

Excerpt of P.A.W.S. by Debbie Manber Kupfer

Vienna, October 2, 1941.

Today was Celia's tenth birthday. This was not how she imagined celebrating it. She was with her family – her mama, Miriam; her papa, David; her elder brother, Issel; and her baby sister, Sara. They were huddled together in the back room of their tiny two-room apartment in Grosse Spielgasse, in the dark, barely breathing.

Outside the building, the boot steps got nearer and nearer. Celia heard shouting, screaming, gunshots. She crouched down even closer to the ground, wishing that somehow they could all melt away into the shadows. Celia clutched her cat, Max, tightly in her arms, feeling his warmth, his soft tabby fur close to her skin, willing him to stay quiet.

Her mama cradled little Sara at her breast, nursing her so she would not cry out. Outside, the pounding footsteps were getting closer, closer: "Juden, Juden, Heraus, Heraus, Schnell, Schnell!" Now they were at the door of the neighbors – the Wassersteins. She heard crying and a single gunshot.

Miriam beckoned to her. "Celia, mein Katzerl, come here," she whispered. "I have something for you, for your birthday."

Celia approached Miriam cautiously, still clutching Max to her. "What is it, Mama?" she asked, gazing into Miriam's blue, blue eyes. She studied her prematurely wrinkled face, memorizing every crease. Mama, my mama, she thought.

Still holding baby Sara with her left hand, Miriam reached around the back of her neck with her right and unclasped the chain that she always wore beneath her clothes, close to her heart. It was a silver chain with a cat charm on it. "Take this, Celia, mein Katzerl. Wear it always, and remember I love you. Ich liebe dich."

"I love you, Mama," Celia whispered as she fastened the chain around her neck just as the doors burst open. Six Gestapo soldiers rushed into their home – "Juden, Heraus, Heraus, Schnell, Schnell..." Celia watched as her family was herded out of the door.