

Corrupted Innocence

Zophia, a free-spirit and vibrant soul, slowly descended into the ground; the chapters of her life closed and her story ended. Zophia was a fighter; she lasted longer than anyone had expected, but even she couldn't outrun fate. The atrocious injections that were put into her body were an enigma doctors could never solve. They did not know what the injections were, therefore throwing any chance of Zophia being cured and saved out the window. The Holocaust claimed another victim. Aleksandra held back the tears and sobs that were choked up in her throat, for she would mourn later. Today was Zophia's day and it was Aleksandra's job to honor her in her death with a quick burial. She hoped her beloved twin sister would find peace in the afterlife in contrast to the horrors she faced while alive. As Aleksandra watched the simple pine casket lowered into the ground, she was overwhelmed with memories of how her sister met this fate. Images flooded into her mind from a little over ten years ago, when her and her sister's lives were forever changed and when their story truly began.

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Riding for what seemed like days, Aleksandra had lost track of time as she sat smooshed up against her mother and father with her sister, Zophia, by her side. There was little room in the small, deplorable railway car. Each and every inch was utilized to pack as many human beings as possible with no room to spare. Each breath she inhaled filled with the stench of sweat and human waste was enough to make her nauseous. Feeling like a caged bird, Aleksandra was terrified of what was to come. Her only escape from the oppressive car was sleep. So she dreamt of her childhood home in Warsaw, Poland where her and her sister would lay in their backyard stargazing. In those moments she was completely and utterly happy as her and her sister giggled as they lay under the twinkling lights in the sky. Aleksandra clung to those moments of happiness, trying to preserve the image of her happy life before her whole world was turned upside down. No longer was she Aleksandra, but just another Jew that needed to be rounded up and sent away.

The car jolted to a halt, jarring everyone awake. Aleksandra clung to her mother's hand and uttered what filled everyone's minds: "Mama, what now? What will happen to us?"

Her mother just squeezed her hand and said "This place will test your limits, try to change you, but you and your sister are strong girls. Don't ever forget that. Look out for each other and never lose hope. My beautiful girls, be strong, I love you" At that moment, the door to the car opened. After days in the darkness, light seeped in through the now opened side of the car. Troops were waiting on the other sides for what Aleksandra did not know. Everyone exited in single file and then separated into two lines; one with the women and the children and the other with the men. The men women and children were either sent to the left of the right, all decided by an officer's flick of the wrist. The girls waited in line ready to see if their fate would take them to the

left or right. Apparently fate had other plans, because the girls did not go either direction, completely out of the lines themselves.

"Zwillinge! Zwillinge!" Announced the SS troops with glee. Aleksandra and her twin sister Zophia exchanged glances. Each girl latched to a hand of their mother, never intending to let go. Aleksandra did not understand. What could these men possibly want? She was just a fourteen-year-old Polish girl from a middle-class family. What value was she to the Nazi cause? A tall gentleman with dark slicked back hair, polished shoes, and a pressed uniform approached, as if acknowledging Aleksandra's unspoken questions. He radiated of authority and it was clear that he was the one in charge. Scrutinizing each girl, he looked back and forth between them. Excitedly, with dark interest, he questioned the mother.

"Are they twins?" he inquired maliciously.

With a nod of the head, Aleksandra's mother condemned them to a life that she hoped would be better off than whatever lay ahead for the rest of the family. With one harsh yank, the troops severed the grip of each girl with their mother and escorted them out of line. Aleksandra cried out in agony, kicking and screaming, yearning to return to her mother's protective embrace. Innocent and naïve, the girls wondered what lay ahead. Their parents wondered the same thing when the man at the ramp altered their course to the left. The girls time here would be filled with hardships and this was only the beginning; a concept which the girls could not yet grasp or possibly know.

Showered and tattooed, the girls had completed their initiation into the infamous Auschwitz - Birkenau. Forever branded, each girl was now marked with their first ever tattoo. It would forever be a reminder of their time at Auschwitz. Aleksandra's number was A-6320 and her sister's A-6321. After their branding, Aleksandra, with her sister in tow, followed the guards to a barrack. This was to be their new home.

From the moment they entered the camp and discovered to be twins, they became test subjects that needed to be analyzed. Aleksandra felt as if she was under a magnifying glass; every physical detail and aspect of her under scrutinization. Hours passed and she and Zophia remained still, to allow the doctors to compare every single detail about them. Everything from their height and weight to the length of their fingers were measured. The girls were identical twins and could hardly be told apart; aside from few small variances or markers in their physical appearance. Each girl felt bare, their bodies the subject or study of the doctors. At first the interactions caused great discomfort, especially to Aleksandra, but as the weeks passed they became more mundane as the girls acclimated to their new lives. The doctors were not always the same and the girls lost track of who was who. The only doctor they recognized was the same man who had sought them out after their arrival. He regularly frequented the barracks and stopped by in the laboratories to take notes. Aleksandra could tell he was in charge; he walked around with superiority and purpose with each step he took. He was consistently very put together, with his perfectly polished shoes and pressed uniform. The man almost seemed charismatic and nice. His name was Mengele. He

was slightly built with dark hair, never a piece out of place, and brown eyes. Often times he would bring treats for the other children in the barrack and would sometimes even play with them. Aleksandra always wondered how a man that comes off so friendly could also sit by and allow examinations and experiments to happen on the very same children he played with. He painted himself as the "fun uncle" who played and gave treats, and then would leave after administering the injections to the nurses that were to be inserted into the children. Some children adored him, but something about Doctor Mengele made Aleksandra uneasy.

Aleksandra was always the quiet one, while her sister was the complete opposite. Aleksandra could pass hours with all but her imagination and the thoughts buzzing around in her mind. As weeks went by she felt not only physically trapped but mentally as well. She felt like she was a bird in a cage just waiting to be let out a fly free. Even though she had her sister and doctors visited everyday she felt lonely. Her mind once was filled with jovial thoughts, but now all it swirled with reminders of all things she had lost and her family or lack thereof. The only thing keeping her afloat, with her head spinning in sorrow, was Zophia. Always her backbone even in the worst of times, Zophia kept her sane. Zophia though still strong couldn't help but be affected as well. Zophia was once vibrant, strong-willed, outgoing, and adventurous, but even she was now diminished to a shadow of her former self. Auschwitz had a way of taking away everything until there was nothing left, and then when there is no more taking a person's spirit.

Day in, day out the routine never faltered. There was no rest for the experiments, for which the purpose they served the girls did not know. Both girls were always taken together to the laboratory for experiments. Blood was always drawn in large amounts, and when questioned about it, the doctors brushed it off with "You can always make more." They were always obedient and never disobeyed the rules, for the sole purpose of protecting the other. They felt that if something happened to one of them the other would be held accountable or no longer useful. Other twins in the barrack were tortured and experimented on, but when one died, the other would follow or just disappear. Aleksandra heard rumors that some twins were purposely killed and then dissected. She wondered what was to keep something like that happening to her or her sister. It tore her up inside as she watched her sister get injected with a needle containing an unknown substance. The experiments were always a little different. There were times when one sister was injected but the other was spared, and other times when they both were subjected to the poison being injected into their bloodstream. The experiments in the "bad building" as Aleksandra call it always put her on edge. That building signified imminent experimentation and all around pain and suffering.

Zophia always seemed to bear the brunt of the experimentation. While the girls were the same age, Zophia was technically the older one by a whole minute and a half. She took on the stereotypical role of the older sibling, always looking out for Aleksandra. Aleksandra had always been smarter than she, but was also meek and timid. Whenever she could, she would ensure that Aleksandra was the controlled subject and she the experimental one. Aleksandra didn't know how to resist the protection of her sister. All

of the injections caused severe pain anywhere from sores covering her body to feeling feverish and violently ill. Both girls were weakened tremendously, but with each experiment Zophia got worse until she was violently ill for long periods of time. Aleksandra begged Zophia to let her be the controlled subject but she was headstrong and would not budge. The injections had all sorts of effects on her and Aleksandra didn't know how to comfort her sister. Zophia would cry in pain until her lungs couldn't take anymore and the only solace Aleksandra could provide was her presence and comfort.

Life was put into perspective for Aleksandra. The troubles and barriers they used to face were nothing to what is now their everyday life. Before the war the girls constantly bickered and could never agree on anything. The war bonded them and now their old arguments just seemed petty and inconsequential. Everything was taken from them and all they had was each other. The girls told themselves that each experiment was worth it if it allowed them to make it through. They just had to hold out a little longer. Dreams of their old life and hoping that it awaited them when they could be free. It will all be worth it, just hold out a little longer. They repeated it to themselves until it not only helped them cope but they believed it. They survived for each other, so the other could live.

On January 27, 1945 their hope came. Gunshots rang in the air with artillery booming in the distance. The doctors nowhere, nowhere to be found. Aleksandra's prayers had been answered, the Russians had come. German boots stampeded the ground in response, but they would be overcome and the prisoners saved. Aleksandra was overwhelmed with joy and tears streaked down her face. "We are free," she said to her sister. Immediate evacuation began and the sisters left behind the darkness that had been their lives for ten months. They knew it would be a long road ahead, but it was something they would face together, just like so many times before. Their new lives were just beginning and they were finally in control. The cage doors were finally opened and Aleksandra could fly free. Aleksandra had a whole new perspective on the world; she had entered the camp with pure innocence never knowing what true pain felt like and left a survivor of a shadow of death and pain. Sometimes she wished that she had never been exposed to the harsh realities of the real world and could go back to being the innocent young girl always feeling safe and protected. One chapter of their lives had closed, but another one had opened and the girls embraced their future and their freedom.

Her sister was dead. It was all Doctor Mengele's fault. How was Aleksandra supposed to live on without her twin, her backbone? Aleksandra also toyed with a very dark question: Why should she have survived the holocaust at all when so many others died? She now felt that she wasn't special, she was just a twin, or used to be. Now her sister was gone too. While Zophia's sickness may have been doctor Mengele's fault, Aleksandra also felt that it was hers to bear as well. She should have done more, should have not let Zophia be the experimental subject and her the control. In the wake

of the death of her sister, Aleksandra was overcome with survivor's guilt. As a twin, even though she was experimented on, she had much better conditions than those of who were forced into hard labor. She was saved because she was a twin, while so many others that hoped to be saved, to survive, were flicked to the left: to the gas chambers; including her mother and father. Aleksandra was the only one left, and in that moment of realization, Zophia's coffin hit the ground, and Aleksandra could not stop a tear from rolling down her cheek. All she could think about was that she was the last one, the only survivor of her family. Aleksandra was now lost in the world, but her mind was set she would live on and prove her family proud. She would live on with purpose for her sister, for her mother and father. While Aleksandra felt responsible and guilty, she could not control the past, but she could control her future. Her family may not be there, but they would push Aleksandra to live a life of purpose and one day find happiness again. Happiness like that of the once innocent little girl who giggled carefree laughter under the stars with her twin sister, unknowing of what lay ahead.

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