

CHOICES

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Dan Bancroft

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SYNOPSIS: A heartbreaking tale of the choices faced by German Jews in the early days of World War II. Set in Frankfurt, Germany in October of 1939, Sarah and her parents struggle to decide the best course of action as the political situation in their country quickly goes from bad to worse.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 MAN, 2 WOMEN)

MOTHER (f).....46, married late in life and has one child. She is worn out, her clothing is clean but threadbare and her hair prematurely gray.

FATHER (m)51, he looks much older, but is very careful with his appearance. His hair is neatly parted on one side, his tie is severely knotted, and his clothing, even though it is evening and he's put in a full day at the shoe repair shop, is still quite clean and crisp-looking.

SARAH (f).....15, she has dark hair and good looks, a determined expression on her face that is not quite childlike anymore.

SETTING

The play takes place in a small apartment in Frankfurt, Germany, in October, 1939. Poland has been invaded. Italy has not yet entered the war. The borders are still open.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

If appropriate (scene change at a festival, etc.), play two minutes of mournful Klezmer music during a scene change (for example, Avenu Malkeynu, D Ressler, Belmonter Valtz, M Wulf, or Di Bostoner Klezmer).

This play is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandparents, Ella and Baruch Weissberg, who perished somewhere near Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and to my mother, Esther, who at 14 left her parents to begin a new life in Palestine.

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SCENE ONE

AT RISE:

It is late at night. The shades are drawn. MOTHER, tired to the point of exhaustion, is seated at the table. A teapot and cups are on the table. FATHER is standing in front of a dimly lit mirror, parting and re-parting his hair. At stage right, just outside of the doorway, SARAH arrives, but remains outside the room, visible only to the audience. She is leaning against the wall, straining to hear the conversation within. A siren is heard in the distance.

MOTHER: *(In a whispered, almost hoarse voice.)* The lady from the Red Cross came by again today. She said they can help, that they are still able to get children out of the country, but not for much longer.

FATHER: *(Keeps his eyes on the image in the mirror, his voice low and flat, without emotion.)* What did you tell her?

MOTHER: The same thing. That I didn't know where she's gone, that I've been to the synagogue, to her friends' homes with no luck, but that I'm sure, I must believe, that she is alright. They can't have taken her, can they? *(She takes out a handkerchief, much used, and blows her nose.)* I should never have told Sarah that the Americans denied your visa!

FATHER: *(Stops combing his hair, stares at his reflection for a moment, then looks at MOTHER in the mirror.)* It was never certain. We all knew that. Your cousin told us as much when she first wrote.

MOTHER: *(Turning back to the table.)* Did you hear that the Metzger's clothing store was boarded up this morning? From one day to the next, gone, just like all the others.

FATHER: I saw the trucks when I left this morning. They were throwing all the dresses and suits into a pile in the middle of the street. On my way home, I avoided Fischerstrasse, but I could still see the fires reflected in the windows.

MOTHER: What will they do now?

FATHER: *(Crosses to the table and sits.)* He has relatives in England. Perhaps they will go there.

MOTHER: *(Sitting next to him, but stiffly, not touching. They lean in towards each other, wearily, as though they will collapse into each other, but they never touch.)* Oh, where can she be! *(Sobbing into her handkerchief. Pause. SARAH enters, looking defiant.)*

MOTHER: Sarah! *(She stands, and rushes to SARAH's side. Their voices rise and cross each other.)* Sarah! We were so worried. Where have you been? *(SARAH looks from her MOTHER to her FATHER, who remains seated and looks at her, appearing relieved but somehow unable to show more emotion.)*

SARAH: I was in the summer shed behind Rachel's house, waiting until that lady left, until I was sure she wouldn't come back again! *(She looks from one to the other, guiltily, then turns and walks to the table, her back to her parents.)* Don't look at me like that. I'm sorry. I know you were worried—

MOTHER: Worried! I couldn't sleep for two nights. No one knew where you were! Anything could have happened. Don't you understand—

SARAH: Of course I understand, but—

FATHER: *(Almost raising his voice, but he doesn't seem to have the strength or willingness to do so.)* You don't understand. You can't. You're too young to know.

SARAH: *(Bristling again, unwilling to hear this.)* I'm old enough to know that I won't go to America. They don't want us. They rejected us! Don't you understand that? How could you let her come here?

MOTHER: You could be safe there. My cousin is there—

SARAH: *(Raising her voice.)* I won't go! I've never met your cousin. I don't know your cousin. And how do you know I'll be safe? She couldn't even help with Father's visa! He's not ill! They rejected him for medical reasons, but he's not ill! It was just an excuse! Tell them, tell her! Father. *(She comes up to her FATHER, crouches down in front of him, pleading.)* There's nothing wrong with you! *(Silence. SARAH's head is down, she's sobbing silently. FATHER is flustered, unsure, unable to react. MOTHER watches from across the room, starts to come towards SARAH, as though to hold her, to put her arms around her, but stops before she gets there and stands awkwardly.)*

SARAH: *(Raises her head, looks first at her FATHER, then her MOTHER.)* How can you just sit there and let this happen? Why don't you do something? *(MOTHER and FATHER exchange glances but avoid looking at SARAH.)* We can't stay any longer! Rachel overheard her father telling her mother that they've started rounding up all the Jews, that's it's only a matter of time before they come for us. *(To FATHER.)* They almost took you away once already. Don't you understand, we cannot stay here! *(SARAH looks at her parents then stands and turns away.)* If you won't go, then I will. *(MOTHER looks at FATHER, who after a beat looks down, hopelessly.)*

MOTHER: Without us? But where will you go? *(SARAH walks toward the window, shoulders hunched, clearly upset. From the street, we hear sounds of an angry crowd passing by. SARAH pulls at the shade to look out.)*

FATHER: Get away from there! They'll see you. *(He takes SARAH and seats her, then goes again to the mirror, checks his part with his hands, then begins to untie his tie, slowly and carefully taking it off and laying it over the back of the nearby chair. Next, he takes off his suit coat and drapes that over the chair as well. SARAH turns to watch her FATHER at the mirror and her MOTHER, who has returned to the stove and pours water into an old teapot.)*

MOTHER: Come and have some tea. Sarah, please come and sit with us. *(FATHER sits at the table. MOTHER pours his tea. SARAH sits down on the floor.)*

SARAH: If you don't leave, I'll go by myself. I'll go to Palestine!

FATHER AND MOTHER: *(They turn towards SARAH.)* Palestine!

SARAH: Rachel and I have made plans.

FATHER: But it's not safe!

MOTHER: We have no family there...

SARAH: *(Her words come out in a rush.)* The Zionists are welcoming everyone to come. We could all go. You could go! They need us there. They want us to come!

MOTHER: *(Hopefully.)* But how can we get there?

FATHER: There is no way to get there.

SARAH: You're wrong. The Bambergers left for Palestine last week.

MOTHER: *(Shaking her head, she collapses into a chair at the table.)* No, they went to Yugoslavia.

SARAH: *(The words come out in a rush.)* There are boats still leaving for Palestine. You have to travel to Munich, then to Trieste and then board the ship. I've heard the stories. It's happening now. We need to leave, to get on a train somehow and get out before it's too late! *(She walks to the table, leans on it with her hands in front of her, looks at her parents, then, when she gets no response, she shakes her head and walks across the room, her back to her parents.)*

FATHER: Those are kinderboats. For children only. *(He and MOTHER exchange glances, then look back down at the table.)*

SARAH: *(Turns back to face her parents and challenges them.)* Then I'll go. I'll go by myself. If you won't leave, I will. I won't stay here any longer. I can't. I can't stay another day; I'll go without you if I have to! *(She turns and storms out of the room stage left.)*

MOTHER: She's right, isn't she?

FATHER: I don't know, I just don't know what to do. I kept telling myself this could not be happening, that it would pass, that we just have to wait. But then I see the broken windows, the swastikas. I hear the stories. And I sit all day, afraid. Afraid the soldiers will come, that they will take me away again, only this time they won't let me go. And what will happen to you and Sarah? *(He puts his head down into his arm and sobs. MOTHER puts her hand on his shoulder. After a moment, he lifts his head and looks at her.)* I'm afraid for myself and for you. For Sarah. And I can do nothing, nothing to save you, to protect her!

MOTHER: It's not your fault. You're a good man. America would have been a chance for us, but now, no one can do anything.

FATHER: Perhaps she's right. Perhaps Palestine is a better place.

MOTHER: But how will she get there? And we can't go with her. She'd have to go alone. Alone. She's only 14.

FATHER: In the morning, before she wakes, I'll go out. There must be someone left who can tell me how we can save her. *(He leaves the room, stage left.)*

MOTHER: (*Sits at the table, takes the cup in her hand. Beat.*) And what will we do?

BLACKOUT.

SCENE TWO

AT RISE:

It is the next morning. The sound of a siren. The shades are still drawn. MOTHER puts the teapot on the table. FATHER is standing in front of mirror, tying and re-tying his tie, fiddling with the knot and adjusting the length so that it is just right, just so. SARAH enters from stage left, a knapsack on her shoulder.

SARAH: I'm ready. (*Pause.*) It's time. (*FATHER, at the mirror, still with his tie in his hands, watches SARAH without turning. MOTHER stands at the table, her hand on the teapot, not turning, her shoulders sagging.*) I need to go. They are waiting. It's time.

FATHER: Here, I'll help with that. (*He walks to SARAH and takes the knapsack.*)

MOTHER: Have some tea, both of you. Sarah, you need something in your stomach before you leave. (*She can barely look at SARAH. She sits, as does FATHER.*)

FATHER: The weather is good, at least, not too cold.

MOTHER: Here is some bread. And this is the jam that Mrs. Weissberg gave us last year. (*They eat in silence.*) I've packed some food, some of those licorice pieces you love. I'd been saving them for your birthday, you know.

FATHER: (*Getting up and bringing a woolen coat to the table.*) I think this may fit you. If not now, soon enough. (*As SARAH stands, her FATHER drapes it over SARAH's shoulders.*)

MOTHER: And stationery. I've put in some letter paper. You'll have to write to us and tell us where to find you. (*She crosses to SARAH, buttons the coat and fusses with it. FATHER steps away, towards the mirror, watches them, fiddles with his tie/hair.*) You look very grown up.

SARAH: *(Smiles.)* You forget. I'm going to the desert. I will roast in a coat like this!

MOTHER: *(Still stroking the jacket, smoothing it down, although there are no wrinkles, no bumps.)* Still, you have to get there first, and winter is coming. *(An awkward silence. SARAH breaks away, crosses downstage, stage right, and turns back.)*

SARAH: You'll come soon, won't you? Rachel's father said it was still possible to apply for visas to Palestine, that you could both be there by the spring.

FATHER: *(Looking at MOTHER, her back still turned.)* I've already put in the papers.

MOTHER: *(Straightening up, she looks at him, then to SARAH.)* We can travel in the spring. Things will be better then. *(She sits.)*

SARAH: *(Turning away from the table.)* Rachel will be here soon. I told her I would look for her from the window. *(She walks to the window as though to pull back the shade.)*

FATHER: Don't! *(SARAH lets the shade fall back into place.)*

SARAH: She's probably here.

MOTHER: Sit with me... Just a few more minutes. *(FATHER stands, goes to the mirror and finishes tying his tie. Then he walks behind MOTHER, hand on her shoulder. Long pause, during which they sit/stand silently, watching and waiting. Then, a knock at the door, quiet first, then louder, more persistent. They look at each other and stand, separately.)*

SARAH: That's Rachel. *(SARAH is standing across from her parents now, her knapsack and coat on, the bag of treats from her MOTHER in her hand. MOTHER and FATHER are next to each other. SARAH steps forward and hugs them, first one, then the other, then both, as MOTHER begins to cry.)*

FATHER: Don't mind her. It's alright, you should go now. Rachel is waiting.

SARAH: I'll write. I'll tell where—

FATHER: Where you'll be. *(Beat.)* Of course.

SARAH: You'll be alright, won't you?

FATHER: Yes, yes, we will. And we'll follow in the spring.

SARAH: Goodbye. *(She turns to leave. As she closes the door, FATHER takes MOTHER's hand in his.)*

FATHER AND MOTHER: Goodbye.

BLACKOUT.

THE END

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