Mary Elmes 2026 – Be Brave and Good

By Isabel O' Regan, 5th Year, Holy Child Killiney

The day was grey and flat and not properly begun when shouts woke us. I was the first to wake and though I was half-asleep, I sat up in bed. I was much taller than most at my age and my legs hung off the end.

My mother lay still and silent at my side. In her arms, she held my little brother. Even in sleep, he had a troubled look on his face. I reached out and took my mother's hand. It was like a stick of ice in my palm.

More shouts came, this time from just outside the door. My mother bolted up, waking my brother, Wullie, only five, started to cry. He was a quiet child and never sobbed; his tears slid delicately down his pale face. In her confusion, my mother did not notice.

The surprise on her face was replaced by a terrible look. She didn't seem angry at the abrupt awakening, nor afraid for what it surely meant for us. Her bloodless lips set into a straight line. She looked both young, fresh from sleep with no makeup and very, very old. Her face had thinned out since we moved to the ghetto in Cracow and I did not recognise her in that moment.

I knew, then, that this was the worst thing the Nazis had taken from me: my mother.

'Stefan,' she said, but a knock came at the front door. It echoed throughout the small, two-room apartment. Only now did I become afraid. 'Stay here with Wullie.'

Still in her nightgown, my mother went into the narrow hall and to the door. From the bedroom, I could see her standing in the hallway. She stared at herself in the mirror. She took a deep breath, jutted her chin and opened the door.

There were two men there. One was a soldier, barely older than me, and the other an SS officer. The officer stepped through into the hall. His gaze swept over our apartment and his lips curled.

I did not like the officer at once, though by now I knew to hate anyone in uniform. Wullie was still crying and I pulled him into my arms.

'Are you Esther Stein?' the officer asked her in clipped German. The language always felt cold and mean to my ears.

'Yes,' my mother said, voice trembling. I wanted her to tell them to leave. But she didn't, of course.

Outside I heard more shouting. I held Wullie tighter. 'And is your husband here, Michael Stein?'

'No, he has passed on.' My mother's eyes bore into the officer. She clearly wanted to share the story of his death. My father lost his job in '37 and a few months later, he caught a chill. It turned out much worse than that, in the end.

His death had been difficult, dragged out; months and months of bloodied handkerchiefs, of long queues for the doctors who would see Jews, of scraping up for medicine that came in brown, glass bottles. ‘Passed on’ felt like too little.

The officer didn’t even make an attempt of sympathy. ‘Your two children, Stefan and William. Are they here?’

I wished my mother hadn’t bid me to stay with Wullie. I wanted to go and take her hand. She turned slightly and I couldn’t see her face anymore. She nodded slowly.

The officer nodded to the soldier, who hadn’t spoken once. The soldier took a small, yellowed slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to my mother.

‘You and your children must come to this spot tomorrow,’ said the officer. ‘At eleven o’clock. You are being moved east.’

‘But why? We’ve been here for less than a year!’

‘And now you’re being moved.’ The officer’s tone was not cold or mean; he just didn’t care. ‘If you do not comply, you will be made to.’

My mother was shaking, but there was nothing to say. The two men turned and moved down the hallway. I heard them knock on a different door.

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We brought just one bag for the three of us. My mother was worried what would happen to our things while we were gone, but there was that a tacit understanding that we wouldn’t be back for some time.

My mother made me wear my heavy winter coat and my thickest jumper. I was sweating. I made no complaints. We left behind nearly everything. I was fifteen and too old for toys, but Wullie brought his stuffed bear.

We went to the gates of the ghetto, where we’d been told to meet. I saw my neighbours, ones of all ages. The officer from yesterday was there too, among others.

There were two trucks. Officers split us into queues. My mother held Wullie on her hip and held my hand. At five, Wullie should have been too big to be carried. But he was very small.

One officer barked at us in rapid German. I was too disorientated to understand; my mother, who was very bright, did, and pulled us onto the first truck. It filled quickly. Then the door closed.

A child began to cry.

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We spent many hours in that truck. The child’s cries had climbed higher and higher until, exhausted, she fell into a fitful sleep still on her feet. A different boy’s sobs replaced hers.

All of us were standing. I was the biggest there and kept banging my head for the hard roof. My legs burnt as they cramped up. There was no room to sit or even crouch; they had packed us in that tightly. My mother and I sandwiched Wullie between us and another woman stood pressed against my back. The air was thick with sweat and the smell of unbrushed teeth. I was almost glad; it distracted me from the hunger in my stomach.

Many relieved themselves along the journey; it stank. I took great care to breathe through my mouth.

There was a single window. Weak sunlight filtered through the dirty glass. The youngest children stood by it. I peered over their heads and watched green fields rattle by.

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The sun had set and risen again before we were off the truck. But it was still a long time until we finished our journey. We took the train. I hadn't thought it possible, but the train was worse. The small window in the truck had offered me some distraction over the journey; the train had no such amenities.

It was just as crowded, only now we were shrouded in the dark. This time at least there was a small amount of room to sit down. I was tucked between my mother and the wall. I was sweltering hot.

The dizzying sounds of tears did not abate once – even the adults were crying. I wanted to join in, but the look in my mother's eyes steeled me towards strength. Wullie started to cry too. I couldn't even find him in the dark to comfort him. I reached my hand into the shadows and only found a thin, skeletal woman. I shrank back.

A few hours into the journey, whispers began. 'I've heard of Jews going east,' said a man from the other side of the carriage. He spoke in Polish. 'They don't come back.'

'Don't say that!' one woman snapped. Her voice came from closer. I squinted and saw that she had two young children, the eldest around Wullie's age; both so small they easily fit into her lap. Her husband sagged beside her in a fitful sleep.

'Why not?' said the man, his voice trembling. He sounded close to tears.

'We've all come from ghettos,' another woman's voice cut in, 'I was in Sosnowiec, and then Cracow. It's most likely another one."

The first woman began to pray. Others, including my mother and I, joined in the familiar words.

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I think it was a full day before we got off the train. I hadn't eaten since leaving the ghetto. I had often gone hungry, but *never* like this.

The train screeched to a halt suddenly. I heard German voices. The doors flung open. The bright, midday light hit us. Soldiers barked out orders. Those closest to the door spilled out

from the train. I was right at the back. My mother grabbed my hand and the three of us intertwined, we stepped out into our new world.

There were hundreds of people, as far as my eyes could see: the old, young, infants, men, women, sick, strong, with seemingly nothing in common. I was instantly overwhelmed at the huge amount of people.

A team of soldiers moulded us and the people from our train into a line. They took our bags and threw them into untidy piles. My mother, Wullie, and I were at the very end. The soldiers came down slowly, speaking to every person they passed. When they finished, they would point in one of two directions and the person would be made to go there.

Finally, a soldier reached us. My mouth had gone completely dry and a wave of nausea and apprehension came over me. 'Names?'

'Esther Stein, Stefan Stein, William Stein.' My mother spoke for us.

'How old is the small one?'

'Five,' piped up Wullie, surprisingly all of us. He had barely said a word since we'd left the ghetto.

The soldier nodded. He then turned to my mother. 'You?'

'Forty-three.'

'The two of you go there, left. You must shower before joining everyone else.'

My mother set her lips into a thin line. 'What about my other son, Stefan?'

With a sigh, the soldier directed the same question to me.

'I'm fifteen,' I answered, trying to steady my voice. The soldier looked me up and down for several, terrible seconds. I felt like a stick of meat, one that was not particularly good, in the being appraised by a thrifty mother in the butchers. My height had always made me stand out but now I wished to be as small as Wullie.

'You go right.' He turned and moved to the next group.

My mother and I stared at each other. 'I'll come with you,' I announced after a minute, 'He will not notice if I go the other way.'

'He will,' replied my mother, 'Or someone else will. I don't want you to get punished, Stefan.'

'Mother –' I didn't want her to go, though I assumed I'd see her later that day. Nor did I want to say goodbye to Wullie. I hadn't spent more than a few hours apart from him since he was born.

The soldier glanced back and shouted for her to *move* in German. He said it exceptionally rudely, and I thought I saw a tear come to my mother's eye. Only twice had I seen her cry: the

first time, when a man threw a bottle at her in the street for wearing the star, and the second, when my father died. It was very unlike her to every show weakness.

‘Stefan,’ she said, and her voice was firm, ‘Be brave. Be good. I will see you later. I love you so much.’

My throat closed suddenly and I couldn’t say more than a few words. ‘I love you too.’ I wrapped her in a hug, feeling her bones protrude into my arms. She only came up to my shoulder.

I looked down at Wullie. He looked too fragile to be in such a place. I myself was scared, and maybe so was my mother; so how would he manage? Still holding to my mother, I brought him into the embrace too. I knew I had to be brave and good like my mother said.

Maybe a part of me knew I would not see them again, and I just refused to believe it; but either way, I clung to my family with no intention of letting go. Neither did they. It was a soldier who eventually separated us.

He took me by the arm and pulled me away. I watched another soldier shepherd them towards a long queue, mostly made of children or the very old. I kept watching until they slipped out of sight, and that was it. They were gone.