

To Life
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TO LIFE

EXT. WARSAW, POLAND - DECEMBER 1942 - EARLY MORNING

Christmas decorations line the streets but this is not your normal holiday. GERMAN SOLDIERS are everywhere.

INT. WARSAW APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

A sparsely furnished room. Hands trembling, SIMA WEINSTEIN, 30s, cries quietly as she dresses 18 month old blue-eyed blonde-haired NATALIE in warm clothing. Her husband LEON, also 30s and more stoic, writes a note. Small suitcases sit nearby. Leon puts down his pen and goes to Sima, resting his hands gently on her shoulders doing his best to reassure and comfort her.

LEON

It's the only way.

Sima is quietly firm through her tears as she holds their infant daughter.

SIMA

I'll never believe that. Not in a million years.

LEON

Sima, after everything we've been through, what other choice do we have?

SIMA

I don't know. There must be something we haven't thought of - something that makes sense. Going through with this -- It never would have entered my mind to do such a thing. How did it get to this?

Leon has no answer for that. Nor will one suffice. He guides her to the table taking Natalie into his arms.

LEON

Sima, copy what I've written so it's done by a female hand.

Resigned, Sima takes a seat. Leon holds a cooing Natalie while Sima tries to steady her writing hand. But she's too distraught. Leon tenderly places his hand on hers. She manages to finish it.

She gives Leon the tear-stained note.

ANGLE ON NOTE

'My husband is a prisoner of war and I can no longer take care of my precious daughter. Whoever finds her, please take Natasha in, in the name of Jesus Christ.'

SIMA

Leon, you have more faith than I do that this trick will work.

LEON

You have the cross?

Sima hands him one but minus its chain.

SIMA

How will she remember us? Or that she is Jewish?

Leon takes Sima's hand.

LEON

She will. We don't have a chain for it?

SIMA

I...I don't know. It must have fallen off.

Leon looks around at their meager possessions. He removes his tallis from its pouch, kisses the prayer shawl and pulls a fringe from one corner. Threading it through the cross's loop, he places it around Natalie's neck.

Tears well in both their eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RADZYMIN, POLAND - 1923

Here in this Polish shtetl (a Hasidic community) about 20 miles from Warsaw, life revolves around home, the market place and the synagogue.

INT. RADZYMIN SYNAGOGUE - SABBATH MORNING

Twelve-year-old Leon Weinstein fidgets with boyish energy playing with the fringes on his tallis as he attends services. His father ABRAHAM'S head shake stops Leon only briefly before he starts up again. Leon's GRANDFATHER, the family patriarch, observes with slight bemusement.

INT. BUTCHER'S SHOP - DAY

A CUSTOMER hands the BUTCHER her zlotys in payment.

CUSTOMER
Next year Palestine.

BUTCHER
From your mouth to God's ears.

MONTAGE

EXT. LOCAL POND - DAY

KIDS cool themselves off.

INT. BARN - DAY

Cows are hand-milked.

EXT. RADZYMIN STREETS - DAY

Great SCHOLARS debate the Bible. And MEN of substance rub shoulders with VAGABONDS and BEGGARS.

Studying is considered the most valuable and hardest work of all - to most of the community...

INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Twelve-year-old LEON WEINSTEIN stares at the wall clock.

TEACHER
Mr. Weinstein, do you have a pressing appointment?

LEON
No, sir.

TEACHER
Then you should keep your eyes on the blackboard and not on the clock.

The bell rings ending class.

TEACHER (CONT'D)
I hope you pay more attention at Hebrew school.

Leon barely hears him as he gleefully races from class.

EXT. RADZYMIN TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Running down unpaved streets, Leon and a SCHOOLMATE pass horse drawn carts and the occasional vehicle. It's Market Day Wednesday when MERCHANTS fill the square with their wares.

SCHOOLMATE
C'mon, Leon. We can't be late again.

LEON

What's more important - missing Hebrew school or making money for my family?
 (to one Merchant)
 Do you need any help today?

MERCHANT

There's barely enough buying to cover my costs. Why aren't you in school?

Leon approaches one market stand after another until he spots three thuggish YOUNG MEN.

SCHOOLMATE

Let's get out of here.

Leon doesn't budge.

SCHOOLMATE (CONT'D)

I'll see you there, okay?

Leon watches as one thug steals fruit while another overturns a merchant's cart. Leon doesn't hesitate.

LEON

Hey, you can't do that.

THUG #1

I think I heard a dirty little Jew.

When the thug laughs, Leon levels him with a kick to the groin. As that thug writhes on the ground, Leon takes off through the square followed by the other two.

EXT. RADZYMIN STREETS - CONTINUOUS

The thugs are right on his heels as Leon dodges pedestrians, and slides under a horse-drawn cart. Rounding a corner, he ducks into a building, safe at last.

The thugs look around but there's no sign of Leon.

THUG #2

You Jews will get what you deserve!

EXT. RADZYMIN SYNAGOGUE - SABBATH MORNING

Leon walks with his father ABRAHAM and GRANDFATHER.

LEON

But I had a good reason.

ABRAHAM

(sighing)

You always do. Leon, your religious education is even more important than your public school education.

LEON

No one gets mad when you're late.

GRANDFATHER

Because the Rabbi's work is never done.

ABRAHAM

And that means *our* work *for* the Rabbi is never done. Your mother understands that.

LEON

Mother's out early every day selling milk. Doesn't she work at least as hard as the Rabbi?

GRANDFATHER

The Rabbi does God's work but yes, she works very hard so we have a good home and food to eat.

LEON

I want to do the same thing - help provide for our family.

INT. WEINSTEIN HOME - SABBATH MEAL - DAY

Leon's FAMILY OF TEN eats quietly. Leon wolfs down his food and grabs a well-worn soccer ball.

ROSA

(teasing)

'Wild one,' sometimes I think you love football more than us or school.

Leon teases her right back.

LEON

School, yes. You, no. I have to love you. You're my sister.

And Leon's out the door.

BREEKA

(calling after him)

Come home right after the game.

LEON (O.S.)

Yes, mother.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD - DAY

The weathered scoreboard reads Radzymin 1 and Leoncin 1. Leon's Radzymin TEAM of Jewish KIDS plays another shtetl's TEAM. The field is basic as are their uniforms.

Leon runs in behind the defense but he's stymied. He checks back to the ball and lays it off to make another run behind the defender. This time, his MIDFIELDER chips the ball to him. They push the ball on offense.

Stretching the defense, Leon and teammates capitalize on the holes. The RIGHT FIELDER DAWID finds Leon open, fires a pass to him and Leon scores, winning the game. His teammates congratulate him; it's clear he's a natural leader.

WOLOSKA, an older Gentile TEENAGER, approaches. Leon's teammates grow quiet.

WOLOSKA

Good game. If you ever want to play
with us Poles --

LEON

I'm Polish.

WOLOSKA

Right. Sorry. I meant --

LEON

I know what you meant.

INT. SYNAGOGUE STAGE - EVENING

Leon portrays Motl Peysi in Sholom Aleichem's play "Motl Peysi the Cantor's Son." His family applauds politely; his Grandfather more enthusiastically.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HEDER CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

This Hebrew school class has a dozen CLASSMATES including Leon. They quiet down promptly as their TEACHER enters with a tanned young MAN of 19. Curious looks are cast his way.

TEACHER

Instead of our scheduled lesson on
Palestine, I've invited a special
guest visiting from there, Mr. Avram
Rozenzweig. Avram grew up in Radzymin
and came here especially for you.

AVRAM steps to the front of the classroom.

AVRAM

I prepared a speech but figured your questions will bring out everything I was going to say. Who's first?

Hands shoot up instantly.

STUDENT

Is Palestine as beautiful as the books say?

AVRAM

More beautiful...

They nod in agreement as if there could be any other answer.

AVRAM (CONT'D)

But there is hard work to be done amidst the beauty. Read everything you can to prepare for the challenges you'll face when you arrive.

LEON

Is it possible for a family to make a decent living there?

The teacher is impressed by Leon's serious question.

INT. WEINSTEIN HOME - AFTER DINNER

Family members clear the table and take care of dirty dishes.

ABRAHAM

And the milk selling?

BREEKA

Slowing down and I don't understand it. It's almost as if shop owners all decided to stop buying from me.

ABRAHAM

We'll manage. We always do.

LEON

I can help.

His six SIBLINGS (three older and three younger) chuckle at Leon's suggestion of financial assistance.

ROSA

How can you possibly help financially?

INT. RADZYMIN TAILOR SHOP - DAY

Breeka and Abraham present Leon to the local TAILOR. He's marking a CUSTOMER'S suit for alterations.

TAILOR
And you want to apprentice with me
because?

LEON
No shtetl has a better tailor. And I
don't do anything second-best.

The tailor smiles, charmed by Leon's bravado.

LATER THAT DAY

Leon observes intently as the tailor measures a CUSTOMER and then cuts the cloth to create a suit for him.

INT. TAILOR'S SHOP - ANOTHER DAY

Leon repairs a garment under the boss's watchful eye.

INT. TAILOR SHOP - A FEW DAYS LATER

Leon pins a men's jacket prior to making alterations.

CUSTOMER
Can you have it ready for Shabbas?

TAILOR
We're very busy right --

LEON
Yes. It will be ready Friday morning.

The tailor nods approvingly.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TAILOR'S SHOP - DAY

Breeka shows the tailor some material for a suit.

TAILOR
We will make an excellent Passover
suit for your mensch.

INT. TAILOR SHOP - SEVERAL DAYS LATER

Leon's parents wait expectantly outside the changing room.

LEON (O.S.)
Don't just smile. Tell me how
professional I look.

Leon steps from behind the curtain. His parents beam at this well-crafted suit which fits him perfectly.

TAILOR
You are happy?

BREEKA/ABRAHAM
Yes.

TAILOR
Then I am happy too. I left some
material so he doesn't outgrow it
too soon.
(to Leon)
You can change now. We have lots of
work still to be done.

When the tailor hands his parents a bill, Leon is confused.

INT. WEINSTEIN HOME - THAT NIGHT

Leon sits by himself, lost in thought.

LEON
I cut the fabric and I sewed the
whole garment. The only thing he did
was measure me!

ABRAHAM
And you did an excellent job. But he
owns the business and he's the one
who gets paid.

LEON
Full price? For a worker's family?

BREEKA
People pay for what they buy. That's
the way it is.

LEON
Well, I don't like it.

And he storms out. Breeka starts after him, but she's stopped by Leon's grandfather.

INT. WEINSTEIN HOME - LATER

Leon returns to find his grandfather asleep in front of the fireplace, a worn copy of the Old Testament in his lap.

Quietly closing the front door, he places a blanket over his grandfather then heads for the bedroom.

GRANDFATHER

You must have done a lot of thinking.
You've been gone a long time.

He's summoned to sit by his grandfather.

LEON

I walked all over Radzymin. Twice.

GRANDFATHER

Walking is helpful when thinking.
Did you arrive at any decision?

LEON

Well, I want to help financially.
But I don't like being bossed.

GRANDFATHER

It's the way of the world. I answer
to the Rabbi. And he answers to God.

LEON

I still don't have to like it. I
want to be my own boss.

INT. WEINSTEIN HOME - BEDROOM - LATE NIGHT

Tip-toeing around his sleeping siblings, Leon packs clothing and some food into a worn bag. At the door, he remembers something. He grabs toilet paper and slips out quietly.

EXT. THE ROAD TO WARSAW - NIGHT

Starting his journey, Leon walks along briskly, making good progress. A road sign reads 'Warsaw 32 km (20 miles).'

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE ROAD TO WARSAW - LATER

Leon munches on bread to maintain energy.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE ROAD TO WARSAW - LATER

To stay awake, he sings Yiddish songs aloud. That doesn't help much. He slows down, blinking often, his gait becoming more erratic.

EXT. ROADSIDE FRUIT STAND - EARLY MORNING

Leon spots a bench inside.

INT. ROADSIDE FRUIT STAND - CONTINUOUS

Exhausted, he curls up on the bench.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ROADSIDE FRUIT STAND - SUNRISE

LEON

Ow!

Leon's poked by the irate FRUIT STAND OWNER.

FRUIT STAND OWNER

Does this look like a hotel to you?