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Night Lessons  
*in*  
Little Jerusalem

RICK HELD



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*For my father, whose memoirs inspired me to write this book,  
and whose embrace of life continues to inspire my days.*

## Prologue

**T**he hero of this book was not a saint, nor even a tzadik – the nearest Jewish equivalent – but he was a hero. Someone who risked his own life to make a difference to the life of another.

Were his motives selfless? No. He was after all flesh and blood. A man. And a very young one. But life is not black and white. Heroes are not without their flaws.

This, as well as I have been able to piece it together, is his story.

# 1

**T**echnically, Tholdi – pronounced Toldi – had been a man already for exactly three years. Since his barmitzvah when by Jewish law he became accountable for his own actions. But according to Alex, Tholdi’s best friend, there was another rite to be performed, another threshold to be crossed. And so it was, on a mild evening early in the European summer of 1941, that Tholdi found himself on a tram travelling towards an appointment to surrender his virginity.

Tholdi was younger than Alex by almost two years, but they were like brothers. They’d grown up in each other’s homes, in the same apartment building with a shared courtyard. Their fathers had done business together. Their mothers had swapped recipes and secrets. And Alex, who lost his virginity at fifteen, had no doubt it was time for Tholdi to lose his. It had been

useless for Tholdi to try to resist. After all, it made good sense. A man should have some knowledge of these things before his wedding day. Should not be inept. And if his family were still allowed to employ a maid, as most good families once did, she would no doubt have tutored Tholdi by now in subjects that his schoolteachers could not. That was how Alex had received instruction, as had Tholdi's father, Nathan, when he was a young man. Alex had made the appointment for Tholdi with Nathan's tacit blessing. If it weren't for his poor vision, even worse at night, Nathan might have accompanied Tholdi himself.

As the tram descended the main hill towards the Prut River, Tholdi took in the passing streetscape of the busy Hauptstrasse. Ringed by the fabled Carpathian Mountains, a place of wolves and castles and legends, and surrounded by the lush rolling farmlands of the Bukovina, Czernowitz had been for nearly a century and a half a jewel in the crown of the Austrian Empire. A large rural village that had flourished into a prosperous and enlightened university town with grand public buildings where royalty visited to watch plays and operas, and where famous musicians, performers and poets were born and celebrated. Its cobbled streets boasted long rows of elegant shops and handsome townhouses, three and four storeys tall. Adorned with Juliet balconies, fanciful domes and decorative turrets, they rivalled the architecture of Vienna itself. But at the end of the First World War the jewel, Little Vienna, was snatched by Romanian hands from the south. And now, less than a year after the start of yet

another world war, it had been snatched again by its eastern neighbour, Russia.

In the Ringplatz, the city's central square, the tram stopped. Outside, the heavy presence of Soviet soldiers eclipsed the usual confetti of lively young university students on summer break, and the city's walls were plastered with giant posters of the soldiers' iron-fisted leader, Joseph Stalin. With his lustrous black hair and walrus moustache he projected the presence of a stern but heroic father. There was no hint of the tyrant responsible for the sudden disappearance of thousands of Czernowitz's citizens. Those 'bourgeois capitalists' of conspicuous wealth who had, without trial, been found guilty of oppressing their workers and deemed enemies of communism. Not that any of this was spoken of. Certainly not on a tram. Not when Stalin's informants were everywhere among them, and the possibility of exile to a barren Siberian gulag was only a malicious whisper away.

'Tholdi, did you hear me?'

Alex spoke in German. Despite the best efforts of the Romanian authorities, who'd spent the inter-war years of their rule trying to stamp it out, German remained the lingua franca of the educated, who never adopted the Romanian word Cernăuți for their city. The Jews of Czernowitz peppered their speech with Yiddish, as you'd expect in the place where Yiddish had been first recognised as an official language. That event had earned the city its other nickname: Jerusalem on the Prut.

'I heard you, Alex. Zaftik. She's zaftik.'

Voluptuous.



Alex wasn't speaking of Tholdi's girl, but the one he'd reserved for himself. The woman, though neither of them could possibly have known it then, who was destined to change everything.

'I think she's tsigayner.' Gypsy. 'But she's clean. All the girls there are, if that's what you're worried about.'

It wasn't. Nor was Tholdi worried, really, that his shmok – another Yiddish word, meaning penis as well as fool – might not rise to the occasion. What Tholdi was worried about, though he knew Alex would consider it weak and womanly, was that afterwards instead of pride he would feel regret. That he had not saved himself for a girl worthy of his desire. His love.

Was it his passion for music that had shaped these feelings? Those grand, sweeping operas full of exquisite, star-crossed longing? Or was it the other way around? Was it in his nature? Is that what drew him to the music? In any case the shameful truth of his anxiety remained unspoken.

'Tholdi, trust me, you won't have a problem,' Alex said.

What a day this achievement would crown. The news that Tholdi had been named top of his class *and* been awarded the school's most prestigious music prize – yet again; he'd won it every year – had filled his parents with the sort of pride an only child, worse still an only son, could not hope to evade. Particularly when it coincided with a birthday. In anticipation Tholdi's mother, Lina, had saved ration coupons for months. Had queued half a day to redeem them. Toiled for hours, happily,

at her wood-fired oven to prepare the feast. Nathan had found a dusty bottle of Hungarian Tokay wine. Even Alex's younger sister, Peppa, had been allowed some.

Nathan raised his glass. 'L'chaim!' To life!

'To our young genius!' Jakob, Alex's father, proclaimed, a touch too loudly for comfort. A reminder to them all that Tholdi's scholastic accomplishments put Alex's in the shade.

Alex, who was usually quick with a clever retort, for once remained silent. But not because of any resentment. He was proud of his friend; if there was any envy between them it ran the other way. Tholdi, for all his success, looked up to Alex, and not just literally – Alex was a good head taller than him – but in other ways, too. Tholdi wished he possessed Alex's confidence. His athletic physicality. His swagger. No, Alex held his tongue because he had no interest this evening in a fight with his father, nor the time for it. He and Tholdi had plans.

'So, Nathan, what say you?' Jakob continued. 'I say doctor.'

Mira, Alex's mother, placed a cautioning hand over her husband's. 'Jakob, please, enough.'

He ignored her. 'Or a lawyer. Lawyer is good, too.'

'He's going to be a conductor.'

Peppa's words, spoken softly, landed like a grenade. An act of open rebellion. Jakob frowned. 'Was it you I asked?'

She opened her mouth to speak again, and then decided better of it. It was Tholdi's day. She didn't want to ruin it. Nathan stepped in to smooth things over. 'My son, whatever you decide we will be proud of you.'

In that moment Tholdi could not have been more grateful for his father's love. Unwavering, unconditional. They all raised their glasses, swallowed the sweet wine.

Leo, Tholdi's grandfather, clapped his hands.

'Berthold!' he commanded, signalling an imminent announcement demanding the gravitas of Tholdi's full name. 'I have a gift for you.'

From his pocket he produced something that since the arrival of the Soviets none of them had seen. His heavy gold signet ring. The one he'd had made when he was a young man. The one Tholdi had coveted almost since the day he had first sat on his grandfather's lap and touched it with his tiny infant fingers.

'Papa, no!' Lina cried.

'Bubala, why?'

Lina was now in middle age, but she remained Leo's bubala. His little darling.

'Because it's yours. Until the day you . . .' She refused to utter the word. 'It's too soon.'

'If we wait till then, I will never have the pleasure of the giving.'

Mira knew what lay behind Lina's outburst. Her fear that her father was inviting bad luck upon himself. She knew also how little patience Nathan had for superstition. It belonged, he felt, to the peasant classes. Mira tried a more rational approach.

'If Tholdi was seen wearing it in the street . . . People these days are taken away for much less.'

Leo shrugged his shoulders and everted his palms – the distinctive Jewish gesture of turning your hands palm up to

prove they are empty; of surrender to the inevitable. ‘So for now he does like me. Keeps the ring somewhere safe.’

Lina looked to Nathan – as always, the final arbiter, the judge – hoping for his support. Nathan looked to Leo’s face, and to Tholdi’s, before delivering his verdict.

‘So long as he keeps it hidden.’

And with that it was settled.

Leo passed the ring to his grandson, who examined its familiar design. The rampant lion on top and, on the sides, the delicately carved edelweiss flowers. Symbols of a legend Leo had told him so many times. A legend that was now his.

‘Thank you, Opa.’

The two men, from opposite ends of life, shared a smile. Lina felt an ominous shiver, a dark premonition she would later recall, run through her.

‘Another bottle?’ Jakob asked Nathan.

Alex caught Nathan’s eye. Urged him to resist.

‘One was all we had,’ Nathan said.

Jakob knew his friend was holding out on him. ‘Always with the hard bargain,’ he complained. ‘It’s a wonder we ever made a deal at all.’

Alex broke his silence. ‘We can’t.’

‘At last! He speaks!’

‘They’re expected,’ Nathan reminded Jakob.

‘At Friedl’s place,’ Alex added quickly. Cementing the small lie that had been agreed to among the men.

Jakob realised his mistake and was embarrassed by it. ‘Of course. I forgot. My apologies.’

‘What time will you be home?’ Lina asked.

The question was for Tholdi, but Alex answered it. ‘By ten. No later.’

‘I still don’t understand why I can’t come too,’ Peppa said.

Another moment of defiance. Directed this time at her brother, it was more strident. Alex’s response was blunt, allowing no space for discussion.

‘Because you can’t.’

When, Peppa wondered, would they all stop treating her like a child? Acknowledge that at fourteen she was already a young woman?

At the front door Lina pressed a woollen scarf into her son’s hands. Implored him to take care. Kissed him on the cheek before she watched him go with Alex. Prayed to God no harm would come to them.



‘Hey, Jew boys! Isn’t this your stop?’

The voice, Tholdi realised, had come from a group of four youths who’d boarded the carriage.

‘The rabbi is that way!’

The youth jerked his head in the direction of the synagogue that was two streets over. It wasn’t the only synagogue, nor even the oldest, but it was by far the most known. Its magnificent Moorish dome made it famous.

Tholdi and Alex exchanged a glance.

Another youth joined in. 'What's the matter? Can't hear us?'

This, not the weather, was what Lina had feared. The Jewish population of Czernowitz was large, some forty per cent of the city's total. More than half of them had arrived during the Austrian era, from territories to the west. For the most part they had been accepted, or at the very least tolerated; without them there would have been no Little Vienna. But there were those Czernowitzers who had long harboured envy and resentment. They wished the city was still part of Romania, which had allied itself with Germany and was now dealing decisively with 'the Jewish problem', just as Hitler had been doing for years.

Tholdi understood that he, not Alex, had attracted the unwanted attention. If Alex were blond he could easily have passed as Aryan – his blue eyes and broad shoulders helped him blend in. Tholdi's features – his dark, deep-set eyes, his pale complexion and slender frame – as well as his reserved nature fitted the myth of the typical sensitive Jew of books and numbers much more neatly.

The third youth found his voice. 'Maybe he hasn't cleaned the shit from his ears lately!'

And then the fourth: 'Maybe he couldn't get past his beak!'

It was a weak joke – neither Tholdi nor Alex had the exaggerated hooked nose the fascists liked to caricature – but the youths all laughed anyway.

Tholdi saw the clenched fists in Alex's lap. Weapons that Tholdi knew his friend wanted to use. He thought of Lina, the

hand that would leap to her breast if they came home covered in blood. *Alex, please, don't*, his eyes implored. In the end, Alex remained in his seat. Said and did nothing.

The youth who had spoken first had the last word. 'Same as all your lot,' he sneered. 'Cowards.' He turned to the others. 'Come on!'

As the tram lurched forward again, resuming its descent, they leapt from it, another burst of their laughter cutting coldly through the warm night air.