

## Preview : Silence and Secrets | Yvonne Carson-Cardozo

“Shh,” whispered Papa. “Don’t make a sound. We could be killed. There are German spies everywhere.”

I crouched on the straw in the cold, dark barn and trembled at his words. If the farmer caught us, he could turn us in. The thought of being captured by the Nazis made my heart thump and my skin crawl. I had heard horrible stories about them brutalizing people, especially the Jews. I was twelve years old at the time and couldn’t understand why anyone would do this to other human beings. Though my parents weren’t practicing Jews, I knew I could be killed just for being one. It didn’t matter that my family didn’t follow the traditional beliefs.

When the Germans invaded the Netherlands and Belgium on May 10, 1940, my parents frantically organized an escape. My mother hurriedly grabbed clothes from our apartment in Ghent as my father went over the plans with my two older sisters, brother, and me. We would dash for the French border, about thirty miles away. Being Jewish, we had no choice but to flee or perish. We left all our precious possessions behind and joined the thousands of frightened refugees choking the roads to escape the onslaught of the Germans.

I had a terribly difficult time understanding this changing world, particularly since I was the youngest of four, and no one took the time to explain much to me. I soon learned that silence and secrets were a way of life: Be quiet; don’t tell others.

I peered through the darkness and saw the shadowy shape of my father in the barn. He was not a big man, but always presented himself in a proper way with a keen sense of humor. All that vanished as we hid next to the cows, unsure of our fate. My scared and nervous father, who in the best of times would have joked and reassured me that all was well, made me realize that my comfortable life in Belgium was over. I shivered in the straw, hoping my family wouldn’t get caught. Nearby were my sisters, Willy and Mary, who were eighteen and fifteen. They couldn’t sleep either. They moved restlessly next to Marcel, my sixteen-year-old brother.

“Be quiet,” hissed Mama, frightened that someone would hear. Her clothes were peppered with straw. She was a woman who loved to dress fashionably and display her pretty figure. In the dirty, smelly barn, her fancy clothes and high heels looked out of place, like the rest of us hiding in the hay.

The cows rustled in their stalls, oblivious to any danger. They didn’t seem worried about keeping silent. I doubted whether they held any secrets. I wondered how long I would have to hold onto mine.



Over the years, silence and secrecy became an integral part of my life, necessary tools for survival. They began in my childhood, then crept into my relationship with my husband and my children. I didn’t want to talk about the past—of escaping cruel Nazis, of joining thousands of refugees fleeing the invasion, of losing my brother who escaped from the train heading for the

death camp, only to be caught later, and my many aunts, uncles, and cousins who died in concentration camps.

Though I kept silent over the years, my secrets yearned to see the light of day. Later in life, when I shared my experiences with other people, some of whom were Jewish survivors, I was told, "You must tell your story."

I thought of Anne Frank, a German Jew who spent two years hiding in a secret annex in Amsterdam before being caught and sent to Auschwitz. She was thirteen when she went into hiding in 1942. I was twelve years old when I fled the German occupation in 1940. Many years after the war, I visited the place where Anne once hid and wrote her secrets in a diary. Her words inspired me. She felt compelled to write what was buried in her heart.

At the age of eighty-six, I have finally broken the silence to reveal my secrets from the past, many of which have haunted me since the war. I want to remind others that the Holocaust did occur, and that six million Jews were exterminated. I want to shed light on the fact that millions of refugees fled the violence and sacrificed family, friends, homes, and possessions. The horrors of World War II should cause the world to say, "This will happen nevermore!"

However, even in the midst of evil, I found kindness. Remarkable individuals came forward like angels, holding a light to guide me on the journey. They showed me that kindness does exist, even when people suffer. The compassion of strangers who risked their lives to assist me and my family kept my hope alive that I would not be defeated by evil. Rather, the kindness and caring of others helped me survive so I could finally break the silence and share my secrets.