

The Silver Sword

The Silver Sword by Ian Serrailier describes the plight of Ruth (12), Edek (11) and Bronia (3) who lived in Poland during the Second World War. These three children learnt what it really meant to survive after their father and mother were taken from them by the Nazis. The extract starts as they are fleeing from the house across the roof after the storm troopers had dragged their mother away and bundled her into a van. They have locked the children in the house.

Luckily for them all the houses on this side of the road together were in one long terrace, otherwise they could not have got away. Even so, it was a miracle that none of their slips and tumbles ended in disaster.

They must have gone fully a hundred yards when the first explosion shook the air. A sheet of fire leapt up from their home into the frosty night sky. They fell flat in the snow and lay there. The roof shook, the whole city seemed to tremble. Another explosion. Smoke and flames poured from the windows. Sparks showered into the darkness.

'Come along,' said Edek. 'We shan't let them have us now.'

With growing confidence they hurried along the rooftops. At last, by descending a twisted fire escape, they reached street level. On and on they hurried, not knowing or caring where they went so long as they left those roaring flames behind them.

They did not stop till the fire was far away and the pale winter dawn was breaking.

They made their new home in a cellar at the other end of the city. They had tunnelled their way into it. From the street it looked like a rabbit's burrow in a mound of rubble, with part of a wall rising behind. On the far side there was a hole in the lower part of the wall, and this let in light and air as well as rain.

When they asked the Polish Council of Protection about their mother, they were told she had been taken off to Germany to work on the land. Nobody could say which part of Germany. Though they went many times to ask, they never found out any more. 'The war will end soon,' they were told. 'Be patient, and your mother will come back.'

But the war dragged on, and their patience was to be sorely tried.

They quickly made their new home as comfortable as they could. Edek, who could climb like a monkey, scaled three storeys of a bombed building to fetch a mattress and some curtains. The mattress he gave to Ruth and Bronia. The curtains made good sheets. On wet days they could be used over the hole in the wall to keep the rain out. With floorboards he made two beds, chairs, and a table. With bricks from the rubble he built a wall to divide the cellar into two rooms, one to live in and one to sleep in. He stole blankets from a Nazi supply dump, one for each of them.

Here they lived for the rest of that winter and the following spring.

Food was not easy to find. Ruth and Bronia had green Polish ration cards and were allowed to draw the small rations that the Nazis allowed. But, except when Edek found casual work, they had no money to buy food. Edek had no ration card. He had not dared to apply for one, as that would have meant disclosing his age. Everyone over twelve had to register, and he would almost certainly have been carried off to Germany as a slave worker. Whenever possible they ate at the soup kitchens which Polish Welfare had set up. Sometimes they begged at a nearby convent. Sometimes they stole from the Nazis or scrounged from their garbage bins. They saw nothing wrong in stealing from their enemies, but they were careful never to steal from their own people ...

In the early summer they left the city and went to live in the woods outside. It was cold at night out in the open. They slept huddled together in their blankets under an oak tree which Edek had chosen for the shelter of its branches. There was not much rain that summer, though they had one or two drenchings in May. After that Edek cut down some branches, lashed them together and made a lean-to. This was thick enough to keep out all but the heaviest rain.

Life was much healthier here than in the city. The sun browned their limbs. There were plenty of other families to play with, some of them Jews who had escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. They could run about freely and hold their classes under the trees, without having to keep a look-out for police patrols. Ruth had started a school. Sometimes she had as many as twenty-five children there. She would have taken more, but they had no paper, very few slates, and no books at all.

Occasionally they received a smuggled copy of a secret journal specially published for children by the Polish Underground press. It was called *Biedronka*, 'The Ladybird', and was full of the kind of stories and pictures and jokes that children enjoy. The grubby finger marks showed that other families had seen it before them. When Ruth's children had finished with it, there was nothing left but a few tattered strips.

Because of the kindness of the peasants, food was more plentiful. Though they were forbidden to store food or to sell it to anyone but the Nazis, they gave the children whatever they could spare. They hid it, too, in cellars, in haystacks, in holes in the ground. With the help of the older children they smuggled it to the towns and sold it to the Poles on the black market. 55

Edek was one of the chief smugglers. In return for his services, he was given all the food he needed for the family. One of his dodges was to go off to town with pats of butter sewn into the lining of his coat. But he could only do this on cool days or at night. On hot days the butter melted. So he preferred to work at night if he could. In time the Germans became wary and posted patrols on all the main roads into the city. After that he cut across country, using paths and rough tracks. He was well aware of the penalties if he was caught. A younger child might get away with a beating. But boys as strong as he was would be carried off to Germany, for the Nazis were getting short of labour at home. 60

Another of Edek's dodges was the cartload of logs which he drove into the suburbs.

Some of the logs were split, their centres scraped out and packed with butter and eggs, then glued together again. Once he drove his cartload into a police patrol, which was searching everything on the road. They emptied the logs on to the pavement. Edek didn't stay to see if the glue would stand up to that treatment. He dived into the crowd and made off. Police whistles were blowing and the chase had started, when some kind friend lifted him up and pitched him head first into a garbage cart. Here he lay hidden, under cinders and dust and rotting vegetables. 65

After that, Edek did all his smuggling at night. 70

There came a morning, towards the end of August, when he failed to return. Ruth questioned other families in the forest, but no one had seen him. After some days of searching, she traced him to a village ten miles away. Edek had called at a house there while the secret police were searching for hidden stores. They had found cheese sewn into the lining of his coat. After setting fire to the house, they had taken him away in the van, with the house owner as well. 75

Ruth returned to the forest with a heavy heart, dreading to break the news to Bronia.

Edek had been their life-line. Food, clothes, money – they depended on him for all these. In the city he had made a home out of a ruin. In the woods no tree gave better shelter than the oak he had chosen. And after dark, when the wind blew cold and the damp oozed out of the ground, none knew better than he how to keep the fire in untended till dawn, so that the glow from the embers should warm them all night as they slept. 80

Now Ruth and Bronia must fend for themselves. It was an ordeal before which the bravest spirit might quail.

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