

Hiding in the woods from the Soviets, escaping by sheer pluck from their takeover of Estonia, Imbi and her mother traveled during the last days of WW II through Poland and Germany, ending up in the U.S. as displaced persons. Imbi's courage and perseverance reminds us that the human spirit in the face of great odds can and will triumph.

If I Could Paint the Moon Black

Imbi Peebo's Wartime Journey from Estonia to America

by Nancy Burke

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR "IF I COULD PAINT THE MOON BLACK"

"Imbi's story, written by Nancy Burke in great detail, gives the reader a deeper understanding of the impact World War II and the Soviet and Nazi Germany occupations had on Estonians. The book is a valuable addition to the literature that has appeared since the collapse of the Soviet Union."

-- Ilvi Joe-Cannon, co-editor of *Carrying Linda's Stones: An Anthology of Estonian Women's Life Stories*

"There are so many statistics I could cite that would illustrate the brutality endured by people living under occupations by both Hitler and Stalin. Imbi Peebo's story, written by her friend Nancy Burke, cuts right through the clutter of history's recorded facts, to reveal a very human story of survival under those dark circumstances. While Imbi is not alone in that experience, her story represents tens of thousands more people...all whose stories deserve to be heard. This is a good place to begin to listen."

-- James Tusty, co-filmmaker of "The Singing Revolution" and "To Breathe As One".

Nancy Burke offers a significant contribution to the literature of eye-witness accounts with her beautifully written story of Imbi Peebo Truumees' life as an Estonian child refugee during World War II. Burke writes Imbi's story with great care and suspense that strikes a perfect balance between descriptions of place and event, childhood pleasures and overwhelming fears. The reality of what happened in during the war years can only really be glimpsed through those who lived through it and understood their experiences. Imbi is a brave and perceptive person, and Burke gives her the justice she deserves.

--Alice Elliott Dark, Professor of English and Creative Writing, Rutgers' Newark MFA in Creative Writing Program, author of *Think of England*, *In the Gloaming*, and *Naked to the Waist*

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CENTRAL CHARACTERS

Olga Vahter, Imbi's grandmother

Olga's Children

Leonhard (wife Maanja)

Erich (wife Pouli)

Eevald

Ellen (husband Julius)

Lydia Vahter, Imbi's mother

Artur

Karli

Imbi's cousins

Virve

Renate

Toivo

Eldor

Rudolf Peebo, Imbi's father

Elsa, Rudolf's second wife

Taavet, their son

Kaaritas, Grandmother Olga's sister's grandchild and

Imbi's friend at the farm

Amanda, Lydia's friend who hid her from the Russians

Aino, Imbi's friend in Narva

Helene, Maanja Vahter's sister

Marie Peebo, Rudolf's mother and Imbi's grandmother

Oskar, Rudolf's brother

Hans and Oskar, German soldiers at the hospital

CHAPTER 19

In Treptow, early spring 1945, I made my usual journey to school each day. Mother went to work, as she did every day, at the hospital. I spent a routine day in classes with nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing, that is, until the close of the school day when I made my way past the train station. What I saw made me stop and gape. The train had been lengthened with the addition of an endless line of cars that stretched all along the platform, far down the rails toward the east. This was not a cattle train. This was a passenger train, much like the one I'd taken here from Schwerin. Smoke chugged from the engine way up front. German uniformed men scurried everywhere. Men in stretchers lined the platform, German wounded lined up for boarding, and pairs of men lifted each stretcher, one at a time, up and through the doors. I drew close. Some of these were sleeper cars, and the men were being lifted onto berths. Inside, men were doubled up on the berths, some of the stretchers, with injured men, were arranged across seats and held carefully in place so as not to fall.

Immediately I knew what this meant and without a word to anyone, I ran the entire two kilometers to the hospital and our narrow barred room where late afternoon sun cast a dark pallor over our meager possessions. I left my books and school bag in our tiny room, grabbed whatever clothing would fit inside a small bag, one for mother, one for me. I grabbed my Mishka and stuffed him in too. Then I opened the small storage box under our narrow bed and stuffed what remained of our rationed food and cigarettes into my bag and buttoned it closed.

I surprised Mother. I had never broken the rule about children entering the hospital before, but this time I simply walked in past the reception desk and found the small office where I knew Mother spent her days.

"Imbi," Mother said, "you know you don't belong in here!" But, she saw my face and knew this was not an ordinary day.

"Mother," I said. "We have to leave. We have to go to the train station. The Soviets are coming. We've got to get out. Now."

Mother glanced around the small office at the others at their desks. These other women were Polish and German. They did not understand Estonian. Mother's face showed her surprise at my rudeness. Speaking in our language in front of them was impolite. I should be using German. I had no time to explain myself.

"The soldiers are loading the wounded onto a west-bound train. Come see."

Mother refused. "I must finish my work day, Imbi. You are overreacting. Go home. We'll learn a bit more before we make any rash decisions."

When I didn't relent, she said, "Go on home! I'll see if I can leave early."

"No," I said. "We must go now. I packed. Let's go." I was not leaving without her and I refused to stay. She must have seen something in my eyes. She must have felt my agitation; my stubbornness was not going to relent. I watched her face. Surely she couldn't have forgotten our flight from Narva, our flight from Mahu to Tallinn at Uncle Leonhard's warning, the boat we missed, the stories we heard of other boats sinking, or families getting left behind because they didn't feel the urgency but trusted fate when they should have trusted nothing and no one. The bombs on the road to Rakvere. I could feel the echoes in my bones.

"Tomorrow will be too late," I said with a firmness that surprised me. "They are loading the wounded. Go look. Just look. We shouldn't wait. We should start now." With that, she stood up. She took her purse and coat and followed me out. She took my hand. I tightened mine around hers and we ran. Back down the road to Treptow, we hurried. The train seemed longer than it had just a short while ago. I approached the closest car.

"May we get on?" I asked. The soldiers shook their heads. "Wounded soldiers only. Civilian trains come tomorrow."

I moved without hesitation to the next car. "Wounded only," said the next officer. And so, it continued.

"See? They will take the army first. Civilians have to wait," Mother said.

I ignored her. Car by car, with Mother's hand tightly held in mine, I moved up the long line of the train. Each time, I met with the same response. My mind raced. Surely one, someone would break the rules and let us on. I thought of our friends, Hans and Oskar, the two officers who fed me every day. Surely, if we found them, we'd meet with success. But they were nowhere to be found. I was running out of train cars. No. No. No. No. I asked Mother to stay put on the platform as I ran towards the locomotive.

And there I stood, with the engineer before me. The only chance left. "Please, sir, may we get in and go with you?" I said in my best German.

"Little girl," he said. "You want to get me in trouble? I cannot go against orders. No civilians. Only the wounded allowed."

I reached into the bag I had slung over my shoulder. Without much further thought, I pulled two packages of cigarettes out of the bag and held them out. "Please, we must get on the train."

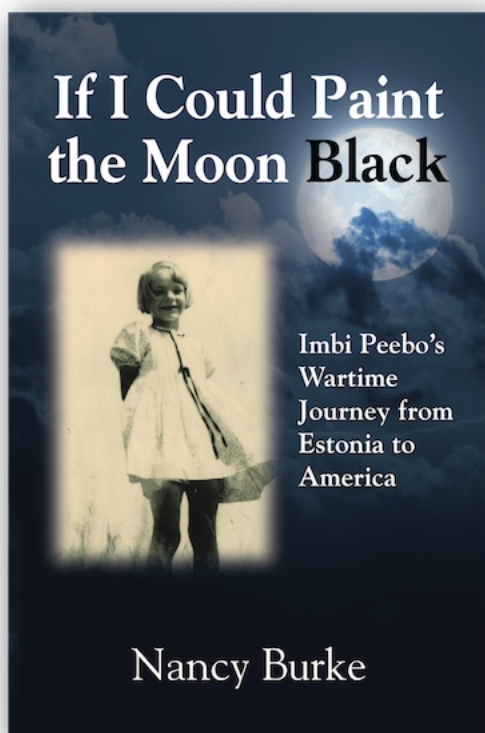
He looked at my offering. He studied my face, then glanced quickly at my mother standing further away. He reached out his hand and took the cigarettes and winked as an approval. I ran to Mother, grabbed our bags and said, "A miracle has happened." I climbed aboard and she followed right behind me.

"Imbi," mother said, looking at the only place for us, the coal pile. "I do think we would be fine if we waited until tomorrow and took a civilian train."

I climbed up and sat on top. I didn't answer my mother. I knew it was happening again. Even if she didn't understand, she recognized the resolve in my

face and let me lead her. My father's words from long ago echoed in my head. "You are in charge Imbi. You are head of the household."

We spent the next eight days in that train, four days sitting on coal, four in a regular car. The westbound train tracks were clogged. Everyone in occupied Poland, including the Poles, fled in front of the Soviet advance. Our food ran out before the journey ended. The engineer smoked both packs of cigarettes. There was one train station, Stettin, through which all trains from occupied Poland must travel to enter the rest of Germany and there were only two rail lines across to the west from that port city. We knew we had to get through there. So did every other westbound train. News was mixed. We had no knowledge of the resistance to the Soviets as they overran Poland. We expected to be bombed, because this was a military train, to be boarded by Soviet soldiers and shot. We also knew we had broken faith with the Germans by stowing away and if anyone with authority found us hiding here atop the coal pile we could be ushered off and left anywhere en route to Stettin. Eight exhausting days later, after our train crawled along at an excruciatingly slow pace, we approached Stettin. Slowly, with a tension as well as coal dust choking us and drying our throats, we slid through the Stettin station and onto German soil. Our train was the last train and only train out of Treptow. Thousands of the wounded were captured and shot by the Russians who had reached very close to the town as we were trying in desperation to leave. Those two packs of cigarettes saved our lives!



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