

THE PEOPLE IN THE PICTURE

A Synopsis by Iris Rainer Dart

It's 1935 in Warsaw, Poland, and the members of The Warsaw Gang, a versatile acting troupe, are getting ready to have a group photograph taken ("Prologue: Act I"). Jenny, a spirited girl of ten, enters her Manhattan apartment in the present day (1977), carrying a tape recorder. Jenny gazes at the photo of the group, then calls out to her Bubbie (a Yiddish word for grandmother). As she and Bubbie discuss the photograph, the people in it come to life, and Bubbie herself enters the memory as Raisel, her younger self ("Bread and Theater").

Back in the present, The Warsaw Gang, now merely the personification of Bubbie's fond memories of the past, encourage Bubbie and Jenny to begin Jenny's birthday party, even though the girl's mother isn't home from work yet. Bubbie gives Jenny the birthday gift of a Russian nesting doll ("Matryoshka"), but when Jenny's mother, Red, comes home, we learn that it isn't Jenny's birthday at all, and Bubbie has left an empty kettle on the kitchen fire, burning the kettle. Bubbie brushes Red off and she and Jenny go into the bedroom to continue the stories. Now Bubbie has reached the part of her story in which Doovie, the actor who conceived The Warsaw Gang, urges Raisel to turn their plays into films, so that they might be preserved throughout time. Raisel and her lover, Chaim, who is the director of the films, invite Jenny to see how they created them ("Before We Lose the Light"/"The Dybbuk").

Hollywood discovers The Warsaw Gang's films and sends Chaim a telegram summoning him to come to meetings right away, but Krinsky and Pinsker, the clowns of the troupe, don't think it's a good idea ("Remember Who You Are"). Moishe comes to Chaim to offer congratulations, and when he learns from Chaim that the Hollywood producers have no interest in Raisel, he gives Chaim a gift of money and urges him to make believe they did, in the hope that once they meet her they will fall in love with her talent. Chaim takes the money and agrees to the plan ("Hollywood Girls").

Just as Chaim and Raisel are planning their trip, hoodlums burn down their studio, leaving The Warsaw Gang only one camera with which to continue making their films. Raisel insists on staying behind in Warsaw to finish shooting the current film, but implores Chaim to go ahead and promises him that soon she'll come to Hollywood to meet him. As Chaim departs, The

Warsaw Gang makes another film starring Raisel and Moishe ("Remember Who You Are [Reprise]").

Chaim never calls Raisel from Hollywood. Moishe, her best friend, tells her she needs to write and tell Chaim that she is pregnant. Raisel says that although she may need a husband, only a nice Jewish homosexual would marry her now, to which Moishe replies, "Raisel, all these years you knew I was Jewish?" He agrees to marry her. The wedding begins, and the members of The Warsaw Gang deliver the baby as the ceremony is led by a blind rabbi ("And God Laughs").

Moishe urges Raisel to hand the baby over to Dobrisch, a nurse, so Raisel can get some sleep. Raisel agrees and when the baby is fussy, she tries to teach the resistant Dobrisch a lullaby to calm the baby. Dobrisch is ashamed to say she is afraid to learn the song because it's in Yiddish ("Oyfen Pripitchik"). Dobrisch tells Raisel she cannot have children of her own and loves the baby, but must quit the job as the baby's nurse, because working for Jews is dangerous in these times.

Raisel's journey into the past is interrupted by a doctor, who raises concerns about her wellbeing, while Red visits a senior care facility to look it over as a possible solution to her mother's problems ("Red's Dilemma"). She takes home brochures, which Bubbie finds and uses as evidence of Red's betrayal; as they argue, Jenny is caught between them ("For This").

After the tirade, Red storms out of the apartment and Bubbie, heartbroken and overwhelmed with anxiety, falls to the ground in pain as she recalls the night Pinsker was attacked by hoodlums in Warsaw (Oyfen Pripitchik [Reprise]).

Act II begins in the Warsaw Ghetto, where a group is burying artifacts in milk cans under the houses ("Prologue: Act II"). Raisel collects the jokes they tell there and offers her journal to the group, as the Jews declare their desire for freedom and their willingness to put their lives at risk to save their diaries ("We Were Here").

Back in New York, Jenny tells her mother she is baking for the recovering Bubbie and happily skips into the kitchen to finish making her *kichlach*. Red envies her joyous daughter and remembers when she was young and hopeful

herself ("Now and Then"). Bubbie emerges from her room and sits at the table to eat Jenny's freshly baked pastries, and she and Red reminisce over Jenny's baby book. The book contains entries Red made about Jenny's first words. When Bubbie says she wishes she had written down Red's first words, Red reprimands her. Bubbie retreats to the past and remembers a painful scene from the Warsaw Ghetto: in a basement, ghetto denizens beg her to entertain them with a song she used to sing during the better days ("Ich, Uch, Feh"). Bubbie's memory of those days turns to tragedy, and she weeps, bemoaning all that was lost.

Back in the present, Bubbie heads for a doctor's appointment, but when the doctor suggests that she consider moving from the apartment into an extended care facility, she leaves his office and gets lost in the streets of New York. Outside a movie theater that no longer plays the Yiddish film she was hoping to see, Bubbie has a vivid memory of Chaim, giving her what she always hoped was the explanation for his disappearance from her life: his inability to find her after the war because she married Moishe and changed her name. Now she tells Chaim how she recalls everything about their love ("Selective Memory").

Chaim urges Raisel to go home and tell their daughter all of the details she needs to know about her own past before it is too late, but Raisel refuses. The Warsaw Gang urges her to talk to Red in memory of all of them. Finally, Bubbie agrees to tell her how she gave the infant Red away and then came back to Poland to retrieve her ("Saying Goodbye"). Red thanks her mother for finally putting the last piece into the puzzle of their story so that Jenny can know it all.

Bubbie is dying, and The Warsaw Gang surrounds the bed as Bubbie sings to Jenny ("Child of My Child"). When Red steps into the hospital room, she can see The Warsaw Gang for the first time since she was an infant. She has made peace with the past and can now look at her life more clearly. Bubbie says goodbye to Red and Jenny ("Remember Who You Are [Reprise]"), and The Warsaw Gang is reunited as Bubbie/Raisel joins them in the next world and in the picture as well ("Finale").

— Iris Rainer Dart