kitchen garden. Death, its terrible mystery, weighed on the ground there—a stillness heavy, wet, sinking. “The little boy,” she managed. “What happened to Semyon?” His teacher answered through a stuffed nose, “Simon. They cut his throat.” Like his mother, then, Musya reflected. Would her own children survive her so briefly? Sitting up made her feel sick. The moment's rest she needed dragged on.

Next all was dark overhead. Behind the door curtain's orange membranous glow the dirt toilet already stank. And the still winter cold of the frozen Ukrainian land overwhelmed them. They couldn't use the heater, from her perch on the ladder Elkie kept hearing too many noises through the screen to open wide enough to offer the least ventilation. The children's teeth chattered, they were having a loud chattering contest; Sender's were so rotten he'd dropped out early from the pain. The baby's small teeth made a hair-raising sound, Eidel judged him the winner. Musya said she agreed, it was true. Her heart was breaking. She asked for a drink. The water was so cold. She told Sender to pull out her quilt from the luggage where he'd helped her store it for safety: “For you children,” she said. To her surprise every one of them objected on the quilt's behalf. She said it didn't matter but wept anyway to see its colors exposed to a soiling such as this promised to be. Her unfinished quilt made a great lump over the four children's heads—a buried lump, it

looked like every hope she'd ever had. Elkie told the others to let her cry. "Let her get it out—it's very nice work, Musya," she added in her usual tone for addressing speech-deprived invalids. But Eidel didn't hear it that way. "You were always sweet on her, weren't you?" Elkie denied everything and said, "Just look at this beautiful quilt, Eidel—you're the one who's always talking about handicrafts." "A lot of beige," Eidel answered doubtfully.

Around dawn everyone smelled smoke at the same time.

Was it Krutonog's? They all sniffed and sniffed. Elkie thought it must be coming from a few streets off. Eidel said maybe it was Tauber's. Elkie groaned furiously and said, "Can you please stop being like that?" The smell of house fires came and went for the next five days. And Eidel did not stop, she'd suggest Tauber's again and again. As they were to learn, Elkie cherished plans for taking charge there since management had fled. Eidel's guess kept her bothered. She fumed, "Twenty other places it could be and you have to pick that one." Certain hints Eidel dropped made the pretty blonde's motives clearer, as they disclosed a heart set on less Obodovka, more downtown Moscow. At the children's encouragement, Elkie countered with a plan to take over Krutonog's, why not? Forget about Tauber's which didn't even have a modern kitchen. "But I don't cook," Eidel said, "and neither do you." The two friends would bicker all day but Elkie's arms would be around Eidel without fail when it came time to try and sleep, affectionate kisses for two in the dark producing strange discomforts in the wakeful

remainder.

The action continued overhead. It wasn't safe to climb out and fill a fresh water jug, not once. There was some full combat. Charging feet pounded, trucks barreled past, explosives went off and sent showers of dirt into the dugout; hunted Jews kept being discovered and murdered as German, Romanian, Soviet and local fighters rampaged over the ghetto in turn. As a diverting change from heart prayer everyone memorized the multiplication tables to eleven. Eidel was at her best then, a born teacher. During respites safe for talking she dominated every discussion. "Up there?" She said, "They're setting fire to paper files in offices." She'd seen a lot near the Polish border. "They're collecting women to fill brothels. A brothel is a kind of labor prison," she answered Anton. He never missed a word from Eidel's lips, unfamiliar or otherwise, and was always questioning and picking fights with her. Once the delinquent boys who'd been sent away for arson were the topic and Eidel said she didn't care about the witnesses, she called the fires accidents, the boys falsely accused, innocents stigmatized for their rambunctious youth, innocent young boys. Anton said, "They were not, they were firebugs and rotten criminals like the council said. Hodeh knows, she had to fight them off with the sharp scissors!" Hodeh said, "I did. They were after the sharp scissors." Eidel said, "You see?" "No," said Anton. Nobody but Eidel saw. Her voice grew impatient. "They needed tools—basic tools—but no one gave them any. They weren't rotten, they were failed by their guardians and representatives. This is what

happens when you don't have socialism." It was easy to see why the teacher longed to go to Moscow, her friend Elkie said—because there were more crazy people like her there. Eidel called Elkie an obstructionist.

Nightfall brought rats to the room upstairs, many rats, many vocal and curious about the firebox screen, on the move, Elkie guessed, from burned-out former premises. They couldn't get in the dugout at all, she told Eidel. Down below, the little clutch of seven souls stayed hidden. Maybe in the night or maybe tomorrow, they'd tell each other, the fighters would at last move on from the Obodovka ghetto where their continued presence was mystifying, really. Had the local scenery beguiled them, as Musya suspected? Were they lingering over a chance to risk death in the Napoleonic winter battlefields of boyhood's imagination? Who could understand the minds of men still intent upon burning down buildings and killing more people at this point?

"We're alive. And they're alive," Elkie said. She meant the dugout's insect life and worms. Lamplight made their numbers come on strong. "We're all alive here so let's just try to get along with each other without screaming the roof off." Every many-legged thing their body warmth had hatched in the Ukrainian soil now crawled towards its source to poke with head or mouth or feelers through the dugout's dirt walls, plop down onto a person and keep crawling. Even the children objected to being so neighborly as Elkie now suggested. "What if they try to eat us?" Anton asked. Eidel said, "Of course they'll try to eat us.

What? Worms and beetles eat flesh—I'm not allowed to know that? Ignorance never helps anything," she finished strongly.

Musya kept mum. Her usual bromide felt out of place: why shouldn't they worry—especially if they wanted the occupation? Misery could do with variety, she thought. The lump on her forehead still hurt and she was tired of life in a dark stink-filled burrow in Transnistria. Crawling insects made the situation worse—but everything that happened made it worse. Death stench, all too familiarly penetrating, reached in from the kitchen garden. Rats' feet scabbled at the firebox frame night and day now. And the three of them who could were menstruating in tandem—the mess was terrible, disheartening. They needed more soil for the latrine all the time. Eventually it happened that Anton was excavating from a wall near the door curtain, Hodeh assisting, when a portion came loose and spilled something into their midst.

A human skull.

A pile of bones followed, dislodged at the same time along with a lot of black beetles. It wasn't safe to scream. Samuel Nemo was noisily fascinated. Hodeh caught him up. "Quiet, Pretzel!" The bones with their bulging ends were just like the ones sticking out from the dugout walls on every side, she'd thought they were roots, age-blackened leg bones and arms bones and ribs; there were digits and knucklebones all over the floor that she'd taken for chalk pebbles. There were some hair strands but no sign of clothing or jewelry, no rings. "I never heard of a graveyard here. It must be very old," Elkie said,

moving the lamp around. “No wonder there are so many insects.” “And worms,” Eidel said. “Elkie, you told me this was a safe dry clean place, you called it the best hiding hole in Obodovka—and you,” she turned, “you were down here in broad daylight for hours arranging things, you never noticed the decay of dead Jews all around you?” “You were the one,” Musya replied, “who said it could be more grave-like.” “Well I was wrong,” Eidel said. “Anyway,” Musya continued, “They don’t look like bones, they’re not white.” Eidel was exasperated. “Those bones you’re picturing aren’t naturally white, they’ve been boiled and bleached with caustic soda. Which I know because I was friends with a medical instructress,” she explained to Anton. He said, “And how do you know they’re Jews?” “Who else?” Eidel said. “Who else winds up in a mass burial in the middle of Ukraine?” Elkie said, “This was always the Jewish quarter. Maybe the ground shifted, that’s why.” Her voice trailed off. “The ground didn’t shift,” Eidel said. Sender pried a section of another skull from the wall by his head and spoke in a wondering tone:

“It’s the mummy cave! The Cave of Ten Thousand Mummies, under Odessa—you remember, Hodeh, we told you.” And he described hero Jim and his brother Tom and their guide the strange conservationist with his torch and his great heaps of ancient remains. Anton said it was better in the story. Eidel agreed that it usually was. “That’s a rib bone you’re holding. And that’s part of a pelvic girdle. It’s really not funny.” The children kept digging out the oddest ones they could find,

hoping to stump the teacher who named them all in Russian. “Don’t pick at the bones, leave them be,” Elkie warned. She had concerns about a possible collapse; but it was a case of some kind of skeleton fever where Musya’s children were concerned, they loved to pull bones from the walls when no one was watching them. Elkie and Eidel blamed her, the mother, when a great sheet of earth fell around Musya’s shoulders one afternoon and left her hair full of cockroaches.

Now she sat away from the wall, hugging her knees. Tears dripped down her filthy cheeks without ceasing. The possibility that her children would die here chose this time to feed among her thoughts; an awful carrion bird with a beak like a spider, it left her mind filled with disgusting chaos. Then every twenty minutes or so a special fear that someone would physically hurt them gripped her and hollowed her out with an acid or caustic soda solution—if she moved it would start to dissolve her. She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t speak to them. Every memory she could make of them was precious but every moment now felt horrific, better forgotten. She preferred to watch the four of them asleep beneath her patchwork by the candle end alight. If she narrowed her eyes, the reeking dirt toilet that shimmered there became the icon room at King Nebuchadnezzar’s palace. Then more vivid than dreams came two little boys in quilted suits hurling themselves down the sled hills of snowy Birobidzhan; the infant Samuel Nemo in the family sailor blouse raced on his impossibly fast short fat white legs to greet her at the ghetto gates; and next lay purring, his

small feline self again, starlight in his eyes, in little Hodeh's lap; then she was back in Hodeh's Ali Baba cave-nest surrounded by floating housekeys. No one was speaking much lately, they were almost out of water. For six days straight the blood seeped from the boy Simon's throat and his mother's had been making its way through the soil towards the dugout walls. The rotten bones in their multitudes were highly conductive, she guessed, so that she expected to see it appear any time now on the wall nearest the kitchen garden, there by the glowing curtain, at first a trickle through the bones like honey glaze. Musya was certain she could see movement there.

"I told them not to touch the bones." Elkie sat up angrily. "But they're all asleep," Musya said. There was a definite disturbance in that corner, though. She gasped as her heart sank. "It could be my husband again!" Pink ectoplasmic Boris Kotz, he felt like the last thing she wanted to see. She watched a dirt clod tumble down the wall, then something of darkness slide out and stop—a big rat body. Would there be a transformation? Would it grow spectacles? She'd never know. Elkie sprang forward and hissed at it, "Shoo! Shoo!" and the rat turned and vanished. Elkie risked another candle flame and signaled to Musya; the others were still sleeping. "Where's the hole?" She'd picked up a skull to use as a plug. "We can't let them get in here, there's too many—they really *will* eat us."

A couple of leg bones served to brace the skull. It would have to be good enough, Elkie whispered, adding:

"Don't tell Eidel!"

Broad daylight showed overhead. The dugout had slept poorly in general and late. Anton sat up, did some arm stretches, glanced around and said, "Who moved my things?" Musya said, "Don't worry. We had to borrow a couple of bones, that's all." He missed his femur. "And my best cherep—you took them. Give them back." "No," Elkie said. "Yes," said Anton. He climbed to his feet. "Yes—yes—yes!" It was bad enough being robbed, now he couldn't get justice—she understood completely, Musya told him. "But we're using them for something very important." "An emergency repair," Elkie said. Eidel said, "What's broken?" "There!" Anton slipped underneath Elkie's hand, yanked his big leg bone from the wall and shook it like a club at them. "This is mine! I'm collecting them!" Dirt and metatarsals tumbled around his boots. Elkie said, "Fine. We need another to replace it." "No!" Anton said. She told Musya to find one. Anton started shouting "No—no!" "He's out of control," Eidel said. Musya and her other children nodded helplessly. "Give me that bone and be quiet." Eidel held out her hand; to their wonder, Anton obeyed in full. Elkie was next. "Why do you need to take his bones?" Eidel demanded of her. Elkie said, "Because." At that moment they all recognized the sound of people walking in the ghetto, many feet lightly shod. Civilians. Earth drizzled from the walls and ceiling boards. A woman called out that she'd heard something inside there, sounded like voices; a man cursed in Ukrainian. It was the townsfolk.

Did this mean it was safe to emerge? Not one of them

thought so. “Blow out the candles!” Eidel said. “No, we need them—wait,” Elkie protested. “Just—oh you momzer, shoo!” Maybe the same big rat vanished into a slightly different hole. Eidel gasped. “Was that a rat? You swore they couldn’t get in here—you promised!” They’d had the run of the place up there beside the kitchen garden and the sudden arrival of people was scaring them underground in great numbers, this was the situation as Elkie explained it, apologizing: “Woman plans, God laughs.” Eidel scoffed. “Enough pseudo-religion—you lied to me!” “But how was I supposed to know what would happen?” Elkie said. “Then you shouldn’t have promised,” said Eidel. Her friend snatched the big bone from her hands and said, “Excuse me, I need to obstruct something. More bones,” Elkie told the rest. “We need to block anything that looks like a rat hole—hurry!” she whispered. Skulls, scapulas, pelvic girdles were produced; lamps and candles lit the grisly work too briefly, they extinguished every flame with the first sound of civilians entering Krutonog’s on their soft feet. At the emergency wall Sender filled chinks by hand with pats of dirt and Anton kept pressing as hard as he could at a scapula he was trying to embed there, until Elkie signaled them to stop: “It’s not safe, the whole thing might collapse.” They all drew back and Elkie swung herself onto the ladder to listen for developments. The wall in question broadcast a series of muffled squeaks followed by a lot of gnawing sounds. “In one more minute,” Eidel said, “I am officially going to go insane.” Sender said, “Oh, please don’t.” Voices exclaimed; they heard disgust, physical—the towns-

people had found the kitchen garden. Some were in the old canning shed corridor, looking out at it. They'd picked a sunny day to explore the ghetto. The firebox screen was admitting plenty of light for the ones in the dugout to see a piece of pale calcified matter jiggle and vanish into the wall, to be replaced by something silvery, whiskered. Sender sprang up and pounded a piece of cranium over the spot. Dirt showered him as footfalls creaked the floorboards overhead. Not everyone had been dissuaded from the tour by the sights and smells of week-old massacre outside. These were some intrepid folk of Obodovka who were amazed and appalled to the point of amusement that anyone had ever lived this way, even zhidy. Elkie reached down armed herself with both axes. A gleam caught Musya's eye through the clay-fogged air: Hodeh ready with the sharp scissors. That left the weaponless to worry and speculate. For someone might get curious and shift the firebox back—what then? Or what if an intruder or two simply crashed down into their midst through the rotting roof boards? Would Elkie chop them into bits if they'd only come to sightsee? What were they doing up there, anyhow? Little by little, hard listening told.

They were stealing the chest of drawers!

It didn't take long, of course. To pillage the whole Jewish ghetto took not much longer. The Kotzes hadn't lost much besides Samuel Nemo's old baby clothes. Elkie was infuriated anyway. "They have everything in that town and they come here to steal our only furniture? Hey, get down, baby—no, go back." Without Musya's noticing Samuel Nemo had slipped

across to the ladder and was trying to climb it, he was going after the thieves all by himself. Hodeh pulled him back onto the floor. “He has no word for fear,” Musya explained. “Delayed language skills,” Eidel said. Elkie said she thought it was safe to risk some candles. Before anyone could move, a fist-sized bunch of dirt and bones tumbled off the rat hole wall and two rats dashed through to chase each other round and round the dugout in crazy circuits, flinging themselves through space, slamming into everything and everyone, squirming through clothes, scratching faces, catching and swinging on braids, until Hodeh cried “Kill, Pretzel!” and there came an exploded squeak. The rest raised their eyes to find Samuel Nemo gripping the sharp scissors and a big rat impaled on their points. He had his little teeth bared at its fellow rat crouched there. They heard him growl and the rat vanished into the wall, the last rat they saw. “On the other hand, he has phenomenal motor skills for a two year-old,” Eidel said. “Thank you,” said Hodeh. “My friend taught him that.”

They waited through one last night and then Elkie called it safe to emerge. They had not died in the war. Strange to see, when Eidel put her foot on the first rung of the ladder Anton rushed to throw his arms around her in a sobbing embrace: he loved her. “This always happens,” Eidel said.

Musya found her old pine cone rolled into a corner of their empty cubicle. Sender was examining the dirt on her quilt by daylight, their sewing kits beside him—he’d never let go. “Don’t worry, this will all come out,” he said.

**Lament: A Soviet Woman and Her True Story**, a novel by Liz Mackie, is available in print and for e-readers. Visit the publisher's website at [Nostalgistudio](#) for links and to learn more.