

RADIO DRAMA

THE DAY STARTS IN THE NIGHT

By Sonia Taitz

This story is based on a true event experienced by the author's father while he was interred in the Dachau concentration camp during the Second World War.

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Time: 25 Minutes

Characters:

Narrator:

Mother -- Sharona Gilson

Father -- Jonathan Gilson (Jon)

Children –

Hannah

Jesse

Sophie

Fritz Kunkelstein

Elsa Kunkelstein

Camp Guard – Wolfgang Kunkelstein

Prisoner – David Shimonas

(Music)

NARRATOR: Sharona Gilson is wiping her hands on her apron. She inspects the table laid for the ceremonial Passover meal. The traditional round Seder Plate sits in the middle of the table. Circled around its parameter are a lamb shank, the Passover sacrifice; a

baked egg, symbol of eternal life; a sprig of green parsley, to celebrate the renewal of hope and in the middle of the plate are the bitter herbs, which represent the bitterness of slavery. Near the Seder Plate is another silver plate, rectangular, and covered in a silk cloth. At one end of the table there is a large silver goblet with a pattern of grapevines. At the other end is a five-branched candelabra which holds unlit white candles. Satisfied, Sharona runs her fingers across the brilliantly white table cloth waiting to receive the place settings.

The room is brightly lit and three children bustle to set the places.

SHARONA: OK, the Seder Plate looks good. Jesse and Sophie put the silverware around, like I taught you, then Daddy will put the Matzahs out... Hannah, your dress is lovely. That length looks good on you.

HANNAH: What time did you say they were coming?

SHARONA: 7:30, but remember they're German – the bell will probably ring at exactly twenty-five after.

JESSE: What's that supposed to mean? Anyway, their plane could be late.

HANNAH: No, they're already here – remember? Mom said they could stay with us, but they wanted to visit the city first.

SOPHIE: I hope they don't find people rude here. New York isn't the kindest place. We don't know them. Why are they coming to see us anyway?

SHARONA: Honestly, Sophie – we're not here to impress anyone. They wrote to us. They wanted to meet us. So they're coming, okay. Don't be antagonistic. Just be your nice self.

JESSE: The smash of cultures! The war of worlds! The dark past walks in the door.

SHARONA: Look you three– the war is long over. Papa and Greta are gone and *their* parents are dead too. But if we can celebrate one positive thing...

JON (*enters, loudly*): Here it is! I got a huge box from Israel. More “unleavened bread” than anyone could eat in 40 years in the desert!

SOPHIE: I could eat them every day. They’re amazing – like water biscuits. So elegant.

JESSE: Well, they’re supposed to be the “*bread of affliction*,” so try not to enjoy them too much. The bitter herbs should help.

SOPHIE: Even though it’s supposed to remind us of hard times, I love that horseradish too. Did you ever eat it plain? It’s crazy!

SHARONA: Jon, did you remember to get the hand-made Matzah, too?

JON: Oops! What hand- made ---? Ha, just kidding. Of course I did. Do you know how expensive that stuff is? Exorbitant.

JESSE: Especially when you consider that half of it looks burned, like old parchment. And what are the ingredients, anyway? Wheat grain and good old H₂O? It’s not like you need truffle oil.

HANNAH: Crushed grain and water. No more, no less.

SHARONA: Well, put the machine-made ones on the plate in the middle and cover them. I’ll get a platter for the hand-made.

HANNAH: And baked for *exactly* seven minutes, right? The timing is crucial.

(The doorbell rings)

JON: Speaking of time, there's the bell, they're here!

SHARONA: Ha! Look at that, seven twenty-five exactly. My father was the same way. Always punctual. But then, he *was* a watchmaker. Lived in a world of seconds, minutes, and hours measured by little whirring wheels and gears... I'll get it.

Welcome! Um – so nice to have you here! You must be Fritz –

FRITZ: Ja, er,... yes, Fritz Kunkelstein.

SHARONA: And your wife is –

ELSA: Elsa, my name is Elsa Kunkelstein.

SHARONA: Well, come in, come in! As you can see, the table is all set for a wonderful meal, and we're so glad you could join us!

SOPHIE: Mommy, should I fill Elijah's cup now?

SHARONA: Yes, sweetie, get the grape juice.

FRITZ: Very delightful, very very home-lick.

ELSA: May I say also, "ravishing?" I studied for some years in advanced English. Yes, the scene here is ravishing.

JESSE: Hey, Sophie! Careful with that juice – you're spilling!

SOPHIE: I like to always fill it to the brim.

JESSE: For who? The imaginary Elijah?

SOPHIE: Sometimes, he actually drinks a little. You just don't notice it the way I do. If I fill it all the way, I can tell.

FRITZ: I know, maybe, who is this Elijah. I was reading your booklet, your "Haggadah," I think it's called. It explains exactly the order of this ceremonial meal.

SHARONA: That was very thoughtful of you, Fritz...I may call you Fritz?

FRITZ: Of course. And you have an extra cup of wine for this prophet, correct?

SHARONA: Yes, wine or grape juice. We'll all drink four cups of wine or grape juice tonight. And we imagine that Elijah is also a guest at the Seder. It's like he's helping us usher in a time of peace.

JON: A messianic time, you know. "The lion and the lamb."

SOPHIE: I love that. No violence, Daddy. The poor lamb is safe.

JESSE (*referring to Fritz*): Not that you're the lion or anything Mr. Kunkelstein. At least not any more.

FRITZ: The Lion of Judah is a very fine symbol, I think, too.

ELSA: Very nice, very fine; she's being so careful, your little Sophie. And you, little one, you are now going to light these candles here soon? It's getting dark.

HANNAH: It has to get darker. The new day begins in the night.

FRITZ: What a fine candelabra. Silver?

SHARONA: Yes. It was Jonathan's grandmother's; she brought it back from Russia.

SOPHIE: Mommy, I think one of them tipped when I poured the juice.

SHARONA: Just straighten it a little, Sophie. You'll help, too, right, Hannah?

HANNAH: I'll get the kitchen matches.

SHARONA: So on Sabbaths and on Holidays – like this one -- we light candles in the evening, and the glow – it's very meaningful to us. That there is light in the darkest times, and we keep it lit, you know?

FRITZ: Ja, I do know.

JESSE: Actually, what *do* you know?

JON: He knows what we mean, son. That's why he's here.

JESSE: Does he know how many of our family were butchered in -
-

SOPHIE: Mom – is this – aren't they the good people's children?

SHARONA: Yes, I told you, sweetie – Fritz, and Ilsa – they're good people.

ELSA: Elsa.

SHARONA: Yes?

ELSA: You say Ilsa. It's not important maybe. But I am called Elsa.

SHARONA: Sorry, Elsa. And – where are my manners? This is my daughter, Sophie, and her big sister Hannah who's getting the matches – and my son, Jesse, and that's my husband, Jon, he's just bringing out a platter for the special matzah –

JON: Voila everyone! Hand-made matzahs, just the way we like them, slightly curled, burnt dark brown at their edges.

FRITZ: Oh, amazing! Wunderlich!

ELSA: Silver like this, so much and so fine, you don't see –

FRITZ: Nein, I meant the breads, so lovely, so traditional!

SHARONA: Jon, I think Fritz knows exactly what they are.

JESSE: But he called them “the breads” –

FRITZ: Ja, nein, I mean, but of course, natürlich, I meant the special breads, what my father told me about –

SHARONA: They were special. They still are. And so was your father. Did you know him, Elsa?

ELSA: Yes, but not for very long. He was not a very healthy man, and I think he smoked too much the cigarettes. The beer did not help matters, either. The poor soul.

SOPHIE: I'm confused!

SHARONA: Let's all come to the table. Thanks, Hannah, just put the matches here. Just by the candles, good. Thanks, sweetie.

Fritz, I want you to sit at the head of the table. Your wife to your right. I'll sit on your left. Jon, you sit opposite Fritz. Kids, just sit. It's all good...

SOPHIE: (*nearly crying*): Mom, who are you? You're acting weird!

JESSE: You *do* have a weird glint in your eyes, Mom.

HANNAH: You're both being so insensitive. Mom *is* almost crying. There's a reason.

SHARONA: It might just be the bitter herbs. They send out fumes, and my eyes- --

HANNAH: No, Mom! I want them to hear it! Your father was in a concentration camp in Germany! Dachau. He almost died there.

SHARONA: They know. Fritz knows.

HANNAH: But he survived, and he came to America, and that's how you were born, and *we* were born.

SHARONA: And Fritz's father – (*her voice wavers*) Fritz – why don't you tell the story. Our story of enemies in wartime.

FRITZ: I will explain, as I heard it from my father, who was then a guard in that same concentration camp. It was the holiday we have here, your Passover.

SHARONA: It's yours, too, now.

(Music)

NARRATOR: The room is in shadows now, night is falling. It is Dachau, the first concentration camp in Germany...A school for violence for the SS men who command it. Over 200,000 people would be imprisoned here and in its subsidiaries...Over 41,500 would be tortured and murdered by the insane who are running the camp. In the shadows we see Wolfgang Kunkelstein, Fritz's father. He is a guard, in a Nazi uniform, standing at the door of a wooden workshop. Inside, there are nine men, bent over their tables working on watches and clocks. In the foreground Sharona's father, David Shimonas faces the guard. Though emaciated, he stands erect, proud...the prisoner's striped pajamas hang from him like rags.

WOLFGANG: Now you sit. *Sitzen jetzt!*

DAVID: I am standing to say something.

WOLFGANG: *No*, it is I who say things here. *Verstanden?* And I am here to say that you have not eaten your rations today, and not yesterday, not that I care if you shrivel up and die, but to waste bread is utterly forbidden.

DAVID: I can't eat it.

WOLFGANG: What are you talking about?

DAVID: It is absolutely forbidden.

WOLFGANG: *Verboten?* By what authority?

DAVID: Have you not read the five books of Moses in your Bible? Look in the second book, the book of Exodus. We Jews were

slaves in Egypt. But the strong hand of God set us free in the end. To remember this...

WOLFGANG: Of course I remember this!

DAVID: No...To remember this, we are commanded not to eat bread for seven days...The entire Passover holiday.

WOLFGANG: Not that I care, but the watches, the clocks, you cannot starve! You must work!

DAVID: Yes, Yes, arbeit macht frei... Your concern as to whether or not I starve is...well, we agree, I don't want to starve, either. And God commands us not to eat bread. But the bread of Passover is the unleavened bread – the Matzah – that is the word, in the language of God. Matzah is what we baked when we fled our captivity in Egypt – no time for the bread to rise. It is flat, and humble. But it kept us alive to this day.

WOLFGANG: What did you call it?

DAVID: Matzah.

WOLFGANG: Matzah, ratzah, yahtzah. It's all gibberish, your Yiddishe ways.

DAVID. My Bible – all the words in it – it's yours. And I respect my orders as you do. I can't do otherwise.

WOLFGANG: Not even under these circumstances? Well...well, what do you suggest? Do you want me to report you...have you killed? The gas chamber can take another subhuman like you any time, it doesn't care.

DAVID: Yes, I'm at your mercy. That's how it is. You are the human, and I am...the Jew.

WOLFGANG: That is how it is. But even for a Jew you are not a bad man, so why make me report you?

DAVID: A *man*...I try to be a good *man* every day.

WOLFGANG: Well, your work is quite good, at least. Respected even. But that doesn't mean...

DAVID: I was once a master watchmaker, with a shop of my own, and workers. I had a Harley Davidson... one of your friends is probably riding it now. I'm still proud of my craft. I take sick and dying hearts and make them tick again. To measure the right time, the rhythm of the universe.

WOLFGANG: Yes, your time-fixing is impeccable... for my uncle the Commandant you corrected a wonderful repeater, very complex, with the moon phases all as they should be.

DAVID. And the calendar in that clock says that it's now my holiday.... My festival of freedom. And so --.

WOLFGANG: So, celebrate your freedom, in those prisoner's pajamas, go ahead!

DAVID: I can't.

WOLFGANG: (*irritated*) To make any bread, you need wheat, yes? Even your flat one?

DAVID: That's right...the staff of life.

WOLFGANG: Good wheat meal and maybe oil, eggs, a pinch of yeast. (*Fondly reminiscing*) Soon, my wife Lotte -- she makes sometimes for Easter such a bread that you put in it egg yolks and sugar and...

DAVID: No eggs, no sugar. Just the meal and the water. And a clock, you need a clock. Timing is important.

WOLFGANG: For this bread of yours, you mean?

DAVID: For the Matzah of the Exodus. For this time in the calendar. Passover and Easter, they're at the same time.

WOLFGANG: And a clock I need, too?

DAVID: Here – take *this* little clock. Take it home. Take it to your wife. To Lotte, who bakes so well. It will tell you when it is time to take the grain off the fire. Then she will have made, for the first time – the most precious and rare bread of all. A bread that instructs and brings you to God: The bread of affliction.

WOLFGANG: How does it taste?

DAVID: You will see. To me, it tastes like honor...like freedom. Only a taste. Only to obey. Not to stuff my body. Just one flat piece, and we'll share it. To show that I –that I and my fellows here...

WOLFGANG: Fellows? Stop!...I have heard enough from you, Jew. It is true what they say – you are very clever. You almost had me fooled. A bread that brings you to God – Feh!

DAVID: I haven't said anything new. It's in that book that you can read – it's old, too. Older than the Reich, even.

WOLFGANG: Enough! Shut your clever Yiddishe mouth and do not talk anymore! Get to work, *now*, because this whole time you've been gabbing like we're equals! Equals! What a thought! You are nothing to me! And I called you a man...Ha!

I can turn you over any minute, any minute on those clocks and watches of yours. I can stop your life in an instant,... when I choose. When *I* say it is time.

(Music)

NARRATOR: The candles glow in the dining room now, illuminating the faces around the Seder table, and the gleam of Elijah's silver cup.

SHARONA, HANNAH, SOPHIE: "Blessed art Thou, Oh Lord, Sovereign of the Universe, who has sanctified us through Good Deeds, and commanded us to light the lights of this Holy Day."

HANNAH: This is a terrible story and a wonderful story too, Mr. Kunkelstein.

SHARONA: Life is like that, isn't it? Affliction – and wonder. Not just for the Jewish people; for everyone.

JESSE: Well, don't stop there.

HANNAH: We stopped to light the candles.

SHARONA: It was getting dark. Before darkness fell, we needed to make the blessing.

SOPHIE: It's a scary time to stop.

(Music)

NARRATOR: David Shimonas is asleep at his workbench. His head lies on his arms. Wolfgang Kunkelstein strides to the workbench, his arms wrapped around a bag. David's face is white as he pushes to his feet facing the guard.

DAVID: I'm sorry, I shouldn't sleep at my workbench.

WOLFGANG: You sleep maybe because you are hungry.

DAVID: Yes.

WOLFGANG: Which is your fault, your responsibility. Insubordinate Jew. Do you know what happens to insubordinate Jews...? What have you to say for yourself, rebel?

DAVID: I will be more awake. I will work harder.

WOLFGANG: I wanted to report you... But... you are a good worker..., for a Jew,... and when you don't sleep at your bench, so...here, here is your bread, your Matzah.

DAVID: You – you brought the Matzah?... You *know* what that could mean?

WOLFGANG: There is a risk for me, but it is small... my uncle, remember...he is the commandant. Just don't make anything of it. And the baking, it was easy, like you said. But my wife, my Lotte, she was quite upset.

DAVID: I'm sorry.

WOLFGANG: Don't apologize when you don't know anything! She was upset because she is proud of her cooking, her baking, and, she said: "So dry! You could choke from it, so dry! No one could eat this kind of bread without something!"

So here... she gave me also some strawberry preserves. I think they are excellent. From our country home, not far, this summer there were so many, you know...

DAVID: You brought them here for me. For us.

WOLFGANG: That pathetic bread...for life. The strawberry preserves: a moment of sweetness, for hope, for you, for these "fellows."

(Music)

NARRATOR: The night has come full on now and the dark is enveloping the dining room. The candlelight all the more beautiful for it, and necessary. Each face is glowing.

FRITZ (laughing fondly) That was my mother, you know, always saving the fruits, the tomatoes, preserving all the goodness of the earth, and – she would make such pickles –

JESSE: Kosher dills?

FRITZ: No, I don't think so.

ELSA: She didn't like *me* much, though. Your mother, Lotte.

FRITZ: When you met her, she was old. And now she's gone. And Papa, too.

ELSA: He was a big drinker and a smoker. Who lives forever?

SHARONA: Your papa was an incredible person. Matzah, strawberry preserves, the risk...his commandant uncle would have sacrificed him in a moment... Your father, I feel him here.

SOPHIE: In spirit, you mean? Should I check Elijah's cup?

JESSE: Now you're really stretching it!

JON: Did he – did your father ever talk about this story?

FRITZ: Nein, he told me this story once, when the cancer came...it was a small candle lit in the darkness of hell he said. That was all. After that he never told it again and never talked about the war at all.

ELSA: Yes, but maybe there were hints, you know?

FRITZ: What do you mean, hints?

ELSA: One time, when he was really old, he started to cry that he was bad, and going to hell. You know, in the hospital after the cancer. I was there, Fritz. The nurse was coming over with the shot for him, to make him stop –

FRITZ: Poor man, he was so skinny, we were even joking that he looked like a –

JESSE: Like a what?

ELSA: No secret, he looked like a camp survivor, all right? He was dying. And here this man who was once so tall and straight was crying, frightened. So I said to the nurse – *halt!*

SHARONA: Stop?

ELSA: Ja, stop! And she stood with the needle and I said, now go and let me talk to this man.

JESSE: What did you say?

ELSA: Who knows what I said. I comforted him, that is all. I was there. I stayed by him. And I told him that he would not go to hell because I knew what a good man he was. OK, he liked the Pilsner, and he smoked too much in the house. But finally he was a kind person.

SOPHIE: Too bad you couldn't remind him of the Matzah story, 'cause you didn't know about it. You could have comforted him with that story.

ELSA: Exactly – what a bright little girl, you are! He suddenly smiled and took a deep sigh, like relief, you know, and he said to me:

“You're right, Elsa. I will not go to hell, because I did something for God that only I could do.”

So of course I asked him what, but that was all. He mumbles something about a candle and fell back asleep, gentle like a child. And later, Fritz told me what he did, that man. It changed his life.

SOPHIE: He went straight to heaven, I think. I hope he did! Maybe he'll meet Elijah there, and the time of peace will come.

SHARONA: But for now, for right now, let's start the Seder. Pass the Matzah plates around, Fritz. Everyone take a piece. The big ones are hand-made, the way Fritz's mother Lotte made them.

JON: They did cost a fortune.

SHARONA: They are – they are beyond price.

FRITZ: Ja. Beyond price. The bread of affliction that brings life!

ELSA: It needs a little salt, this matzoh.

HANNAH: Here – and soon, we'll put horseradish on it. To remind us of the slavery.

SHARONA: And after that, I have the best strawberry jam. The sweetest jam you ever tasted.

SOPHIE: And now the blessing everyone, please repeat after me:

(SHE SPEAKS EACH PHRASE, and EVERYONE REPEATS)

“BLESSED ART THOU,
OH LORD, SOVEREIGN
OF THE UNIVERSE,
WHO HAS GIVEN US LIFE,
AND SUSTAINED US
AND BROUGHT US TO THIS DAY.”

SHARONA: Now let's eat. I'm starving.

(Music)

End