

FREE LIKE A BIRD is a coming of age tale of two friends, Yosef, a Jew, and Ivan, a gentile, caught in a world conflicted by war, revolution, and anti-Semitism. In 1913, seven-year-old Yosef Matsevitsky begins a ten-year struggle to be reunited with Papa, who left the family behind in the Ukraine. He faces a moral dilemma when he learns of Ivan's betrayal. His shows ingenuity and determination, despite many obstacles.

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CHAPTER ONE

Yosef Aharonovich Matsevitsky stood in the doorway of the synagogue, sheltered from the frigid, late morning air. He shivered, as an icy blast sunk to his toes and made his eyes water. Phantom smells of steaming cabbage soup assaulted his nose, already numb from the cold. His stomach made loud grumbling noises, and he could almost taste the black bread dripping with *schmaltz*. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he waited impatiently for Papa to come. Thank God morning classes were over and soon he would eat his fill at Mama's restaurant.

The sun shone today, a rare occurrence in a land which stayed gray for months on end, but it didn't warm anything. "Yosef, hurry now," said Papa, jolting him from his daydream, "and cover your ears from the cold."

Two big men stood facing Yosef, nearly blocking out the sun. His father, Aharon, was clean-shaven and wore a black sheepskin fur hat. Roman towered beside him. His red curly beard tumbled over a plaid scarf wrapped around his neck, his blue eyes sparkling in the noonday sun.

"Good day, Yosef," said Roman, giving him a gentle push forward.

A few blocks from the synagogue, two boys from the rabbi's school turned into the street ahead of Yosef and his companions. They wore black coats and wide-brimmed hats, and their long, curly forelocks bounced as they walked. Suddenly, three young men jumped out from behind a clump of bushes and threw stones at them.

"Christ killers!" they yelled. "Dirty Zhids! Get out of our town!"

The Jewish boys turned pale and fled down a nearby alley, barely escaping the flying rocks.

"And there's the Jew-lover, Roman Popovic. May the devil take you!" shouted one of the ruffians, pointing at Roman.

"The devil already has you in his grip," shouted Roman.

Yosef grabbed his father's arm, pulling him to a stop. "Papa, why don't those boys stay and fight back?" he asked.

"Curses on you, bullies," shouted Aharon, ignoring Yosef's question. "Are you the tsar's policemen?" Before he could chase them, they vanished into the bushes.

Yosef stood trembling, holding tight to Aharon's arm. "Papa, why do others hate us?"

"Jews have always lived in fear for their lives. The *goyim* blame us whenever bad things happen. Jews are forbidden to own land in the Ukraine or in Russia. They've become moneylenders and tax collectors, making the peasants hate them even more. Some in our own family have had to move from one village to another between eastern Poland and here, at the whim of the tsar," said Papa. "He blames his own mistakes on the Jews, even though we have nothing to do with causing them."

Papa wrapped his arm around Yosef and drew him closer. "Keep your eyes open, Yosef."

"Aharon," said Roman, putting his hand on his companion's shoulder, "have you heard the news coming from Kiev? Mendel Beilis's trial will take place soon."

"Who is he?" asked Yosef.

"He's the Jew accused of killing a Ukrainian boy. Two years ago he was arrested for kidnapping and draining the boy's blood to make matzos for Passover and then burying him in a cave. He's been in prison ever since," said Papa.

"But Papa," said Yosef. "Jews won't even eat an egg with a speck of blood on it. We have to rub salt on meat and wash away the blood to make meat kosher."

"How can it be that in 1913 they are still blaming Jews for killing Christ? How much blood has been spilled because of those lies?" said Papa.

"It seems that the tsar and his cronies want to stir up the people to drive out or kill all the Jews," said Roman. "I hear the talk in the street, and it makes me worry for you and your family."

Yosef shuffled his feet to keep up with the two men as they picked up their pace. Confusing thoughts raced through his head. Just where did he belong in his city of Vasilkov? Within its borders lay a sizable Jewish community. He was a Jew, different from the Christian boys who lived outside the borders of the Jewish area. On the other hand, his family stood apart from most of the Jews of Vasilkov. Papa didn't go to synagogue often, and he had many business dealings with the gentiles. At the restaurant, Mama served a midday meal for factory workers, Jews and non-Jews alike. It was rare for a woman to work at a business outside the home, and sometimes Yosef heard the other women talking about Mama at the synagogue.

Yosef kept to himself most of the time. He preferred to dress like the Ukrainians. He kept his hair short, unlike many of the other Jewish boys in his

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class, the ones who sported long forelocks. He had little in common with them. His lack of hair made his ears stick out like doors from his head, but Yosef didn't care.

Papa and Roman had been friends since childhood. Papa's father owned the slaughterhouse in Vasilkov as did his father before him. Now the business belonged to Papa and his three brothers, Uncle Yehude, Uncle Shlomo, and Uncle Zev. Farmers from all over the area drove their cattle into town to the slaughterhouse which supplied meat to the whole region, even to Kiev, the big city to the north where Mama had grown up. It was not a kosher slaughterhouse, another reason many Jews were at odds with Papa. But he made sure that the *shoychet* had an ample supply of cattle to slaughter, even if he had to bribe a farmer once and awhile.

Roman's father had worked for the Matsevitskys when Papa and Roman were boys. They used to ride the range together on cattle drives, long before Yosef was born. Now Roman was foreman of the slaughterhouse. Long ago Papa had promised Yosef that he would learn to ride and have his own horse when he turned eight. Yosef's birthday was less than six months away, and he could hardly wait.

Yosef had two sisters. Sima had celebrated her tenth birthday a few weeks before; Basha was only five. Yosef was stuck between them, a lone boy in a house of girls. If only he had a brother!

"Thank God for my friend, Ivan Popovic," thought Yosef. Ivan was Roman's youngest son. Both boys were the same age, and they were almost like brothers. Yosef loved to wrestle with Ivan. Even though he was the smaller one, he often pinned Ivan to the ground. Ivan always laughed and tickled him until he let him go. The Popovics had a farm on the outskirts of town, and Yosef often thought of it as a second home. Roman was one of the few gentiles who befriended them.

Roman's voice broke through Yosef's musings. "I hear the tsar has stepped up recruitment for the army."

Papa gave Roman a stern look, and they grew silent as they reached the door of Mama's restaurant.

"Yosef," said Papa. "Stay with your mama and sisters now. She can use your help. Roman and I have business to do." He bent over and kissed his head, then strode off down the street with his companion.

Yosef watched them walk toward the slaughterhouse, a few blocks away. He could tell that Papa had something on his mind, and he hesitated for a moment before opening the door, wondering what that might be.

“Hurry now, Yosef,” barked Sima. She stood by the door, her chest puffed out and her lips in a pout. “You’d better eat before it gets too busy in here. Don’t stand there daydreaming all day.”

Yosef glared at Sima. He hated the way she ordered him around, acting like she was Mama. Who did she think she was, anyway, only two years older? He sauntered into the warm kitchen filled with mouth-watering smells.

“Yosef,” said Mama, her brow creased into a frown. “I’m so glad to see you. Is Papa there? The postman brought him this letter.” Then realizing that Papa had left, she continued, handing Yosef a sealed envelope. Her hand shook. “Go chase after him. I’ll keep your soup warm.”

Yosef reluctantly put on his coat and hat and returned to the cold air outside. He could no longer see Roman and Papa, but he was sure that they had gone to the tavern down the block. They always went there to talk business. Yosef’s eyes moved in a wide arc, scouting the street, and he was relieved to see no trace of the bullies from earlier in the day. Gripping the envelope, he ventured out into the deserted road.

Yosef entered the tavern by the back door. The room was packed with men, crowded together, standing by the bar or sitting at tables. A haze of smoke tickled his throat and clouded his vision. Yosef spied Papa sitting with Roman in the back corner of the room. He crawled under several tables to reach them. He could hear their conversation from his hiding place. Why not stay here for awhile and listen?

“I have to go, Roman,” Aharon said. “There is no future here. My aunt in America has promised to pay my passage, mine and my brother Shlomo’s. He has saved enough to bring his whole family. Mine will have to wait until I send for them.”

Yosef’s jaw dropped at Papa’s words. Go away? Papa?

“I’ll watch over Minna and the children like my own,” Roman said.

Yosef heard the clink of their glasses. He envisioned them toasting each other and draining their glasses in single swallows as he had seen them do so many times before.

“Yosef and Ivan are like brothers,” said Roman, “like us. I feel like I’m losing a part of me, we think so much alike.”

“What if something happens to Minna or the children before I can return to get them? But if I stay here, I’ll surely be drafted into the tsar’s army and never get out. What choice do I have?”

Yosef heard his father let out a long sigh. Papa’s words had stunned him. Papa leaving? Going to America without them? How could that be? Did Mama know?

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“Don’t worry, Aharon. I’ll teach Yosef the things you would want him to know.” Roman’s voice trembled as he spoke. “You must hurry to plan your departure before you are conscripted.”

Papa’s feet slid back from Roman’s, just missing Yosef’s foot where he crouched under the table. “Tonight I must face Minna,” said Papa, rising to his feet.

The two men stepped away from the table. Yosef watched Papa hug Roman in a warm embrace, then pull his fur hat down over his ears and wrap his coat tightly around his body. Papa made his way toward the door of the tavern, pushing it open and disappearing into the street.

Yosef watched Roman’s feet turn to follow. He felt queasy as he crawled back under several tables and wormed his way to the rear door. His heart pounded, and he could hardly breathe. He ran around the side of the building, chasing after his father, who was half-way down the street.

“Papa,” shouted Yosef. “Mama wanted me to give you this letter. She said it was important.”

Aharon turned as Yosef ran toward him with the envelope clutched tightly in his hands. As he ran to catch up with his father in the brisk winter air, Yosef’s breath came out in puffs of steam like a railroad engine struggling up a hill.

“*Oy vey*,” Aharon mumbled as he took the letter from Yosef, his face gray as stone. “Hurry back to Mama now,” he said, drawing him close for a moment. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Yosef retraced his steps to the restaurant, his head reeling with the news. He felt nauseated, not from hunger, but from a creeping sense of fear. Was Papa really leaving and why was he going without them? He had heard stories of families split apart because the father was forced to join the army. Maybe that’s what the letter was about. Papa’s face turned white when he saw it. Mama used to say that once a man was in the army, he was there until he died. Every day Jewish men were leaving to find work elsewhere, especially in America. Jobs were scarce in Vasilkov, and once the army called, there was no choice. The tsar was the supreme ruler of the Ukraine and all of Russia, and his secret police hunted down anyone who disobeyed him.

“I mustn’t let on that I know, or Papa will be angry with me,” thought Yosef. He opened the heavy front door of the restaurant. Ignoring Sima, he pulled off his jacket and hat as he entered the kitchen.

“Wash up, Yosef,” said Mama, “then sit down. Your soup is getting cold.”

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“Yes, Mama,” he answered. Despite the rumbling in his stomach, Yosef hardly touched his food.

“Eat, Yosef,” said Mama. “We don’t have all day. I want you to finish your homework. Tonight is *Shabbes*, and I’m bringing home a special meal. We’ll close the restaurant by three o’clock. There’s much to do before sunset.”

That afternoon Yosef buried himself in his school work. Recurring thoughts of his father leaving made his head spin. Maybe he hadn’t heard him right. Maybe Papa would change his mind.

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