

The Berlin-Bucharest Express

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In Slotwina Brzesko, ¹ Bronia lived near the train station and the Wehrmacht ² headquarters. It was an advantageous location. Every night at exactly 1:20 a.m. the express train stopped for one and a half minutes, long enough for Bronia to step on or get off the train. Bronia served as a courier, delivering Aryan papers and foreign passports to Jews in various parts of Poland. She had two wonderful connections, Benjamin Sander Landau in Bochnia, who had in his possession seals from all the desirable consulates in the free world, and the ticket seller at the train station, a kind Gentile who arranged for Bronia the correct tickets needed for each occasion.

One day Bronia was traveling to Lvov ³ to bring Aryan papers and make travel arrangements for Reb Hirsch Landau and his wife, formerly from Litvatz and now living in Lvov. It is difficult to describe the despondent condition of Reb Hirsch and his wife. When Bronia entered the cold, dark little room, their faces lit up with such gratitude as she never had seen before. They were overjoyed that they were not forgotten and that their distant relative had come to their rescue. Reb Hirsch was praising the Lord that He had not forgotten His humble servant, and Mrs. Landau kept telling Bronia that if an angel had come down from heaven it would have been less of a miracle than Bronia's coming in this difficult time to rescue them. Bronia placed them on a truck and two days later they safely arrived in Tarnow.

Bronia boarded the Bucharest-Berlin Express. It was December 1941. A gentle snow was falling. The train was packed with soldiers from the eastern front going home for Christmas. Next to Bronia sat a woman, a German secretary who worked at a German company in the occupied territories. Now she too was traveling home for Christmas.

At Gorodenko the train came to a sudden halt for passport control. The woman next to Bronia became very frightened. She turned to Bronia and said, "We are all dark in my family. In the past it was considered an asset. We used to be referred to as the Spanish beauties, but now my dark complexion is a curse. Each time I travel they suspect me, you know, that I am one of them. My family is one of the oldest German families. We never even intermarried with the Austrians!"

"Passports please!" Bronia was searching for her passport. "No need, comrade," the officer who checked passports said to blond, blue-eyed Bronia. "Follow me!" he ordered the German secretary. She left the compartment, never to return. Bronia finally found her passport. It was issued in Berlin, where she had lived since childhood, in her real name, Bronia Kocicki née Melchior, born in Sosnowiec. It even stated her correct date of birth. Slowly, Bronia placed the passport back into her pocketbook.

A German officer took the secretary's place and sat next to Bronia. He looked as if he were in his mid-thirties, with a very handsome face that expressed much suffering and pain. The train proceeded once more on its way. Snow was still falling and the compartment was lit by a dim light from the narrow corridor. Tears began to stream from the officer's closed eyes. He seemed to be having a nightmare. His face twitched and his lips mumbled soundless words.

He opened his eyes and turned to Bronia. The tears were still falling on his hollow cheeks. He told Bronia that he was on his way home because he could not take it any longer. "In Zhitomir it was especially horrible." He was responsible for it, too; he was in command and he gave the orders to shoot. "They assembled them all, men, women, and children. We murdered them all, all of them," he said as he wept. He showed Bronia pictures and documents to support his horrible tale. Bronia looked at them in the dim light. She felt her head spinning; she was afraid she was about to faint. How was this possible? How was it possible to murder innocent people, unsuspecting Jews dressed in their Sabbath finery? Bronia's blood was screaming, Why, why, why? She controlled her emotions, but the officer sensed her great pain, which he interpreted as sympathy for his troubled state of mind. Bronia asked for a picture for evidence. But he told her that as much as he would like to give it to her, he could not do so.

1. Slotwina Brzesko ... Bochnia: cities in southeastern Poland

2. Wehrmacht: German army

3. Lvov: city in Ukraine, also spelled "Lviv"

The officer asked Bronia to continue traveling with him. Her understanding and sensitivity would be of great assistance to him, he said, to ease the terrible burden he could not carry alone. Bronia replied that she would like to accompany him, but her duty did not allow her this great pleasure. At Tarnow she quickly parted from the officer and stepped down off the train into the cold, sorrowful December night.

Bronia brought back the news of Zhitomir to the town's leaders. They listened to her gruesome tale and then said, "Here it will not happen. They kill Jews only in the formerly held Russian territories because they cannot distinguish between Communists and Jews. But here they know we are not Communists. We were never under Russian rule."

Bronia saw before her eyes a picture of the dead children. She questioned the spokesman of the group: "How does one mistake infants, small children, babies at their mothers' breasts for Communists?" She demanded.

"Here it will not happen," she was told over and over. "Just don't scare the people with unnecessary tales of horror."

Every night when Bronia was at home, when the Berlin-Bucharest Express rolled by, she would hear in the clickety-clack of its wheels new tales of terror, new names of other Jewish communities. Long after the train had disappeared into the frosty winter night, Bronia would clearly hear the voice of a German officer telling the gruesome tale of Zhitomir.

Based on a conversation of Rebbetzin Bronia Spira with her daughter-in-law, Dina Spira, May 10, 1976

1. Bronia is a Jew working with Gentiles (non-Jews) in Europe during the Holocaust. What is Bronia doing? Where? How does she remain successful?
2. What happens at the stop at Gorodenko? Why is this event ironic—the opposite of what we would expect?
3. How does the German officer's grief affect Bronia? What is his misunderstanding?
4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) affects thousands of American soldiers after tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have witnessed disturbing events, which stay with them long after they no longer serve. Describe the German officer's symptoms of PTSD and explain what trauma is upsetting him.
5. What happens when Bronia brings back the news to the town leaders? Why do you think the leaders react in this way? Is this similar to the Jews of Sighet in Night? Explain your answers.