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## PROLOGUE

*Thursday, February 24, 2022*

*5:25 a.m.*

**L**evi Yitzchak,” Rabbi Moshe Weber said urgently into his son’s ear, pulling him out of his dream. “Wake up. Come with me into the hallway. Quickly.”

Levi Yitzchak’s eyes flew open. His father was leaning over him, a frightened expression on his face. “Wh— Abba?” he said. “Why? Where?”

“War has broken out, Levi Yitzchak. The Russians are bombing Dnipro. Come into the hallway where it’s safer. It’s *pikuach nefesh*.”

*War?*

Levi Yitzchak jumped up. His bedroom was dark, but the waning moon cast a pale glow over his older brother Baruch’s bed. The bedframe was bare — no mattress, blanket, or person sleeping in it.

Levi Yitzchak’s face paled. He quickly followed his

father out of his room, heart racing.

The hallway was full of mattresses and some of Levi Yitzchak's siblings — six-year-old Rikki, four-year-old Zeldy, and twelve-year-old Baruch. They all tried to find comfortable spots on the mattresses.

A frighteningly loud sound pierced his consciousness, rising and falling. *Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo!* What in the world?

"That's the air-raid siren," Abba said. "It means the Russians are in the area."

There'd been talk about war all week long. But no one had really thought it would happen.

*Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo!*

Glass rattled in the window frame of one of the rooms.

"Don't worry, the siren will end soon," Baruch whispered reassuringly to his younger sisters.

Levi Yitzchak's heart pounded as he settled down near his siblings on the mattresses.

Ima appeared with fourteen-year-old Chani at her side. Now all of the Webers in Dnipro were safe and sound in the hallway.

All except Yechiel.

Ima checked her phone. "Yechiel's in the hallway of his dorm together with the rest of the boys from his yeshivah," she reported.

"Like us," Chani murmured.

Levi Yitzchak looked around. Unlike the other rooms of the house, the hallway had no windows. That

made it somewhat safer if a bomb fell in the area.

*Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo!*

It was 2022, and war had come to visit Ukraine.

And the Weber family from Dnipro was right in the thick of things.



## Chapter 1

# THE DAY BEFORE

*Wednesday, February 23, 2022*

*Twelve hours earlier...*

“Ma, what are you doing?” Rikki called out. Her blond curls bounced as she bounded into the kitchen. “Why are there so many carrots on the counter? And why so many pots and pans?”

“I’m making chicken soup, carrot soup, and carrot kugel,” Ima said. “You know I always like to have extra food available just in case you kids are hungrier than usual, or someone from the community needs an extra meal.”

Next to Ima, the Weber’s kitchen assistant, Helena, sliced and diced in silence. Buckets and buckets of carrots, sweet potatoes, and onions stood beside her, causing Rikki to shake her head.

“You always cook a lot, Ima,” she said. “But this is really a lot, a lot.”

Levi Yitzchak, walking past the kitchen, came in at his sister's last words. "You're cooking extra, Ima, because of the war that everyone's talking about, right? You want to make sure we have enough food to eat just in case it really happens."

Ima didn't respond. Instead, she signaled with her eyes that Levi Yitzchak's conversation choice was wrong in the presence of his younger sister. But the damage had already been done.

Rikki's eyes rounded with fear. "War, Ima?" she wailed. "Ima, you're cooking extra because someone's going to attack us?"

Ima sat down at the kitchen table and drew Rikki close. "There's been talk about war," she said carefully. "But no one really thinks it'll happen. The Russians have been threatening to invade Ukraine for a long time already. Even if nothing happens, it's still always a good idea to be prepared. We'll be able to use a lot of this food on Shabbos too, when we have guests."

Israeli-born Rabbi Moshe and Shoshi Weber were Chabad *shluchim* to Ukraine. They had come to Ukraine shortly after their marriage in 1996.

Slowly, together with the many other *shluchim* in the city, they'd transformed Dnipro from a Jewish wilderness (as a result of the Communists) into an active Jewish city. By 2022, Dnipro had over 50,000 Jews, and many shuls, Jewish institutions, and shops.

Rabbi Weber was the administrator of the yeshivah and gave classes. Mrs. Weber taught many classes

as well. They and their children were pillars of the Jewish community.

“We have guests almost every Shabbos,” Rikki told Ima stoutly now, “but you never cook this much.” She was clearly still mulling over Levi Yitzchak’s declaration of war.

Ima didn’t respond. Instead, her thoughts flitted to the food she’d already cooked — which Rikki hadn’t seen. Aside from the large vat of carrot soup she and Helena were now in the middle of preparing, the six freezers in their house were brimming with an abundance of cakes, breads, quiches, and other soups.

*Winter camp at the Dnipro Menorah Center  
two months before the war started*





No one really thought war would happen. But it was still a good idea to have extra food in the freezer.

A lot of extra food.

Helena continued to slice and dice in silence. Rikki's expression grew fearful, and Levi Yitzchak found himself feeling guilty. He was the one who'd told his sister about the threat of war. It was up to him to try to right that wrong now.

"Ima always prepares the best soups," he told his younger sister brightly. "I'm happy she's making a lot of orange soup. I'm going to ask her for two portions when it's ready."

*An ordinary motza'ei Shabbos in the Weber home  
with guests before the war started*



“Well, I won’t,” Rikki said. “Special war foods are icky, and I’m not going to eat any.”

“That’s silly,” Levi Yitzchak said breezily. “Everyone knows the war will never happen. It’s silly not to eat soup just because of that.” So saying, Levi Yitzchak headed for the kitchen door, his younger sister at his heels.

Would Russia’s threats indeed go unfulfilled? Or would Russian President Vladimir Putin really invade Ukraine as he’d been threatening?

The questions hung low over the household all afternoon, casting a pall over the children’s activities.

Toward nightfall, another sign of war arrived, a sign that Putin might make good on his threat and not stick to mere words.

Savta Rosenfeld from Israel called, and Levi Yitzchak managed to overhear the tail end of her discussion with Ima.

“Yes...yes...” Ima told Savta reassuringly. “The Israeli Ministry of Education called all of its teachers in Ukraine back to Israel last week. But still...shops are open, and the community center is running. No one thinks anything will happen. Of course, I stocked my freezers. I know you’re concerned, but no one here thinks there’s anything to be concerned about.”

Levi Yitzchak swallowed hard.

Savta was clearly worried about them, and news from abroad often provided a truer perspective than news from those in the middle of a situation.

Were people all over the world concerned about the welfare of those living in Ukraine? Clearly Israel was worried, or they wouldn't have called all of their teachers back.

It was with a heavy feeling in his heart that Levi Yitzchak went to sleep that night.

Only to be jolted out of his sleep before dawn by a worried Abba.

*Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo! Weee-ooooo!*

Would life for the Weber family ever return to normal?



In November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign a free-trade agreement with the European Union. His refusal showed a pro-Russian/anti-European stance, which caused protests and clashes in Ukraine. These clashes became known as the Ukrainian Revolution or the Revolution of Dignity.

The revolution led to President Yanukovich's ousting from power in February 2014. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who viewed President Yanukovich as an ally, was angry at this. He responded by sending Russian forces to annex Crimea from Ukraine.

Protests, sanctions, and unrest between Russia and Ukraine followed. For eight years both countries lived in a state of near war. Until February 2022. That's when President Putin sent his army to invade Ukraine.



*A meeting between Ukrainian President Zelensky (left) and Russian President Putin (right), December 10, 2019, did not succeed in preventing the Russian invasion of Ukraine.*

War had begun.

The Ukrainians — grown used to the hostility between the two countries — were caught unprepared. They hadn't been expecting war.