**Author’s Note**

My great-grandmother was born in Talsi, a tiny village outside Rīga, the capital of Latvia, at a time when Latvia was part of the Russian Empire. After the bloody upheaval of the 1905 Russian Revolution, she left Latvia and arrived by ship at the East London Docks to start a safer life. But I got to wondering what had happened to the relatives she left behind in Rīga and my research revealed the unbearable truth. They were Jews, so their fate during World War II was to be the worst imaginable.

Latvia left the Russian Empire and was an independent country from 1920 to 1940. But in 1940, towards the beginning of World War II, the Soviet army again occupied Latvia, under the pretext of protecting it from the Germans. They installed a Communist government.
Latvia became part of the Soviet Union and was once more governed from Moscow.

The new Communist regime in Latvia was harsh. During the period of the Soviet dictator, Stalin, Latvians who were judged to be enemies of the State were tortured and interrogated on the sixth floor of the KGB building in Riga and executed in the basement or the yard. Thousands more were sent to hard labour camps in Siberia. In June 1941, 15,500 Latvian residents, mostly from Riga, including 5,000 Jews and some 2,400 children under ten, were arrested and deported to these labour camps by cattle truck.

Under Communist rule, factories, banks and private businesses were nationalized. Latvia’s armed forces were destroyed. Organizations such as the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts were abolished, as well as all independent social organizations. All Latvian schoolchildren were forced to learn Russian as their first language in school and take part in Communist demonstrations. Churches, synagogues and other places of worship were shut down or repressed. Writers, musicians and artists were only allowed to produce works in accordance with Communist ideology. Any books which did not follow this ideology were banned from schools, libraries and bookshops and their creators were shot or sent to labour camps.
But worse was to come. The year of Soviet occupation in Latvia came to an abrupt end in July 1941 when Hitler’s German army invaded. Many Latvians at first viewed the German army as saviours who would rescue them from the daily restrictions of that harsh Soviet Communist regime. There was even hope that Latvia’s independence would be restored. But, for Riga’s 30,000 Jewish residents, any hopes were short-lived. Along with the German army came Adolf Hitler’s vehemently anti-Semitic Nazi Party. The Nazis had only one plan for the Jews of Riga – to wipe them out.

As the Soviet army retreated and the German army invaded, there was mass bombing and shelling in Riga. The spire of St Peter’s Church in the old town, a national monument since 1209, was caught by artillery fire and burned to the ground. As St Peter’s burned, the Nazis began to put their dreadful plan into effect.

This is the story of what happened next.