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Such Good Girls

*The Journey of the Holocaust's
Hidden Child Survivors*

"Rosen proves a deft chronicler of the uncertainty, upheaval, and turmoil experienced by his subjects. . . . Most powerful of all, he makes us see how the Holocaust's hidden children succeeded against the odds not just once, by surviving, but twice, through the resonant new lives they subsequently forged." —*WALL STREET JOURNAL*

R. D. ROSEN

SUCH GOOD GIRLS



*THE JOURNEY OF THE HOLOCAUST'S
HIDDEN CHILD SURVIVORS*

R. D. ROSEN



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DEDICATION

*In memory of my mom and dad,
always with me.*

EPIGRAPH

Everyone knows of course the story of Anne Frank, but Anne Frank did not survive the war, whereas we, luckily, did. One could say that we were fortunate, and for that reason we have remained more or less silent to this day.

—ED VAN THIJN, THEN MAYOR OF AMSTERDAM, SPEAKING AT THE
HIDDEN CHILD CONGRESS IN AMSTERDAM, 1992

It would be easier to live without remembering all the time.

—A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR IN THE
DOCUMENTARY *FOUR SEASONS LODGE*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE ON NONFICTION

The personal histories at the heart of this book are based entirely on the words of the subjects themselves—whether preserved in correspondence, family documents, other written memorabilia, recollected in present-day interviews conducted by the author. There is, of course, no such thing as perfect recall; the passage of time alone wreaks havoc on benign memories, let alone on memories so singularly traumatic, so beyond comprehension even now. The people who experienced hiding firsthand and somehow lived to tell the tale—the three women in this book, for example—inevitably stumbled at times in the telling. On such occasions, I've turned to the historical record for additional details or clarification. Some actual events have been enhanced with likely details and dialogue based on the recollections of my subjects and in consultation with them. Otherwise, the events, details, and emotions described herein have been neither invented nor embellished.

A NOTE ON NAMES

This book concerns three women who were forced to adopt new names in order to survive the Holocaust. I've tried to identify them by their original names whenever possible, but since that was not always possible to do and still maintain the integrity of their stories, I've provided below a brief key to the names of the book's major characters.

SOPHIE was born Selma Schwarzwald in 1937 in Lvov, Poland, the only child of Laura and Daniel Schwarzwald. In 1942, Selma escaped the Lvov ghetto with her mother, bearing papers identifying Selma as Zofia Tymejko and Laura as Bronislawa Tymejko, a fatherless Catholic girl and her widowed mother. In the pages that follow, I've continued to call the mother Laura (although she was considered Bronislawa to the world), but refer to her daughter Selma by her new name, Zofia. Laura and Zofia settled first in Kraków and then in Busko-Zdrój, Poland. In 1944, they were joined by Laura's younger sister, known as Putzi, but who had been living under the name Ksenia Osoba, with the nickname of Nusia.

In 1953, Laura and Zofia, now living in London, still under their false Catholic names, obtained British citizenship. Laura chose Turner as their new family surname, and Zofia Anglicized her name to Sophie Turner until she later married David Zaretsky and became (and remains to this day) Sophie Turner-Zaretsky.

FLORA was born Flora Hillel in San Remo, Italy, in 1935, the only child of parents from Czechoslovakia. After her father's death from tuberculosis in 1937, she and her mother, Stefania, moved to Nice, France, in 1939 to escape Mussolini. Shortly before her mother was deported by the Nazis in 1943, Flora was handed over to convent nuns, who gave her the Christian name Marie Hamon, which she retained until reverting to Flora and taking the permanent name of Hogman, the name of the couple who hid her in 1943 in southern France and adopted her after the war. After the deaths of her adopted mother in 1956 and adopted father in 1958, she moved to New York and has remained Flora Hogman to this day.

CARLA was born Carla Heijmans in 1929 and kept her birth name until she married Ed Lessing in 1949. At that point she became, and remains, Carla Lessing.

INTRODUCTION: WHY IS THIS SEDER DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER SEDERS?

At the end of March 2010, a friend invited me to a Passover seder in Greenwich Village. It was one of those seders common among Manhattan types who over the years have stripped their Judaism down to a proud cultural core. We were Jews who had drifted far from regular Shabbat dinners, synagogue, and bar and bat mitzvahs, but we clung to the Passover seder as the one unsinkable ritual of our Jewish upbringings. It was a time to relive the raucous seders of our childhoods and celebrate the emancipation of the Jews from Egyptian bondage, as well as the freedoms that we all took for granted in the most Jewish big city in the freest country in the world.

The trees were just budding outside the apartment's casement windows on West Twelfth Street when the ten of us sat down at the long table. I didn't know all of the people, but we were a familiar assortment of savvy, secular, casually dressed types: a cable TV executive, a novelist, an editor, a lawyer, a real estate agent, a doctor. We ranged in age from our thirties to our seventies.

There was just one person at the table who didn't quite fit: an affable woman in her seventies with a cherubic face and close-cropped blond hair who had come alone and was seated directly across from me with a colorful scarf loosely knotted around her neck. She had the appealing air of someone perpetually on the verge of laughing. Among the darker-haired guests, she didn't look Jewish, but she seemed well enough acquainted with the feast's rituals and laughed with everyone else when we complained of the interminable wait for each installment of the meal, stole pieces of matzoh and sips of wine, and interrupted our reading of the Haggadah to complain of its historical inaccuracies and improbabilities.

But her fair coloring and faint European accent, which was hard to place, made her stand out from the rest of us irreverent Reform Jews at the table. At the first real break in the proceedings—somewhere between the gefilte fish and the chicken soup—I asked her about herself. For all I knew this was her first seder and I didn't want her to feel uncomfortable. She said her name was Sophie Turner-Zaretsky, that she was a retired radiation oncologist and was distantly related to the host.

"I can't place your accent," I said. "Where did you grow up?"

"Poland."

"Oh, I'm half Polish," I said, glad to have something in common. "On my father's side. Warsaw. So you were in Poland during the war?"

"Yes," she said.

"What were you doing?"

"Hiding," she replied softly and with no more emotion than if she had been telling me what movie she had seen the night before.

With that one word, of course, all my assumptions about her collapsed. She was a Jew after all, and one whose childhood put the rest of ours in stark perspective. I quickly calculated that, if she was in her seventies, then she had been a little girl during the war.

I felt that uncomfortable twinge of privilege that I often experience when confronted with the less fortunate—let alone someone who really happened to wake up on the wrong side of history's book. I didn't know quite what to say. Had her parents been murdered? How many European Jewish children had survived the Holocaust? I had no idea. All I knew was that Sophie had grown up in one of the very

worst places in history to be a Jew.

On the other hand, I had grown up in one of the safest places ever, a lakefront suburb of Chicago that had been hospitable to Jews since at least the 1920s. My four grandparents had found their way from Shkud, Lithuania; Chvanik, Belorussia; and Warsaw to Chicago in the early part of the twentieth century—a quarter century before the Nazis invaded Poland. My parents, born here, grew up in the urbanized shtetls of Chicago’s west side, enveloped by family, before joining the new diaspora to the suburbs in the 1950s. Highland Park, twenty-odd miles north of the city, had actually become famous for its overprotected, entitled children. In 1960, when I was in sixth grade, the town was singled out in a *Saturday Evening Post* feature story—later a book—called “Suburbia’s Coddled Kids.” The article portrayed a few of my wealthier sixth-grade classmates as absurdly sheltered, including a boy who had allegedly tried to pay for his thirty-five-cent school lunch with a fifty-dollar bill.

Ever since I could remember, I had been troubled by the seder service’s most punitive passage when the Haggadah takes up the issue of the “wicked child,” one of the four types of children to whom the story of the Exodus must be explained. The wicked child asks “What does it all mean to you?”—excluding himself from the community. To him, it is said that God brought the Jews out of slavery, but not him; the wicked child would not be redeemed. While all four children—the wise, the simple, the one who’s unable to ask about it at all, and the wicked—may represent aspects of a single self, the wicked child spoke to my anxiety about my good fortune and a fear that, raised in my suburban bubble, I was insufficiently connected to the history of my own people.

Sixteen or more Polish relatives on my father’s side had perished in the Holocaust, but the family ghosts—at once too remote and too numerous—were rarely even mentioned at home. Beyond that, as far as I knew, the family’s only personal connection to the Holocaust, and it was a distant one, was a letter my grandmother had sent to my father from Warsaw when she returned there to visit her mother after twenty-two years in America. He probably first showed it to us when I was in my twenties. “I stayed in Berlin with my aunt four days,” my grandmother wrote. “I saw Hitler on parade last Sunday. Things are not so hot in Berlin, but I’m glad I saw everything.” Her letter is dated July 18, 1934, barely two weeks after Hitler’s “Night of the Long Knives,” the ruthless, murderous purge of political opponents, left-wingers, anti-Nazis, and other undesirables that cemented his power.

Growing up, I didn’t know any survivors. The Nazis’ Final Solution was like a dark cloud that had passed overhead long ago—not a handful of years before—but could still be seen in the distance, if you cared to glance in that direction. America couldn’t seem to put enough distance between it and the Holocaust. Among children, the Holocaust was mostly the subject of nervous jokes (“Eat—you look like someone from Auschwitz”) and ditties like the one sung to the tune of the “Colonel Bogey March,” variations of which made the rounds of countless American playgrounds in the 1950s:

*Hitler had only one big ball
Göring had two but they were small
Himmler had something sim’lar
And poor Goebbels had no balls at all*

The attempt to emasculate these monsters after the fact was a bizarre expression of our impotence in the face of the Nazis’ atrocities. Recasting Nazism as comedy in the 1960s—from *Hogan’s Heroes* to *The Producers*—helped to hide our own government’s inaction during the war and its sinister expediency after it. Without informing the public, the United States’ OSS recruited the Nazis’ Eastern Front intelligence chief, Reinhard Gehlen, and thousands of Nazi spies—some of them war criminals

—for their intelligence—often unreliable and fabricated—on the Soviet Union. Nazi scientists Wernher von Braun and Arthur Rudolph were repackaged for the burgeoning U.S. space program as harmlessly apolitical scientists, although during the war their V-2 rocket had been built at Nordhausen at a cost of more than 10,000 dead slave laborers.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower released film of concentration camp atrocities made right after liberation. The footage, shot by Hollywood directors recruited for the purpose, had a brief run in newsreels in American movie theaters in 1945, but for the next decade most Americans were shielded from the worst images of the Final Solution. Orson Welles's 1946 poorly reviewed movie *The Stranger* featured some very brief atrocity footage, and Alain Resnais's remarkable 1955 art house documentary *Night and Fog* wasn't released in America until the 1960s. The Holocaust wouldn't become real for many of us children until 1961, when we at last saw the footage of bulldozed Jewish corpses in *Judgment at Nuremberg*, the movie that introduced much of the world to the incontrovertible proof of what the Nazis had done. (The 1959 live TV version of *Judgment* on *Playhouse 90* didn't include documentary footage and had been stripped of any references to gas chambers in deference to its sponsor, the American Gas Association.)

To my embarrassment, I had never talked to a survivor, and now here was Sophie sitting three feet from me, an emissary from a disaster I hadn't emotionally confronted in my life. Here was my chance, but questions don't come easily in the presence of another's tragedy. In any case, I'll never know what I would have asked Sophie next because her cousin Alice Herb, our host, suddenly called to her.

"Sophie, tell him about the bear. Tell him about the bear."

"All right," Sophie said to Alice, then turned to me. "Alice loves the story of the bear. All right. When I was hiding in a small town in Poland with my mother, of course I didn't have many toys. In fact, I had only two—a doll and a little bear I later named Refugee. He was one of those Steiff bears, but he stayed with me after the war and into adulthood and now he's in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The copy they made of him to sell in the gift shop is one of their most popular items."

"Amazing," I said.

"Tell him about the space shuttle," Alice said.

"All right, all right," she said with mock irritation, putting up her hand, as if to prevent her cousin from making any more demands. Sophie explained to me that every American astronaut who goes up in the space shuttle can take a couple of personal items along, and that the commander of *Discovery*, Mark Polansky, who's half Jewish and wanted to draw attention to genocide, took a photo of a Darfurian child in a refugee camp and a facsimile of Refugee on a twelve-day mission to the International Space Station in 2006.

"Wow," I said, wincing at how dumb I must have sounded. "That's an amazing story. And you said Refugee was a Steiff bear?"

"A little one." Sophie held her thumb and forefinger three inches apart.

"That's funny, I had the same one," I said, probably more excitably than the coincidence called for. "Actually, I still have it in my closet with a bunch of other Steiff animals my parents got me when I was a kid." What was I doing, inserting my own toys into her narrative? Was I trying to maneuver the conversation onto safer ground? "Unfortunately," I insisted on adding, "he's lost an arm. And I think his head came off. You obviously took better care of yours."

And it was true that the small bear, whom I named Beauregard, had been one of my most beloved toys in a childhood which, unlike Sophie's, was full of them. That Sophie and I were connected n

only by our Judaism and our Polish origins, but also by the very same make of German teddy bear, fe eerily providential.

I left the seder that evening with Sophie's e-mail address and found myself a couple of months later sitting at the glass-topped dining room table in her Upper West Side high-rise apartment, sipping tea and asking her questions about her childhood hiding from the Nazis with her mother and her bear. I could sense that Sophie was ambivalent about reconstructing a past that had been packed away. When she fished documents and photos out of her file cabinet or boxes in her closet, I felt I was imposing. That my demands on her were in the service of what I hoped would be a charming, inspirational children's book seemed to make the ordeal more palatable, but even so, Sophie's occasional protests—"It was so long ago," "I really can't remember," "Does it really matter when my mother gave me the bear?"—made me feel that I was picking at the margins of a thick scab that had formed over an old and grievous wound. Sophie could have put an end to my literary endeavor with just a word, but she didn't, and I sensed in her, buried beneath her suppression of the past, a faintly beating desire to confront it. (She would tell me much later that she felt a "responsibility" to talk to me.)

I drafted the text of a children's story called *Refugee: The True Story of a Girl, a Bear, and the Holocaust*, and kept meeting periodically with Sophie to clarify events and chronology. When we got together, sometimes at a café near her apartment, I tried not to overstay my welcome, since I continued to feel that I had subtly pressured her into sharing the details of a story she otherwise would have been content to relate only sparingly, and in passing.

As time went on, however, the adventures of Sophie's bear became inseparable from an infinitely more complex and tragic story that could hardly be contained by a few hundred words aimed at six-year-olds. A year and a half after I left my friends' seder with an idea for a children's book, I realized that I was actually on a longer and more intense serendipitous journey toward a book for grown-ups, one that would eventually embrace the stories of three other hidden child survivors. Sophie, it turned out, was my portal into the world of the very few and very lucky Jewish children who emerged from World War II, our last living witnesses to the Holocaust. Between 1 and 1.5 million Jewish children were living in Europe before the war, but only 6 to 11 percent survived, compared to a third of Jewish adults. Of these child survivors, who numbered between 60,000 and 165,000 children, some had survived the death and work camps, while the rest survived by hiding or being hidden.

Only later still, well into the writing of this book, did I become conscious of the most obvious reason I felt so strongly drawn to Sophie and her history. At the time of the seder both of my parents were now in their feeble nineties after long, productive, and healthy lives, were suffering through their final months. They weren't murdered or starved to death, but died at home within a month of each other, surrounded by state-of-the-art end-of-life care. Nonetheless, I was dealing with the loss of my mother and dad, the most important links to my past and my Jewish heritage. The situation—the expensive and hopeful interventions, the shuttling back and forth between Florida and Chicago, the difficulties coordinating emotional decisions with my siblings—was full of new fears. I was clinging more tightly than ever to the past, lamenting not only unfinished business, but also unasked questions, and trying to take in the vast unexplored landscape of my family and the ultimate unknowableness of those I loved. In the midst of this period of loss and mourning, whom should fate seat across from me at a seder but a combination of surrogate parent and history tutor, someone who could connect me to the very cataclysm that had been at an inescapable remove in my parents' lives and so conspicuously absent from mine.

Sophie told me what she could remember about her childhood—with the help of some old photo

documents, and an earlier interview she had done with her cousin Alice Herb—and from these elements I could write a credible version of the story from her childlike point of view of even between 1942 and 1948. But how was I going to tell the story from the viewpoint of her late mother with whom Sophie spent those years and more? Given the peculiarity of their relationship during those years, I longed to capture the discrepancy between their respective realities.

The answer came one day when I was sitting with Sophie in her apartment. As usual Sophie was patiently correcting my mistakes and filling in gaps in my latest draft of her story with new bits of information that, since our last meeting, had been jarred loose from the greater mass of her suppressed memories. Suddenly Sophie pulled a sheaf of typescript pages from a box and said, “I don’t know if this will help, but it’s something my mother wrote for a class she was taking late in life.”

I fanned through the seventeen-page manuscript with a surge of joy. Sophie had just handed me the equivalent of the Rosetta Stone—the means by which I could finally translate Sophie’s speculation about her mother’s state of mind during and after the war into the hard currency of her mother’s own memories. With her mother’s essay, I could at last begin to connect the desperate parallel universes in which the two of them lived.

The story of Sophie’s bear, her generation, and of the momentous event in 1991 that finally broke the hidden child survivors’ adult silence, starts in 1942 in the city of Lvov, Poland, where a girl named Selma Schwarzwald and her mother, Laura, were about to start living side by side in two utterly different lies.

PART ONE

THE CHILDREN

In late August 1942, when the knock came on the door of the Schwarzwalds' hovel in the Lvov ghetto, it was as if the Messiah himself had arrived. Laura Schwarzwald rose wearily to her feet. With time running out, whoever didn't have the money to buy Christian documents—forged or real—baptismal certificates and marriage documents—would almost certainly receive a death sentence instead. Having deported the bulk of Lvov's remaining Jews from the ghetto, the Nazis were now hunting down the last of its inhabitants. Every Jew still alive in the ghetto was standing on the precipice of death. All they had to do was look down and see everyone who had gone before them.

Laura's husband, Daniel, who was at his unpaid job as a security guard for the Third Reich's military engineering organization, had made the arrangements, and here, at last, were the papers that were the family's only remaining hope. Laura pressed her hand against her breast to feel the wad of money safely hidden in her brassiere and opened the door.

The gaunt man who pushed his way past her had circles under his eyes as dark as a panda bear's and a shirt so grimy that its original color could only be inferred. His belt, though pulled tight around his narrow waist, barely kept his soiled pants up. Was *this* the paperman? she thought. A scrawny, doomed fellow no better off than the rest of them?

"Where is he?" he demanded, scowling.

Bewildered, she asked, "Who?"

"Don't play dumb. The paperman. I was told to come here to buy the papers. For my wife and child."

Laura could barely catch her breath. So the Pole had promised the papers to two separate families? What was he trying to do—get paid twice for the same ones? Weren't the Poles and Ukrainians already making a killing off the Jews' desperation for new identities? Laura's heart sank even more quickly than it had risen at the sound of his knocking.

"They belong to us, the papers!" she screamed at him.

"No need to get excited," the man said arrogantly, looking around the room with its scraps of furniture and its air of death. "I'll sit and wait."

She could hardly bear to look at this withered Jew as he sat in the chair, arms folded, with a pathetic sense of entitlement—entitlement, that is, to go on living too, for another day.

"They aren't your papers," she said to him.

"We'll see about that."

She begged him to leave, not even trying to hold back her tears, but he ignored her and waited in defiant silence as the afternoon dragged on. What had he been just a few months before—a doctor or lawyer or a businessman like her husband? Who could tell? Now they were like two hungry animals eyeing each other over a meal that hadn't arrived yet.

If her husband were at home, he wouldn't stand for it; he would have thrown this other buyer out with no questions asked. However, something better than her husband intervened: fate. As the ghetto curfew for Jews approached, the paperman still hadn't arrived. The man in her kitchen kept jiggling his leg and checking his wristwatch with increasing anxiety, knowing that to be seen on the street after curfew was to risk being shot like a rabid dog.

"You'd better go," she said, "or the dogs will be eating your corpse in the street tomorrow."

morning.”

He said he’d give the paperman five more minutes.

“Then what?”

“Then I’ll leave and come back for them in the morning.”

“They’re not yours. If they were yours, you’d be in your house waiting for him, not mine.”

He consulted his watch yet again. “*Goniff!*” he spat. Finally he could stand it no more and stood up. “Anybody tell you what a good-looking woman you are?”

“Go,” Laura said.

He jerked his chin at something over Laura’s shoulder, and she turned to see her daughter, Selma, who had wandered in from the other room. She was blond, not yet five.

“Your little girl is pretty too,” the man said. “Very fair. You’re lucky.”

“Not as long as you’re here. Go. Go before you get a bullet in the head.”

He asked her for a piece of bread.

Thankful that he was leaving, she went to the cupboard and broke off a piece of days-old bread.

Twenty minutes after he left, there was another knock on Laura’s door. She hesitated, wondering if the Jew was not giving up that easily. But a different voice was whispering to her through the door. She opened it and a ruddy Pole stumbled in. If history had made the Jews one of the unluckiest people in the world, and now unluckier than ever, Laura was not above solemn gratitude for the fortunate timing of the man’s appearance. The round-faced man was very drunk, the only explanation needed for his late arrival. He slumped in the chair recently vacated by her rival and demanded to see the documents. From her blouse Laura removed the agreed-upon amount and asked to see the documents.

The man slid the precious papers out of his inside jacket pocket and flourished them for a second before putting them back. Then he wagged his index finger in her face, like a metronome.

“Not until I have a drink,” he slurred. “I have to drink in order to stand the sight of all you *żydys*!” He drew a circle in the air to indicate the ghetto. “Then we will close the deal.”

Every chance to live a little longer had to be bargained for. Laura happened to have half a bottle of vodka in the room in the cupboard—how much luck could one woman have!—which she put down before him. He sloshed some into the dirty glass she provided, tossed it back, then poured another and drank that while smacking his lips. Nothing would prevent him from just getting up and stumbling out. Laura’s relief turned to anxiety, but her *mazel* held; the Pole couldn’t hold his vodka. Laura sat and watched him drink himself into semi-consciousness, then pulled the papers from his pocket and replaced them with the money and waited for him to stir. At that point she was able to maneuver him back into the street. For the rest of her life, she would be as grateful for her good fortune as haunted by it—her family saved at another family’s expense.

That night, Laura read the documents over and over again by candlelight. A real Christian birth certificate for Selma and a marriage license for her, both from the same family, with birth dates close enough like their own. From that moment, and for the unforeseeable future, Laura and Selma and the Schwarzwald ceased to exist. Bronislawa Tymejko and her little daughter Zofia Tymejko had taken their place, just as this life in the ghetto—too precarious, really, to be called “life” at all—had replaced the prosperous, cultured existence she and her family had enjoyed until almost exactly three years before.

She’d grown up with her parents, Mina and Josef Litwak, and four siblings in a grand three-story house with French windows, scrollwork, and a courtyard. The home was owned by her wealthy

paternal grandfather Moses, who also lived there with his wife, Sarah. In *their* sprawling apartment the walls were covered in silk, the parquet floors were lined with Persian rugs, the ceiling dripped with chandeliers, and Laura's grandmother favored Parisian dresses and stylish *sheitels*—the wigs worn by Orthodox married women. The crowning achievement of Laura's parents' Judaism was the fact that her father, a banker, and grandfather had organized their own synagogue.

Laura and her husband, Daniel Schwarzwald, who worked in his family's successful timber export business, lived elsewhere in Lvov in a smaller apartment in the Christian section of the city with the two-year-old daughter, Selma. They were all among the highly cultured citizens of Lvov, which until 1918 had been the capital of Galicia, part of the Austrian Empire. Much of the Litwak family spoke German fluently as well as Polish and Yiddish. After the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy in 1918, Lvov became the third largest city in Poland, and its second most important cultural and intellectual center—a city with well over 100,000 Jews—a third of the city's entire population.

On September 24, 1939, the life that Lvov had known for the past twenty years was shattered suddenly and easily as one of Moses and Sarah Litwak's Venetian wineglasses. Just two weeks after the Nazis invaded Poland from the west, Russia invaded from the east, where it overwhelmed Polish resistance and took a quarter of a million Poles as prisoners. The Russians occupied Lvov—whose Jewish population began to swell rapidly as it absorbed Jews fleeing the area occupied by Germany from the west—and soon began to deport the city's anti-Communists, "bourgeois bloodsuckers," even Polish Communists, and other "untrustworthy elements" to Siberia. The well-to-do merchants and professionals were relieved of their livelihoods, then retrained as laborers. The Soviets immediately emptied the stores of all food and merchandise and appropriated it for their own use. The citizens of Lvov were ordered to change their zlotys for rubles at the banks, only to be told after standing on line all night that there would be no exchange after all. Suddenly the Poles were paupers.

The Soviets had barged into Lvov without much ceremony, and a commissar and his family took over the apartment of Laura's grandparents—moved right in—and forced them to retreat to a single room. The elderly couple cowered in their bedroom, inmates in the ornate prison of their home. The man who had his own synagogue now had barely two kopeks to rub together. The commissar and his family made themselves comfortable, helping themselves to the Litwaks' food and possessions while denying Moses his kosher food.

The commissar then announced that Moses, being a bourgeois, would have to leave Lvov and live at least thirty kilometers away to avoid contaminating the new Communist regime. Preferring starvation to eating *treif*, and death to ceding his home to the intruders, Moses's heart gave out.

That night his little great-granddaughter Selma happened to glimpse, through a bedroom doorway, Moses laid out on his bed in a black suit. To circumvent the Russian Communists' prohibition against any kind of religious ceremony, before dawn the next morning everyone in the family walked separately to the Jewish cemetery to meet his casket and give him a Jewish burial. Many from the Litwak and Schwarzwald family who were there that morning would themselves soon be dead, with neither burial nor family around to say good-bye.

For the moment, though, thirty-year-old Laura, her husband, Daniel, and their Selma seemed safe enough. The Russians retrained Daniel as a road worker, then a baker's apprentice, and, finally, after he hurriedly learned Russian, he was given a job as a timber specialist in a factory. Laura was allowed to remain at home with Selma.

At least on the surface, life in Lvov actually improved for a while. The Russians set about beautifying Lvov, keeping the streets spotless and requiring all tenants to sweep in front of the

buildings daily—while wearing white aprons, no less! The Russians quickly organized schools and promoted Russian culture, reopened theaters, and produced ballets the likes of which the Poles had never seen. Moreover, ticket prices were kept low enough so that all workers, including the newly minted laborers, could afford them, the better to expose the locals to Russia's "superior" culture.

But the citizens of Lvov were getting a taste of the worse terror to come. One evening, the Russians cut off electricity, a trick that forced everyone to stay home while the Soviet secret police—the NKVD—went door to door, selecting Polish Communists—who had their own ideas about socialism—for deportation to forced labor camps in Siberia and the Far East, and in some cases immediate death. The ballet tickets may have been cheap, but the towering portraits of Lenin and Stalin left no doubt that life in Lvov would never be the same. Between February and June 1940, the Soviets deported almost 400,000 people from the newly acquired territories, 200,000 Jews among them.

By June 1941, the Germans and the Russians were no longer merely sharing poor Poland. They were now at war with each other, and the Germans were winning. After less than two years of Soviet occupation, the Germans arrived in Lvov in the summer of 1941, routing their former allies—but not before the Soviet secret police murdered thousands of civilian prisoners they had been holding in Lvov prisons. The Germans compounded the violence by promptly blaming the massacre on the Jews, inciting a pogrom organized by the Ukrainian Nationalists that lasted four days and left more than 2,000 Jews dead in the streets of Lvov while the Germans filmed the atrocities.

The Nazis brought to Poland a killing machine the likes of which the human imagination had not yet been able to conjure. The *Einsatzgruppen* were special mobile killing squads, the leading edge of the Final Solution that would not be made official until a few months later. As the German army advanced eastward, the job of the *Einsatzgruppen*, 3,000 executioners divided into four groups, was to follow close behind the *Wehrmacht*, gathering and disposing of the Jewish people as they went.

Between June 30 and July 3, the *Einsatzgruppen* murdered at least 4,000 more Jews with help from Ukrainian Nationalists—herding them to secluded killing grounds, where they were relieved of their watches, jewelry, money, and clothes, then shot to death in the back of the skull, one by one, and piled in mass graves, many of which the victims had dug themselves. Others were gassed in groups after being piled into olive green trucks and vans that had been outfitted and sealed airtight for the purpose.

On July 15, all Jews were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David.

On July 25, Ukrainian Nationalists organized another pogrom in which 2,000 more Jews were slaughtered. By the end of 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* had murdered more than half a million Jews, more than 3,000 a day. Before it was all over, they would murder well over a million Jews. The work was done mostly by professional men—including doctors, lawyers, even clergymen—men who had a strong work ethic and deep sense of duty to the Third Reich, if not an inherited hatred of the Jewish people. This made them excellent executioners. To keep up both their strength and morale for this arduous labor, they were well fed and provided with copious amounts of alcohol, but even some Nazis had their limits. They could finally take no more of the daily grind of extermination, and were relieved without prejudice by an understanding Führer. Those with sturdier constitutions just kept at it, learning quickly that, once they had negotiated certain moral obstacles, less stubborn than one would have thought, they became accustomed to almost anything, especially if the music blaring over loudspeakers distracted them from the sounds of their own pistol shots and the begging and shrieking of their victims.

But killing Jews one by one could accomplish only so much. By October 1941, the first Jews were taken as forced labor, and a month later all remaining Jews in Lvov were forced into a ghetto. Laura

family—her parents and her three remaining siblings (a fourth, Edek, had immigrated to Palestine)—were all German-speaking Polish believers in Teutonic culture, but they too awaited their turn. Before long, a group of storm troopers and German soldiers invaded the apartment, where Laura and her husband had hidden her grandfather's gold and silver religious objects. The SS men found everything, including the Torah with its magnificent silver crown and pointer. When Laura refused to tell them what the objects were for, one of them smacked her across the face with the back of his hand.

Laura's brother Manek was soon caught in the street without his Star of David and taken to an SS camp, but at least he was given a pass to return to the apartment at night. One evening he told the adults of watching two German soldiers beat two men for stealing a bar of soap, then bash their skulls against each other until their brains splashed against the wall. Another time, he reported that a soldier took a child by the ankles and swung him as hard as he could against a brick wall. The German was laughing. Atrocities Laura never before imagined had become her daily reality, like the potatoes and cabbage the family now subsisted on.

The Schwarzwalds were told to pack the few belongings that the Soviets and Germans hadn't already taken, and they joined the rest of the city's Jews in the Lvov ghetto in the Zamarstynow borough. Their new home was a single room that the family—Laura, her husband and daughter, her parents, her father's parents, and her aunts and uncles—had to share with another Jew, a total stranger. Not a mile away, the Germans had already established, in a former factory, the Janowska forced labor and concentration camp for Jews destined for Belzec, the extermination camp near Lublin. In fact, Janowska itself became an extermination camp, where killing often took the form of entertainment. The SS officials there organized a prisoner band, instructed them to compose "The Death Tango," and ordered them to play it during executions.

In a matter of weeks, the family's comfortable life had been reduced to a meager existence of fear and chaos. Their only hope was to obtain false documents in the bustling market of Poles and Ukrainians who were getting rich selling their identification papers to the doomed.

Daniel started work as a security guard at a hostel for construction workers of the German military engineering group, Organisation Todt. At least it was a job that paid him in increasingly scarce food and work passes for him and Laura, who was permitted to remain in the apartment with their daughter as his hausfrau. Laura's two unmarried younger sisters, Adela (whom everyone called Putzi) and Fryda, were given jobs in a factory making military uniforms.

"Selections" continued, now right under their noses. One night Laura heard unfamiliar noises outside and got out of bed to see thousands of Jews, denied transportation, trudging to work on foot before dawn, many near collapse, a column of human despair shuffling along between lines of German soldiers prodding them with their rifles.

After a few weeks, the noise changed to the rumbling sounds of trucks carrying deportees to the concentration camps. The frightened Jews stood tightly packed in the open trucks, staring at the sky, searching for God, hoping for a miracle. Laura heard one man cry out loud, "Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad. . . ." Then a woman took up the words that are supposed to be the last ones uttered by a Jew before death. Then the others joined in, like a demented congregation, their voices rising, unheard, into the gray sky.

In exchange for her diamond ring, Laura temporarily rescued her own parents from the German roundup and arranged to hide them at her husband's place of work. Life was now a lethal game of musical chairs, in which those who couldn't find one of the diminishing number of places to hide were taken away, almost surely to their deaths.

The Schwarzwalds clung to each other on Janowska Street in the Lvov ghetto as the Germans shot 5,000 Jews who were elderly and sick, and therefore useless to them. In early spring 1942, 15,000 more Jews—mostly women, children, and the elderly—were deported to the extermination camp Belzec, not far from Lvov. In August, tens of thousands more were sent there. Another thousand orphans and sick Jews were shot dead. By September 1942, of the 100,000 Jews who lived in Lvov before the war, there were approximately 65,000 left, and they could only imagine what was happening elsewhere. Every morning the Jews of Lvov awoke to horrible news—that the nightmare was still real.

Laura learned that in the nearby town of Gorlice, Laura's great-uncle had been made head of the ghetto's Judenrat, or Jewish Council, the administrative organization made up of the community leaders, that the Nazis forced the Jews to form in every ghetto, under penalty of death, to facilitate their own deportation and extermination. This policy, used in the camps as well, put the decision of which Jews would live and which would die not in the hands of God, or even the Nazis, but of the Jews themselves. If the Nazis ordered the head of the Judenrat to produce 5,000 Jews at six in the morning to be deported, he had three choices. He could comply, comforting himself with the Nazi reassurance that deciding which Jews would live and which would die was preferable to all of the dying. He could refuse and be executed, along with who knows how many others for good measure. Or he could do what Laura's great-uncle did. In Gorlice, the Nazis asked him to prepare lists of Jews to be "resettled." He told them such an assignment would require serious thought, so that he could make sure the Jews left would be of the utmost use to them. "Come tomorrow morning," Laura's great-uncle said, "and I will have for you exactly what you want." When the Nazis returned, they found him dead at his desk, a suicide.

Daniel was able to visit his family in the ghetto only occasionally, leaving Laura and Selma alone and at the mercy of the German soldiers, who three times came to their room and ordered them to be deported to the gas chambers at Belzec. Each time, Laura used her fluent German to persuade them to leave her and Selma alone.

On a fourth visit, the soldiers insisted she come with them, then changed their mind and asked for Selma only, saying that the Führer loved little children and would take good care of her. Laura knew full well how much the Führer loved Jewish children. She had heard Manek's story, and she had already seen the piles of children's corpses behind the fence at the Janowska camp, their blood having been taken for transfusions for soldiers at the Eastern Front. Incredible—the Nazis committing the reality the atrocity that Christians had been falsely accusing Jews of for centuries. Somehow Selma prevailed again, shooing Selma away, and the soldier softened. He even returned later, warning her that the roundup of Jews was finished for the time being, and that the next day it would be safe for her to go out and forage for food.

But how many times would she be so lucky? It was already too late for her grandfather Moses and her invalid grandmother Sarah, who had been carried off in a chair, loaded onto a truck, then thrown off it, and shot. A friend reported seeing her tiny corpse, like a dog's, on the pavement. It was too late for her own parents, who had been discovered and deported to Belzec, where they too would be murdered. When the soldiers had come for them, her father hid, but as soon as he heard the cries of his wife he came out of hiding, saying he didn't want to be separated, and so he too began the journey to the gas chambers. When Laura and her sister came home to an empty apartment, the building's concierge told them, "The Nazis came for a cleaning." Daniel's family was now also gone. Laura's family and her siblings were among the last of the clan in the ghetto, now a pitiful city populated mostly by ghosts, both living and dead.

The Schwarzwalds knew it wouldn't be much longer before the Nazis closed in on them. The S were clearing one ghetto block at a time—from the window Laura could see them herding Jew friends and acquaintances among them—and soon it would be their turn. Laura found a platform under the roof of an adjacent house where they could hide at night, packed in like herrings with fifteen others, including an epileptic girl of thirteen who started to howl at the sound of German boots in the empty apartments below and had to be silenced with a pillow. Laura would toss Selma across a ventilation shaft to someone who caught her on the other side, then leap from a top-floor window to their building to the window of the next with a bag of food and a change of clothes for her daughter.

Meanwhile, her husband hid on the roof at work, pressed all night against the drainpipe.

The competition for Christian identification papers that roughly matched the Jews' ages was intense and the price always climbing, but somehow Daniel succeeded first in purchasing authentic Christian birth certificates for his wife's two younger sisters, Fryda and Putzi, who would now become Zofia Wolenska and Ksenia Osoba. Then he was able to purchase a marriage certificate for Laura and a birth certificate for Selma from a family named Tymejko.

The papers for her and her daughter were going to be delivered in two days. By now, Laura could barely summon an ounce of hope. She had become like a stone. She felt as if suffering no longer touched her. A human, apparently, could adapt to anything. In late August, while Daniel was at work, the paperman actually came, and the documents were hers—but only after, by sheer luck, she had gotten rid of an unexpected visitor who claimed that *he* had been promised them as well.

When her husband begged her to leave with Selma, she agreed. He would try his best to follow.

The family's good fortune had run out, though; on the eve of their escape, Daniel found himself at the right place, but at the wrong time.

On September 1, 1942, the Germans ordered all remaining Jews to consolidate their living quarters in one section of the ghetto, and Daniel went to the Jewish Community House to see one of the Jewish Council members, his friend Dr. Katz, to ask him about finding a new place to live. The game of musical chairs was coming to an end.

Unknown to Daniel, a Jew had killed a drunken German soldier the day before, and the Nazis wasted little time retaliating with their customary brutality. While Daniel conferred with Dr. Katz on the second floor, the Nazis surrounded the council building with MG-42 machine guns, a weapon so effective—it could shoot a fifty-round belt in a matter of a few seconds—that it would still be in use seventy years later. SS men stormed the Jewish Council building and forced dozens of Jews outside where they were instantly mowed down. The SS men then stomped up the stairs and cornered the members of the Jewish Council and the other Jews with them.

Word of the *Aktion* spread quickly inside the ghetto. Laura left Selma with her sister Fryda and headed immediately to the Jewish Community House. Laura wouldn't tell anyone for many, many years what she saw that afternoon, although by then a grisly photograph of it had begun to appear in photographic histories of the Holocaust. There were no signs of life around the building, but so perfectly spaced corpses hung from the second-floor balcony, dangling like a row of marionettes in a toy store.

When Laura saw the dead council members, some of whom she knew, twisting slowly in the nooses, she clutched her stomach and turned away. When she turned back, she didn't see Dr. Katz or her husband among them, and this gave her hope. But she didn't dare advance any farther to investigate. To associate herself with any of the dead men would be suicide. The corpses would remain hanging there for weeks.

Before the day was over, she learned that Dr. Katz had managed to jump out of a second-story window and hide in a cobbler's workshop nearby. He was still alive and reunited with his wife. But Daniel? No one knew for sure.

That night, still hopeful, Laura waited for her husband's return. By morning, her hope had evaporated. If he were alive, she knew, surely he would have gotten word to her. Unless he had been captured, or was hiding in the forest. But false hope was something she couldn't afford. She resigned herself to the likelihood that her husband was gone, Daniel, the man about whom Laura had once written her cousin Tonka in Tel Aviv, "Danek is sweet, loving; I love him with all my heart as a husband, a lover, a friend. Everybody at home is very attached to him and he to them. Grandma never takes her eyes from him. They made out fine with such a son-in-law."

Laura still had her daughter and siblings; the others were gone.

The day after the *Aktion*, September 2, 1942, was Selma's fifth birthday, but there was no party and no presents, unless her mother's soothing lie counted; she had quickly concocted the fiction that her father was working for the Russians for a while and would return someday.

But Selma wasn't soothed. After listening to the sound of German boots like gunfire on the cobblestones outside and sometimes on the stairwell, she had felt safe only when her father got home from his job in the evening and she could run to him and hug his legs—even when he still worked at the bakery and would be covered in flour. He was blond and had gray-green eyes, just like she did, and she wanted him back. Now.

Selma curled up on a makeshift cot and sobbed into her pillow as Laura watched, berating herself for saying the Russians had taken him. Had there not been a softer lie to tell her, something that promised her father's quicker return, something to get the little girl through these days? Did it even matter, anyway, since they would all be dead soon? Laura comforted her daughter as best she could, but who would comfort *her*? Only her daughter stood between her and serious thoughts of suicide, which would be so much easier than living another day.

Only God knew what was going on in her daughter's head, but her mother saw how quiet she had become, how she endured each new terror in silence. Every once in a while, bright images of their old life peeked through the darkness to torture Laura—her grandparents' Shabbos dinners, the sight of Daniel working on timber-export numbers late at night, how Selma reacted to her first taste of oranges—but she would shoulder them away. Look, she thought, look what history has done to us. Would her little girl ever know that not far away Jews were digging their own graves and waiting for the bullet to hit the base of the skull?

Later that night, the night of Selma's fifth birthday, Laura met with her brother Manek and her two sisters, Putzi and Fryda, and they decided to escape with the false papers that had been Daniel's last gifts to all of them. They decided that Putzi and Fryda would leave first for Kraków by train, after which Laura and Selma would follow a few days later, and finally Manek. There was nothing to lose.

That Putzi was even still alive to make a run for it was itself a miracle. Group by group, the young Jewish women she worked with making military uniforms for the Germans had been taken away and deported until there was only one group left—Putzi's. When the SS men came for them, Putzi ducked down behind her machine, slid to the floor, and held her breath. Somehow the Germans didn't notice. After they marched the other women away, Putzi remained on the floor, alone and trembling, waiting all night for them to come back for her, but they never did. In the morning, she snuck out of the factory and made her way home. For the rest of her life, she would suffer from guilt that she alone had survived.

Even before the papers had arrived, when acquiring Catholic identities looked like it was going to be their only hope, Laura had started reading the catechism to Selma. Before they had been moved to the ghetto, Laura's Christian landlady, the wife of a university professor who had been taken by the Russians, had given her a Polish Catholic catechism and a New Testament and tried to convince her to leave Lvov as soon as possible. She even suggested the family move to a resort town, a place where people were always coming and going anyway, where the locals were accustomed to strangers. She assured Laura that becoming a Catholic would be relatively effortless. She would have to go to church only occasionally, and merely watch what the others were doing. She might even see its many advantages over Judaism.

"My children are not happy with me for wanting to help you," her landlady had told her. "What can I do? I can't take a chance that they would report me to the Germans. But, you see, that is what is like now, Laura. I cannot protect you, but I can give you advice on how to protect yourself. So take this Bible and the catechism"—she made the sign of the cross on Laura's forehead—"and may Jesus Christ be your savior."

She had not taken the woman's advice, but she had taken the books and, thinking ahead, had been quietly preparing her five-year-old daughter for Catholicism. Laura's greatest fear now, on the eve of their attempted escape, was no longer death—what was death to a stone?—but that Selma would inadvertently betray them all if she raised the slightest suspicion that she was a Jew.

"Tell me the five church commandments," Laura would whisper to Selma at bedtime in the ghetto room.

"I don't know, Mama."

"You do know. The first commandment begins, 'On Sundays and holy days of obligation . . .'"

"Please, Mama."

"'On Sundays and holy days of obligation,' you must what?"

Her daughter sighed. "Attend Mass and re—and re—"

"Refrain."

"—refrain from unnecessary work."

"Good girl. Now the next one: 'At least once a year'—what?"

"I'm hungry, Mama."

"Zula," her mother said, using her pet name.

"At least once a year, the sacrament of penance."

"Now the third commandment, the one about the Easter season."

"At least once a year during the Easter season, I must take the Holy Communion."

Laura kissed her hard on the forehead. "You're such a good girl! What about the fourth commandment?"

In the last couple of days before the two of them were to set out into the world as Bronislawa and Zofia Tymejko, Laura's drilling intensified—and that wasn't all.

"I'm giving you a special name today," she told her. "To be safe, so that nothing bad happens to me and you, I will call you Zofia. Zofia Tymejko. That is your new name. My new name is Bronislawa Tymejko."

"That's not a very nice name."

"Which one?"

"Yours is not as nice as Laura."

“That’s all right, Zula, because you call me Mama. You must always call me Mama, do you understand? But if someone asks you my name, what do you say?”

“I say your name is Bronislawa.”

“Very good. Bronislawa what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tymejko. Tymejko.”

“Tymejko.”

“So what is my name now?”

“Bronislawa Tymejko.”

“Very good. Who is Laura Schwarzwald?”

“That’s you too.”

“No!”

Selma flinched.

“That is no longer my name! That person doesn’t exist anymore. You mustn’t ever say that again. When someone asks you who your mother is, or what her name is, what do you say?”

“Bronislawa Tymejko.”

“Bravo! It’s like a game we’re playing, but if we break the rules and you accidentally call me Laura, or say that your name is Selma, then the game is over and people will hurt us, or take us away. You don’t want that to happen, do you, Zofia?” Laura said.

“No, Mama.”

“What’s your name, little girl? What do you say from now on when anybody asks you? What do you say?”

“I’m Zofia.”

“Zofia who?”

“Zofia Tymejko.”

“That’s right. And your birthday is July twenty-seventh.”

“It’s September second, Mama.”

“No, that was Selma’s birthday. Zofia’s birthday is July twenty-seventh. See?” She showed her the birth certificate. “See? And what is my name?”

“I don’t like this game.”

“It doesn’t matter, Zofia.”

“I want to be Selma.”

“We must play it all the time now or something bad will surely happen to us.”

“Why? Why does everyone want to hurt us?”

“That I will explain to you when you are a little older, Zofia. But just now they want to hurt people named Schwarzwald and Litwak, so you are never to say those names. What’s your name, little girl?”

“My name is Zofia Tymejko and I was born on July twenty-seventh and I am five years old.”

“How old will you be next July twenty-seventh?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you do, Zofia. You’re five years old, so on your next birthday on July twenty-seventh you will be how old?”

“Six.”

“Excellent. Now, Zosia, what are the three divine virtues?”

“Faith, hope, and love.”

She kissed Zofia’s forehead again. “You’re so smart, Zosia. And don’t talk to anyone. You understand?”

“Yes, Bronislawa Tymejko.”

Laura smiled. “But to you, it’s still Mama.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Poor Zula, Laura thought. Her daughter was a blessing and a curse. She was the only reason to live but for her to survive she was going to have to erase her only child’s identity, and destroy who knew what else?

On September 6, 1942, Laura washed and brushed Selma’s blond hair and fixed it with a white bow. They both put on their best clothes. With only one small suitcase each and their false documents, they set out on foot for the train station. Just before they walked out of the ghetto, Laura removed her and her daughter’s armbands with the Star of David. The trick was to look like they’d just been visiting the ghetto, doing business. Once through the gate, they strode into Christian Lvov, trying to look as little like Jews as possible. This meant walking past the German guards as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She had hired a Pole named Julek to have the rest of their luggage shipped ahead to Kraków, to escort them there, and to collect their luggage in Kraków and help them find a room. He joined them at the appointed street corner and walked silently next to them to the train station, smoking a cigarette. Most of the way there, Laura held her breath.

To everyone in the world but themselves, they were now Bronislawa and Zofia Tymejko.

Once they were settled on the horsehair seats and the train was moving, Laura repeated her strict instructions that Zofia not talk to strangers, to let her answer all questions. When it was necessary to speak, she told Zofia to speak only Polish. Her mother sometimes spoke German too, and Zofia knew many German words.

Once out of the ghetto, Laura felt an unfamiliar surge of hope and permitted herself the thought that maybe her daughter might even go on to have children of her own one day to say Kaddish for all of them. But the hope didn’t last long. On the train Julek sat in another row and pretended not to know her and Zofia, and Laura wondered—why not wonder in a world where children could betray their own parents?—if he was planning to turn them in. After all, he already had their money.

The trip ended without incident. Julek didn’t denounce them. However, he disappeared with the tickets for their luggage, and presumably the luggage too, leaving Laura and Zofia to find lodging for themselves. Laura looked around for him frantically. Not wanting to call attention to themselves by looking lost near the German policeman patrolling the Główny station, mother and daughter, with even fewer possessions to their name, then set off in the rain across the plaza to find a room.

Kraków was the capital of the General Government, the name that Germans had given to the occupied region of what had been eastern Poland, and it was swarming with Germans. To avoid prying eyes, Laura moved Zofia and herself frequently, five times in the first month. Zofia was undernourished and constantly sniffing. Laura worried about her health but worried even more that she would make a mistake answering inquisitive neighbors’ endless questions while she was out looking for work. But Zofia passed the first tests with flying colors.

Laura had attended university and once wanted to be a doctor, but her ambition even before the

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