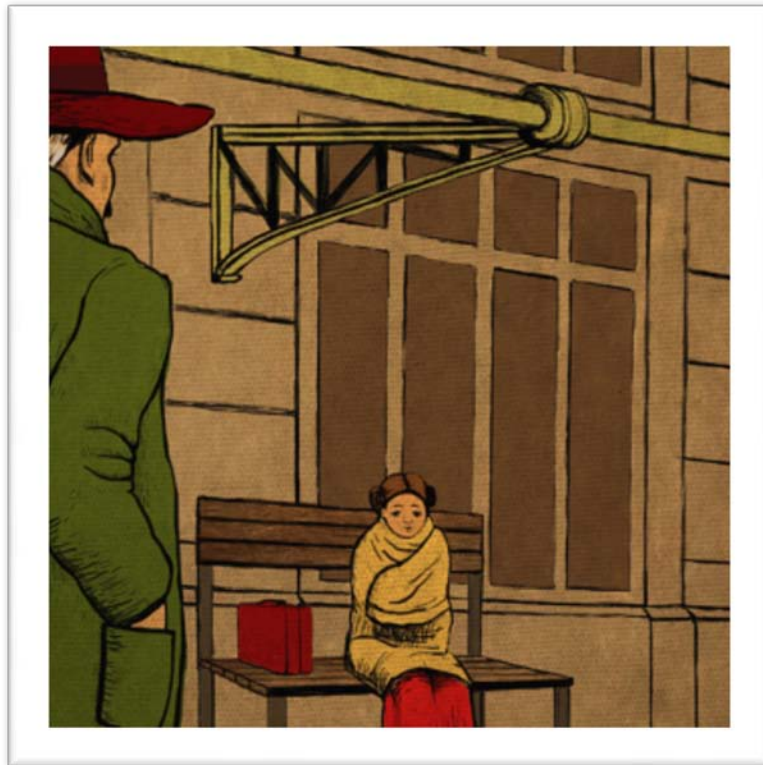




## LOST PAPERS



## Lost Papers

It is 1941. Isaac the Jew and Rebecca, his wife of twenty years, stand in line at the checkpoint between Germany and Switzerland for three hours before they reach the barrier.

“Passports,” the guard says in German. Isaac hands over his documents.

“You are from . . . ?”

“Born in Munich,” Isaac says.

“You are going to Zurich?”

“No, no. To Basel. I must meet my brother’s daughter now orphaned. She is alone and will be waiting at the train station. Friends have sent her.”

“You, woman,” the guard says, “where are your papers?”

Rebecca does not look up from her frantic search in her bag. “I cannot find them,” she says. She has slipped into her native Polish.

“She will find them,” Isaac says.

“Go to the back of the line,” the guard says. “Next.”

Isaac grabs Rebecca’s arm and takes her to the side.

“Incompetent,” he whispers.

“I thought they were here,” she pleads. “Maybe you have them.”

“Why would I have them? He sets down his satchel then empties the contents of her bag on the ground. Unzips, unbuttons, unwraps . . . but there are no papers.

“I must go to meet Anna.” Isaac says. “She will be frightened.”

“I cannot stay here,” Rebecca says, “One of the women said Gestapo make arrests.”

“You must find your papers.”

“They were in my bag. Someone has stolen them.”

“The papers must be found to cross the border. Stay here. I will be back the day after tomorrow with Anna.”

“You don’t care that I can’t go,” she sighed.

He held her shoulders and brought his face close to hers. “I am not the cause of your carelessness. It will soon be over. Anna will be with us.”

She cries. “You care more for your brother’s illegitimate child than your own wife.”

“Hold your tongue,” he says.

He releases her. “Hide for your safety. Do not be conspicuous.”

He goes back to the line and passes into Switzerland without restraint. At the Basel train station he finds Anna sitting alone on a bench against the outside station wall under an overhang to keep out of the rain.

Anna looks up. “Is that you, Papa?”

He takes the child in arms. “Yes, it is me. Your Papa.” Her likeness to her loving mother pleases him with sweet memories of their time together.

“Mama said you were a small man,” she says looking up at him after he puts her down.

“Your mama was a good woman. Grab your things and we will go to a new life. It is all arranged. Do you have your papers?”

“Yes, Papa.” She pats the pocket of her sweater.

“They are not safe there,” Isaac says.

He takes the papers from her, opens his satchel, and tucks them in the top slot between his other papers.

It takes a half a day to walk to the border. At the official Swiss booth Isaac shows the agent his papers from his pocket. Then he opens up his case. He hands papers over.

“You are Rebecca?” the Swiss agent says in French.

Anna laughs. “*Non, Monsieur. Je m’appel Anna.*”

Isaac opens his case again. He finds Anna’s papers in the top slot.

“*Excuse moi, Monsieur.*” Isaac says with a strained laugh. He holds out the papers to the agent.

“And who is this Rebecca?” the agent says handing the papers back.

“She is my wife, *Monsieur.*”

Isaac trembles and the papers flutter to the ground. Anna helps collect them.

“You must be more careful with your documents,” the agent says.

“It is my eyes, *monsieur.* I lost my glasses and do not see well.” But he had kept Rebecca’s papers to prevent her from talking to Anna. Rebecca must never know his relation to the girl.

Anna’s papers are accepted. They pass into Germany. Isaac begins searching for Rebecca.

“She is old with hair like cobwebs,” Isaac says to Anna. “She does not know about your mama or that you are *ma petite poupée.*” He smiles. “She thinks Uncle Aaron was your father. That will be our secret, no?”

“Will we see her soon?”

“She is probably hiding,” Isaac says.

After two hours of searching in alleys and behind buildings, Isaac knocks on doors of homes in the village. Maybe someone has taken Rebecca in for the night. They look. But no one has seen a woman called Rebecca.

In the town square the butcher remembers seeing a woman in the street hiding in the shadows near the end of yesterday. But he does not know where she went.

“What will I call her?” Anna asks.

“We will call her, Mama,” Isaac says. “Can you do that?”

“I think so,” Anna says nodding.

The baker has been busy from four AM making the dough for fresh loaves and *baguettes.*

“Yesterday before dawn,” the baker says, “the Gestapo herded Jews and people without papers into a truck. I saw her. But no one knows where they were taken.”

Anna takes her father’s hand and pulls him away. He is dry-eyed, his mouth open, his chapped lips cracked. “Will we find her, Papa?” Anna asks.

“Yes. Of course,” he says. He hides his trembling hands in his pockets. “She is here . . . somewhere.”