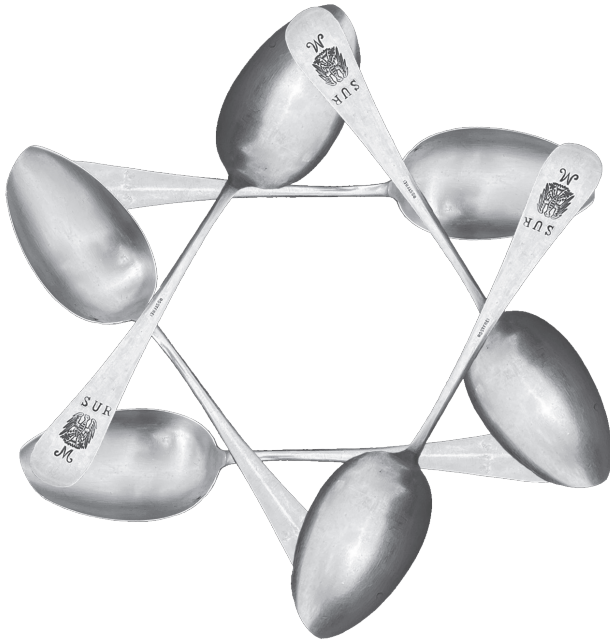


Based on the true story of a
young woman's escape from Auschwitz

TATAE'S PROMISE



SHERRY | MOISES J
MAYSONAVE | GOLDMAN



DartFrog Blue

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This book is historical fiction, based upon the true story of Hinda Mondlak Goldman and the eleven tapes she recorded prior to her death. It reflects the recollections of Hinda's experiences over an extended period of time. Some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated. For dramatic and narrative purposes, the book contains fictionalized scenes, composite and representative characters, and dialogue. The Holocaust, however, was real, and this novel draws upon historical data. The characters involving officials of the Third Reich and the commanders, directors, guards, staff, and internees of Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps are identified from a variety of public-domain sources, including published materials. The views and opinions expressed by those characters should not be confused with those of the authors, and they do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and opinions held by individuals on whom those characters are based. Space and time have been rearranged to suit the convenience of the book, and with the exception of the Hinda Mondlak family and the Wolf Yoskowitz family, any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book uses language consistent with the time period (1930s and 1940s) and the political environment in Europe during World War II. Some terms may be offensive by today's standards.

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In memoriam,
I dedicate this book to my mother, Hinda:
My best friend and my guiding light, FOREVER.
— Moises J. Goldman, Ph.D.



With great love, I dedicate this book
to Hinda Mondlak Goldman:
An amazing woman, whom I admire.
Thank you for whispering in my ear the past four years.
— Sherry Maysonave

Preface

On May 5, 1985, my mother, Hinda Mondlak Goldman, who survived years of heinous abuse at the Auschwitz concentration camp, died in my arms. Coincidentally, on that same day, United States President Ronald Reagan and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl appeared at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. In his speech,* President Reagan said:

“Chancellor Kohl and honored guest [sic], this painful walk into the past has done much more than remind us of the war that consumed the European Continent. What we have seen makes unforgettably clear that no one of the rest of us can fully understand the enormity of the feelings carried by the victims of these camps. The survivors carry a memory beyond anything that we can comprehend. The awful evil started by one man, an evil that victimized all the world with its destruction, was uniquely destructive of the millions forced into the grim abyss of these camps. Here lie people—Jews—whose death was inflicted for no reason other than their very existence. . . . For year after year, until that man and his evil were destroyed, hell yawned forth its awful contents. People were brought here for no other purpose but to suffer and die—to go unfed when hungry, uncared for when sick, tortured when the whim struck, and left to have misery consume them when all there was around them was misery. . . . And then, rising above all this cruelty, out of this tragic and nightmarish time, beyond the anguish, the pain and the suffering for all time, we can and must pledge: NEVER AGAIN.”

My mother’s last wish was for me, her son, Moises J. Goldman, to tell her horrific and triumphant story in a public way. She, too, was adamant that such horror should never again occur anywhere in the world, and she hoped her story would move people to support that aim.

In 1984, my mother was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. Too weak to write and knowing that she did not have many months left to live, she recorded eleven tapes, forty-five minutes each, describing the war’s impact upon her life. In those tapes, she spoke of her father, whom she called *Tatae*—a Yiddish form of the word Father—and how, moments before being murdered by the Gestapo,

he had written a note to her, leaving her with his blessing and a promise: You will live; you will tell. These six words rang in my mother's ears and beat in her heart for the rest of her life. She wanted—with all her soul—to honor her father's last behest.

You may ask, "*How did she?*" Painfully, I will tell you.

It has been over thirty-five years since my mother passed away, and while I had attempted to listen to the tapes many times, hearing her voice and story always turned into such a heart-wrenching experience for me that I would have to stop. I could not finish them. You see, my mother meant the absolute world to me. She was my biggest fan and my best friend in every sense of the word. I knew that someday, if I were to fulfill her final wish, I would have to overcome my grief and listen to the entirety of the tapes. But after trying time after time, I just couldn't. Instead, I threw myself into my work as an aerospace scientist, entrepreneur, and businessman.

I do not know if destiny played a role, but after I moved to Austin, Texas in 2018, I met a couple, Sherry and Stephen Maysonave, whom my wife, Terry, and I befriended. Sherry is an accomplished author, and her husband, Stephen, an accomplished businessman. During our many visits and outings together, I told Sherry some of the stories my mom had told me about her Holocaust experiences. As she listened to them, Sherry expressed her abhorrence of what my mother had endured. I inquired about her interest in co-authoring a book with me. Sherry replied, "I feel the pulse of my soul in all this. I would be honored to write your mother's story. It *must* be told. Such atrocities upon the Jews must *never* happen again."

So now *I was on the hook*; no more excuses or reasons for not listening to the tapes my mother had entrusted me with. How could I not go forward? Sherry has authored award-winning books, and her writing style is so detailed and marvelous. My decision was made. Yet, admittedly, it was personally traumatic and extremely painful for me to listen to and transcribe more than eight hours of my mother's recorded material. The process proved complicated, too, as she had spoken in multiple languages, primarily Spanish and Yiddish, which I had to translate to English.

As I finished the initial few tapes, I got up from my office chair and went to my wife. I said, "Honey, I do not know if I can do it; this is going to kill me."

My wife answered, "It better not; your mother lived long enough to tell her story, so you had better do the same."

My grandfather's promise to my mother then became *my* promise to her. I have fulfilled that promise with this book, which tells my mother's story of growing up in Poland, born ninth of eleven into a religious and devout family, to her experiencing cruel persecution and deep loss due to Hitler's Nazi regime, World War II, and its far-reaching aftereffects. The war stole my mother's home, her family, and what should have been happy teenage years. Even still, she not only survived Auschwitz but at the age of twenty-three, she escaped. *And* she got her younger sister out with her.

I proudly say that my mother was extraordinarily bold and brave. I hope these pages of *Tatae's Promise* will fill you with awe of her incredible spirit and triumph.

Moises J. Goldman, PhD

**Source for President Reagan's Speech:*

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum Archives, Remarks at Commemorative Ceremony at Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in the Federal Republic of Germany. Public Papers of the President. Portions of the speech were omitted as noted with ellipses.



A Silent Scream

September 1939 | Zieluń, German-occupied Poland

Black smoke roiled in the village air dense with soot and cinders. Trembling, eighteen-year-old Hinda Mondlak watched the flames rise higher, fiery fingers reaching toward heaven, lighting the starless night sky. A northern wind emboldened the blaze and whipped her dark russet hair, flogging her face as if punishing her further. Hinda stood next to her father, who had his arm around her shoulder, holding her close to him. His presence usually radiated safety, but tonight, it did not stop her shivering nor the tears slipping from her azure eyes.

Hinda's feet shifted, registering the earth's convulsive vibration as the ground under them quivered. Her chest heaved, and her breath slowed. Her hand flew to her mouth. The massive roof and walls crashed downward, crumbling with loud cracks that echoed, multiplying the eerie sounds. Her beloved synagogue disappeared in the blaze.

Government orders. Not Polish ones, but official Nazi commands: Burn all synagogues in German-occupied areas of Poland.

Her heart quaking, Hinda gazed upward to her father—Salomon Mondlak, who was a tall and strikingly handsome man. He appeared remarkably calm in the light of the roaring fire. Yet his face had turned ashen. *Ash*, Hinda thought. Their temple was soon to be nothing but rubble and gray ash. *Is that my fate too?* She pinched the skin on her arm, examining its fragility.

German soldiers marched near them, their pounding boots loud exclamations. One soldier cocked his gun in their direction and yelled, "Go home, dirty Jews, go home."

Hinda remembered when the Nazis had first occupied the village of Zieluń. German soldiers had come to their home, to all the homes, assuring the townsfolk that their lives would not change, only their government. A lie, a colossal lie.

Without a word, and with his head held high, Hinda's father—*Tatae*, as she called him—tucked her arm into his in the most gentlemanly fashion and began walking away as if they were strolling in a serene, picturesque park.

Hinda's back now turned toward the burning synagogue, she felt the heat of the immense blaze spread through her dorsal vertebrae. The heat penetrated her very bones, which then crackled with warnings and foreboding. Her every instinct proclaimed that soon she would witness another Gestapo-ordered fire—one even more personal. A silent scream screeched through her entire body.



Far, Far Away

May 4, 1934 | Zieluń, Poland

At half past four in the morning, chirping birds awakened Hinda. She nestled into the soft mattress and pulled the covers over her head. A rhapsodic feeling curled her lips upward into a smile. Today, she turned thirteen. Yet the birds' melody would be her only birthday song.

Intrusive sounds, loud thumps and thwacks, came through the walls, drowning out the birds' warbles. Hinda bolted upright in her bed. While her large family—eleven children, seven boys and four girls—made significant noise when they were arising to start the day, these were not their typical early morning sounds.

Hinda glanced around the room she shared with her three sisters. Fanny was the oldest; her bed was empty. Hinda's younger sisters, Rachel and Sara, still slept.

Once again, abnormal noises from the other room startled Hinda. Deciding that something big was happening, she leapt from her bed, ran her fingers through her hair, and straightened her nightclothes.

Entering the main living room, Hinda gasped. "What? This is the day?"

Trunks and valises littered the floor. Fanny and her six older brothers—Shio, Leon, Isaac, Manuel, Jack, and Zalel—were dressed in their best clothing. Fanny looked elegant in her navy suit and matching hat and gloves, though the buttons on her suit were faded. The brothers' clothing, hand-me-down jackets and pants, was a bit ill-fitting, their suits either too big or too snug.

Jack strode over to Hinda, making mock boxing movements with his hands and feet. "Sorry that it's today, your birthday, but our passports and tickets suddenly came through late yesterday. This is our only chance." He cuffed her arm, then leaned in, and kissed her cheek. "Can you wake up Rachel, Sara, and Joel? I would like to see them before we leave."

Hinda hesitated, wanting to stand close to Jack another minute. But her father suddenly announced, "It's time to load up. Trains to Mława run on schedule."

Hinda rushed to knock on Joel's door, then to get her younger sisters. In the girls' bedroom, Rachel, who was seven, was already up and dressed. Three-year-old Sara, who clutched a cloth doll to her chest, still lay in her bed. Her eyes were wide open, and her mouth was set in a decided pout. Hinda scooped Sara and the doll into her arms and motioned for Rachel to come with her. Two steps into the hallway, they collided with Joel, who was in his first year of high school. In the order of the eleven children, Joel was just one year older than Hinda.

His eyes barely open, his raven hair wild on his head, Joel groaned. "It's not even five o'clock yet. Why did you wake me?"

"The older ones got their travel papers. They're leaving in a few minutes," Hinda replied. In her arms, little Sara squirmed upon hearing the news. She contorted her body this way, then that, and tossed her head back. Unable to safely hold her little sister when she was in the throes of an emotional spell, Hinda set Sara on the rug.

That is when Hinda saw her mother, Esther, who sat in the corner, a handkerchief to her nose. Esther's shoulders shook, and whimpers escaped from her mouth. She appeared wrung out, as if she had been crying all night.

Amidst the commotion, Salomon, Hinda's father, spoke calmly, but authoritatively. "We must be on our way." To his wife, he urged, "Esther, start saying your farewells. Time is short."

Beginning with her sons, Esther's body fell onto each one. She hugged them, patted their shoulders and their faces. Between cries and expressions of love, Esther pleaded with them to stay. When she came to Jack, she sobbed uncontrollably.

Hinda had *never* seen her mother so distraught. She looked frail and sick, whereas before, she had always appeared sturdy, strong, and uniquely beautiful.

Salomon went to his wife. He stroked her sable-colored tresses; his thumb gently slid over her silky white cheek. He then cupped her face in his hands and peered into her wide-set green eyes. "Esther, it's their freedom, their destiny. Let them go. Let them find safety and better fortunes."

Her chin quivering, Esther attempted to stand erect and compose herself.

"Come now. Let's go outside and give them a proper send off," Salomon encouraged. As he held Esther's hand, guiding her out the door, he tapped Hinda on the shoulder. "Try to smile and wish them well."

With Joel following behind her, Hinda led Rachel into the front yard. On the road, a man waited with a horse-drawn wagon. A friend from synagogue and a nearby farmer, he had readily agreed to use his wagon to transport the travel trunks to the train station.

Hinda had known this day was coming. Even still, she felt ill prepared. She remembered the family meeting that her father had called this past February. His usual serene face had worn a tormented expression when he announced that it was prudent for the older siblings, those who had graduated high school, to leave Poland and seek better lives and safety in North America. On that very day, he stated, each one of the seven oldest had applied for travel papers. Salomon had emphasized that it could be as early as the following week, or it could be months, before their papers were granted or denied. But if approval papers came in, he had said, they would have to leave immediately.

In that same family meeting, Hinda's brother, Jack, who had a keen interest in politics, had then explained that, in addition to Poland's depressed economy, alarming events were occurring in nearby Germany. He rose from his chair at the dining room table, where the family had gathered, and further explained, "One year ago, in January, a man named Adolph Hitler was appointed chancellor in Germany. He's a leader in the Nazi party and has a reputation for being prejudiced against non-Aryan people." Jack looked around the table, eyeing his family members. He pointed his index finger and swept it around the group. He then loudly exclaimed, "That's people like *us!*"

Shifting nervously in her chair, Hinda noted individual reactions. Esther looked questioningly at Salomon. He nodded to her, silently saying yes, it's true. Some of the older brothers shook their heads with contempt. Joel rubbed the back of his neck, appearing disturbed. Young Rachel rested her head on Hinda's shoulder. Fanny looked down at her skirt, and began picking at the raised nubs of the tweed fabric.

Fisting both hands, Jack continued, "Within months, Hitler began using the power of his office to openly attack Jews. Yes, Jews!" Sighing heavily, Jack asked, "Do you want to hear specifics?"

Salomon leaned forward, urging Jack to continue. He said, "Yes, please give details. I know about most of this, but the others do not. It's important that our family be well-informed."

Speaking with moving fervency, Jack spelled out the frightening facts. "On April 1, the Nazi regime declared a nationwide, one-day boycott of Jewish businesses and shops. Then, just one week later, on April 7, Nazi officials expelled Jews from Germany's Professional Civil Service." Jack's eyebrows shot upward in concern as he explained, "This means that Jews employed by the German government or state-run departments, including Jewish teachers, state-hospital

doctors and nurses, government lawyers, and administrative staff, were all dismissed from their jobs.”

Hinda watched Jack's face as he talked. He was clearly upset, but his face blanched pale when he shared another of Hitler's anti-Jewish actions.

Still standing up, Jack straightened his shoulders as if steeling them. He resumed, “Then, one month later, on May 10, the Nazi regime, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler and another Nazi bigwig, Joseph Goebbels—Germany's propaganda minister—issued a mandate for thousands of books to be burned. Selected books that they considered non-German and not aligning with Nazi philosophy were all torched.” Intently, Jack looked around the table, checking the response of the group. He then added, “Do you understand that included *Jewish* texts?” His eyes glazed with worry, Jack glanced heavenward and then said, “And get this. Goebbels had the audacity to make this declaration in his speech on the night of the book burning: ‘The age of Jewish intellectual dominance has ended. It has gone up in flames.’”

Recoiling, the older brothers pounded their fists on the table so loudly that the noise awakened little Sara from the other room. Her screeches echoed throughout the house. In response, Esther started to rise from her chair, but Rachel leapt up and rushed toward the door. “Mommy, you stay. I'm really sleepy, so I'll go and lie down with Sara.”

Swallowing hard, Jack waited for Rachel to leave the room. Then, he said, “Please indulge me just one more thing. I recently read a book by poet, Heinrich Heine, and he wrote, ‘Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings.’”

Everyone gasped. Knots formed in Hinda's stomach. Searching the faces of her parents, Hinda saw not just concern, she saw flat-out fear. She then understood why her parents were willing to split the family and to get their older children not only out of Poland, but out of Europe.

When the final travel trunk was hoisted into the wagon, one of the horses snorted and neighed. The noise brought Hinda back to the reality of the present moment. She squinted her eyes at the scene on the dirt road in front of her home. *My family. Over half of my family is leaving, and they're going far, far away.*

On the street, Jack set down his suitcase. His index finger punched the air repeatedly, pointing to Hinda in an exaggerated manner. Silently, he mouthed the words: I love you. Hinda pursed her lips sweetly against her hand and then flung the air kiss toward Jack. She then tried to coax her lips into a smile, but sadness pushed them sideways as she choked back a sob.

Sidling closer to Hinda, Joel muttered, “I wish I were leaving with them.” He thrust his hands inside his pockets and cast his eyes down at the grass.

Hinda leaned her head against Joel’s shoulder. Then, she gazed across the lawn, checking on her mother, who clutched little Sara tightly in her arms. Torrents of tears pelted Esther’s face and dripped from her chin.

Sighing, Hinda inched closer to Rachel, who was weeping audibly and wringing her hands in her skirt, wrinkling and wadding the fabric. Hinda placed her hand on Rachel’s shoulder, hoping to assuage her little sister’s angst and to find comfort for herself.

The man with the wagon whistled to the horses, and they clomped down the road. The older brothers turned and waved heartily as they walked away. Fanny stared straight ahead and just kept on walking.

After a few steps, Salomon stopped. He called out to Esther and the four remaining children on the lawn, “When they get settled, we will try to get out, too, and join them.” He looked upward to the sky streaked with clouds. “God willing, we *will* see them all again.”

Suddenly, it felt as if boulders sat atop Hinda’s shoulders and were crushing inward on her heart. Her cherished family. Would they ever all be together again? The answer she heard reverberating inside quickened her pulse. Hinda clasped Rachel’s hand. Gripping her sister’s palm against her palm, skin to skin, Hinda silently mourned the ache that was taking root deep in her soul.



The Bubbling Wkra

March 1938 | Zieluń, Poland

A farming community, Zieluń was dubbed a *shtetl* because of its proportionately large Jewish population. This morning, on the main street of the village, knots of people huddled together here and there. They spoke in low voices.

Hinda departed from the small grocery, and her skin broke out in chills. The once refreshing village air was now thick with fear. Whispers of *war* crowded the atmosphere as if a dense fog had moved in and cloaked the peaceful beauty—verdant fields, lush forests, and magnificent snow-capped mountains—surrounding the scenic village.

Hinda shepherded her younger sisters, Rachel, who was eleven, and Sara, seven, down the street. The grocery bag, crammed with fresh turnips, carrots, and cabbages, weighed heavily on her arm. Nearing seventeen years old, Hinda was her mother's main support now that the only kids at home were Joel, Rachel, Sara, and her. Memories—of the day, now four years ago, when seven of her siblings departed for foreign lands—flashed through her mind. Saying good-bye to them had been traumatic for the entire family, but it was especially agonizing for her mother. For the remainder of that day, whatever chore her mother was performing, Hinda had heard her mother intoning prayers for the family to be reunited. Hinda's faith was her second skin, yet she had felt unable to honestly articulate such prayers. Her instincts shouted that her mother's petitions to God were futile.

"Hinda, you are *blessed* with good instincts," her mother had told her since she was ten. "You must always trust yourself."

At times, this thing called *good instincts* felt like a blessing to Hinda. Other times, it provided such a stark view of reality that it caused her angst. Esther had also claimed that Hinda's older brother, Jack, was gifted with exceptional instincts. Wishing she could talk with Jack about such things, Hinda wondered if intuition had helped him get along in life, had guided him, and given him confidence as he found his way in a new land.

Last year, word had come in a letter from Jack that Fanny had settled in New York City, and the other brothers and he had all gone to Mexico City. He relayed that they had met a man on the ship to New York who talked about the numerous job opportunities in Mexico City, particularly in the textile industry. Jack reported that, indeed, all the brothers had found secure employment there. Shio, Leon, Isaac, and Zalel were all working in textiles. Manuel was a Hebrew teacher. And Jack had landed an excellent job in journalism.

Hinda pondered her older siblings' choices. New York, Mexico City. Such foreign spheres. Worlds away from Poland. From threats of war. They were the lucky ones, she decided. Abruptly, she was jolted from her reverie when she felt multiple tugs on her skirt. She looked down to see Rachel peering upward at her.

"Can we go to the river after lunch?" Rachel asked.

Hinda sighed at the thought of the river—the bubbling Wkra located on the outskirts of Zieluń. "What a lovely idea. Let's get these vegetables home, and then we'll ask Mommy."

Perhaps, at the river, Hinda could escape her instincts that augured more disruption and heartbreak for her family.



Filling their baskets with mushrooms, Hinda and Rachel scampered through the forest on the way to the river. Feeling free, they danced and skipped among the trees. Hinda had been relieved that her mother had told Sara to stay at home—an unusual occurrence. Not taking it lightly, Sara had fussed, stomped, cried, and begged, but her mother remained adamant that Hinda and Rachel go alone and enjoy the river.

Responsible for the care of her youngest sister, Hinda had become Sara's second mother—in charge of bathing her, dressing her, brushing her thick hair, and teaching her reading and arithmetic. In contrast, her relationship with Rachel was not so maternal. With Rachel, who was six years younger than Hinda and quite mature for her age, she shared a camaraderie, a deep bond that connected them to a powerful force, one even beyond genetic sisterhood.

Hinda's basket now brimming with mushrooms, she eyed the flowing water of the river. It beckoned. "Our work is done, Rachel. Let's go enjoy the river."

Rachel found her spot at the top of the riverbank. She had brought a small notepad and colored pencils to sketch the birds that inhabited the lush foliage along the Wkra, varying species singing their cheerful songs that harmonized with the river's gurgling. Nature's symphony.

Hinda stretched out on the low riverbank. Daring to remove her boots, she dangled her feet in the water. It swished around her toes, tickling her. She reveled in the feeling of the grass and the earth on her back. Her proximity to the water and its bubbling sounds were soothing balms, medicine for her anxious heart. Since childhood, when she had played games among the trees and on the riverbank with her siblings and friends, the Wkra River had been her bliss, her rapturous place. And now, it was only at the river that she could cease worrying and not hear the words *War! War!* reverberating in the very air and in her bones. At the river, her world felt safe. She could relax, be a teenage girl unleashing her vivid imagination, dreaming of true love and a grand life.

Later, when Hinda and Rachel returned home, the happy carefree mood at the Wkra was soon dispelled. Her father sat at the kitchen table talking earnestly with their brother, Joel, who was in his last year of high school. Joel was a strapping young man who had broad shoulders, black hair, and bright eyes that changed from blue to green, depending upon what color he wore.

A letter from the Polish army, recruiting Joel to serve, lay on the table. Salomon picked it up and shook the letter for emphasis. "This is a solicitation, not an official order. You must finish high school first. Education is your ultimate worth."

Joel sighed in relief. "Father, I have no desire to enlist. I want most to continue my education, but I'm scared. The school superintendent says that they may come for us boys, force us to serve."

Upon hearing Joel's words, Hinda winced. She remembered him wishing he could leave Poland when the older brothers and Fanny did. The hair on Hinda's arm prickled. It stood straight up as if an invisible comb had raked it upward.



The Mandate

April 1939 | Zieluń, Poland

The spring rain fell in big droplets, a sign of a potential storm. Salomon Mondlak donned his raincoat. At the door, Hinda hugged him good-bye. “Tatae, be safe in the rain. Wait. Don’t you want your rain boots?” She looked up into her father’s sky blue eyes and felt such pride. Just the day before, a neighbor had said that she bore a close resemblance to her father. Applause to her ears. She hoped to be like him in all ways, not physical traits alone. His reputation as a wise, kind man was widespread, even beyond Zieluń.

“Rain boots. That’s a fine idea, Hinda.”

Just then, a businessman from the village came to the door to speak to Salomon. The man, his mouth set in a scowl, explained he’d had a disturbing dispute with another merchant.

A scholar and expert in the Talmud—the collective text of Rabbinic Judaism, both law and tradition—Salomon Mondlak was known as a theological leader. It was not surprising that Jews from Zieluń and other nearby *shtetls* came seeking his counsel as the Talmud was deemed *the* central guide for rituals and for daily life.

After pulling on his rain boots, Salomon leaned in and kissed Hinda’s cheek. “Have a good day, my dear daughter.”

Taking his umbrella, Salomon asked the man to walk with him as they talked. Before the two men arrived at the *yeshiva*, the religious school, where Salomon worked, they had agreed upon the solution to the merchants’ quarrel. Their conversation had turned to war. News had come that in Mława, the largest town near to Zieluń, the Polish army was amassing to defend Poland’s borders against a German invasion.



Returning home that evening, Salomon shed his raincoat and presented an envelope to his wife, one bearing an official seal of the Polish government.

Esther searched her husband’s face before taking the envelope. Hands shaking, she removed the letter and quickly scanned it. When she looked back to

her husband, her eyes expressed both relief and alarm. She exclaimed, "Praise God they're not taking Joel, but how can I possibly have everything ready so soon?"

Salomon took his wife in his arms and whispered, "We can manage this." He placed the letter on the table. "Call the children in."



When the family was assembled around the kitchen table, Hinda noticed immediately that her father's demeanor was more serious than when they gathered at the table for him to read a selected story, which he did every evening.

His eyebrows furrowed, and Salomon announced that an official communication from the Polish government had arrived today. He held up the letter and proceeded to read it aloud: "The German military is advancing on the borders of Poland. To defend the country against a takeover, a mobilization of the Polish military is in full operation. The Polish government hereby issues orders for select citizens of Zieluń to provide shelter to the soldiers who are being assigned there."

Salomon paused to clear his throat. He then read the final sentence: "The Mondlak family is mandated to house three officers beginning Thursday, April twentieth of this year, 1939." He laid the letter upon the table for all to see. Pointing to the date, Salomon said, "The mail was delayed, so this means that the officers will arrive to our home the day after tomorrow."



April 1939 | Gliwice, Poland

Downstream from the village of Gliwice—located in the Upper Silesia region of southern Poland—Wolf Yoskowitz launched his canoe into the Klodnica River. Fern leaves and lush green foliage skimmed the vessel's hull as he rowed along the river's edge. Arriving at his favorite cove, he cast his fishing line and then settled into a waiting posture. The late afternoon sun cast its glow upon the water, making his lure appear golden. Wolf stared at it, anticipating a bobble. But the glimmer radiated outward, capturing his reflection, which startled him, his face appearing older than his twenty-two years. The liquid likeness detailed his chiseled good looks, including his high forehead. Shimmering, the golden water reflected his dark Brunette hair as reddish, which it was not, and filled his spirited blue eyes with gleaming stars.

Sighing heavily, Wolf contemplated his future. Rumors of war with Germany abounded. The Polish army was actively soliciting young men such as him—stout and healthy. Two of his best friends had been forced to enlist last week. The military could come for him, too, although his father's recent stroke had made him the sole provider for his family. Chafing against the cane fishing pole, the calluses on his hands reminded him that he was no stranger to work, having labored in the flour mill since he was ten years old.

Staring into the water, Wolf remembered a conversation with his rabbi, who had suggested that Wolf make a case of his family's hardship if the military questioned him, and to say that he was Jewish, an Orthodox Jew, at that. The rabbi had explained that the Polish army should be reticent to recruit Jews because their presence could incite violence from the Nazis. Then the rabbi had clarified his point. "Months ago," he said, "on November ninth and tenth of last year, Nazi leaders—with the support of Adolph Hitler—actively coordinated attacks on Jewish communities in Germany. For two days, Jewish-owned businesses and homes were vandalized, hundreds of synagogues burned, Jewish cemeteries desecrated, and German Jews beaten and killed." The rabbi had

looked aghast as he then exclaimed. "And now in Germany, the Nazis are interning Jewish men, ages sixteen to sixty, in labor and concentration camps. Wolf, do you understand the impact of all this?"

His brow furrowed and Wolf replied, "It's alarming. All so terribly frightening."

"Jewish men between sixteen and sixty. Wolf, that's you and me. And, as for last November's pogroms, you must understand that these were not spontaneous riots against Jews as Nazi propaganda claims. They were state ordered! State-sponsored arson and vandalism! It's now referred to as the 'The *Kristallnacht*' (the night of the broken glass) because of all the broken glass in the massive destruction." The rabbi sighed deeply. "More importantly, I don't believe that this Nazi violence against Jews will stay within Germany. Hitler has his eye on all European Jews."

Lost in memories of the rabbi's disturbing report and predictions, Wolf jiggled his fishing line, but it did not dispel the anxiety that gripped him. Darkness, like a cloud eclipsing the light of a full moon, swelled inside him. Unconsciously, he sank his teeth into his lower lip, causing a blood blister to rise.

From the riverbank, three young boys who Wolf recognized from synagogue began throwing rocks into the water. Wolf watched the waves ripple in his direction and then concentric circles form around his lure.

One boy yelled out across the river, "Wolf Yoskowitz, my sister, Bracha, wants to marry you and make wolf babies." The other two guffawed, hyena-like laughs that bounced across the water. The boy who had spoken wound his arm back and threw a rock at Wolf's canoe. A solid hit, it dinged loudly.

Bracha? Lord, help. She was not a girl he would ever consider marrying, although she was slightly attractive. To his mother's chagrin, not a single female in his shtetl held that kind of appeal for him. From the time of puberty, Wolf had sensed—intuiting angelic whispers in the depths of his soul—that he would instantly recognize *the one*, would know his wife-to-be the moment he looked upon her face.

Wolf watched the boys trot away and then disappear among the trees. A sudden burst of sadness engulfed him. *These boys will not have a carefree childhood if our rabbi's predictions for European Jews are correct.*

Usually, it was a relief to be on the river he loved. But today, being there did nothing to dissolve the knot in his throat or the ache in his heart.



6
Wojtek

April-May 1939 | Zieluń, Poland

Frightened of the soldiers in their home, eight-year-old Sara cried frequently. Yet Hinda found herself humming happily, unburdened by the additional household chores or what it signified to have three soldiers living there. Two of the officers were in their mid-thirties and were married with families. The third, named Wojtek, was single and in his early twenties.

In the evenings after dinner, the older officers retreated to the study and talked with Salomon, while Wojtek visited with Hinda and Joel. Their discussion topics included the military, what it was like as a young officer, fear of being on the front line, and of Joel's being called to serve. At times, Wojtek would tell them about his hometown of Krakow located in southern Poland. A prosperous city, Krakow was a hub for agriculture and manufacturing, and a center for higher education—vastly different from Zieluń.

Spellbound by Wojtek's melodic voice, Hinda and Joel would sit and listen to him for hours as he spoke about his city's culture, his family's bicycle manufacturing business, and his dreams to return and help his father run the operation. At times, Hinda found herself staring at Wojtek, his unique appearance and demeanor markedly different from the young men of Zieluń, who typically had dark hair. In contrast, Wojtek sprouted light flaxen hair that was almost monochromatic with his skin tone and his olive-colored eyes, which bulged, overshadowing the other features of his squarish-shaped face. At five feet, ten inches tall, he was shorter than Joel, but his broad neck and extremely muscular, stocky body made for a presence that was far more commanding.

One morning, Hinda's mother suddenly dropped her dish towel on the counter and turned to Hinda. "Your eyes have a new sparkle these days. I hear you humming, and I see Wojtek staring at you too long." Esther sighed and said, "Hinda, he is Catholic. You are Jewish. Very Jewish."

"Mommy," was all Hinda could say. The realization startled her: the exciting energy bouncing around inside her was about Wojtek. About attraction.

Although she was almost eighteen years old, Hinda fell against her mother, sinking into her bosom as if she were a child.

Esther stroked her daughter's hair as she held Hinda. She pulled back, gripped Hinda's arms, and gazed directly into her daughter's eyes. "You are a wise girl, Hinda Mondlak. I trust your wisdom."

The following week, a day when Hinda was leaving for the forest to pick berries and mushrooms, the soldiers arrived back home after lunch instead of their usual time. Surprising to all, they were free for the afternoon. Wojtek asked if he could accompany her. Hinda looked at her mother and was astounded when her mother nodded yes and instructed, "Don't be late getting back. I need the fruit and mushrooms for dinner."

On the way to the forest with Wojtek, Hinda laughed readily. She felt free, frisky, and daring. Soon, their baskets had been set down, and they were playing hide-and-seek. Wojtek was no match for her practiced skill at hiding among the trees and lush foliage of the forest she knew well. At last, he declared surrender.

"Come see the river, my treasured river," Hinda called back to him as she raced to the riverbank.

"Your river?" he teased. "I do believe the Wkra River is the property of Poland."

"Yes, but it's incredibly precious to me," she said as she found a spot near the water. He plopped down beside her, and they sat listening to the soothing sounds of the bubbling river.

Turning to Wojtek, Hinda said, "I'm very afraid of what's going to happen."

"What do you mean? The war?" he asked.

"Yes, and I fear that I'll never see you or hear from you again."

Wojtek turned to look upon her face. Her large, luminous eyes—blue as a cloudless sky—captivated him. He replied, "Everything is going to be all right. We don't want war, and neither do the Germans."

"But they do," Hinda argued.

"The Nazi leaders do; they want to rule the world. But regular German people don't. Ordinary citizens, like you and me, in most countries are usually scared of war."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"As soon as I'm allowed to return home, I'll send an invitation for you to come to Krakow. I'll even make a bicycle just for you." Wojtek's lips crooked into a tender smile as he slid his arm around Hinda's shoulder. In a short while, he moved his arm to her waist, squeezing her closer.

Hinda sighed. Sitting so close to Wojtek—his shoulders smashed tight against hers—felt glorious. A boy had never held her in that way. She did not want it to end. In the next minute, her father’s face swam before her mind’s eye. Her father, who she respected and admired, would be profoundly disappointed if he saw her cuddled so closely against Wojtek’s body. The voice of her instincts arose deep inside, warning, “He’s a gentile. Do not get involved.”

Wojtek suddenly grasped her face in his hands. His full lips brushed against hers.

“Oh no! The baskets. We left them in the forest.” Hinda jumped to her feet, offering him her hand. “We’d better get the mushrooms and berries, and head home.” Wojtek’s eyes became slits for a moment, but he took her hand, letting her pull him up.

“I’ll race you to the forest.” Hinda hoisted her long skirt upward and dashed off.

When they returned home, their baskets chock-full, they found Esther waiting on the porch for them. First, she looked at her daughter, checking her out from head to toe. Turning to Wojtek, Esther said, “Hurry, and get your things. The other officers have already left. Unexpected orders. Your platoon is leaving tonight. Going to Mława.”



Decrees and Handcuffs

September 1939 | Zieluń, German-occupied Poland

Since early June, Polish soldiers no longer protected Zieluń. All available combat troops had been transferred to the trenches to defend Poland's borders. In late August, news had come that the battles of Mława and Warsaw had been lost. Although Poland had put up fierce resistance, the German military had been victorious. Within weeks, Nazi forces occupied vast areas of Poland.

Marching on Zieluń streets, German soldiers cast terror with their official uniforms, loaded guns, and clomping boots. Using oversized hammers, they nailed posters on buildings and street signs, dictating new laws. The posters—emblazoned with the German eagle and Nazi swastika symbols—announced new decrees, primarily for Jews: certain areas, streets, markets, and buildings where they were permitted to go or from which they were prohibited.

The earsplitting hammering sounds invoked agitation. Yet the restrictions the posters delineated alarmed the Jewish villagers. Instead of whispering “*War! War!*” the villagers openly asked, “*Why? Why?*”

Standing near the market, which now heralded a swastika flag over its doorway, Hinda read the detailed stipulations on the poster nailed to the building wall. Tromping in front of her, Nazi soldiers hauled a well-groomed Jewish man bound in handcuffs, kicking him as they shoved him forward. At the corner, the soldiers stopped. Gripping his hair like a lever, they jerked his head upward and instructed him to read aloud one of the posters. Their hands in fists, the soldiers struck his upper back and arms when he recited the section about the newly banned street—the one where he had unknowingly trod. Hinda recognized the man from the yeshiva. He worked for her father, cataloging sacred books.

Not realizing that she had ventured into the street, Hinda jumped back on the sidewalk as a man on a bicycle swerved, narrowly missing her. The sight of the bike stirred her heart with questions, the same ones she had pondered since last May: Did Wojtek survive the Mława battles? Did he get to return to Krakow and help his father with their bicycle business?

Gestapo jostled past her, hauling a group of Jews in handcuffs. People on the streets cowered back, shuddering at the frightful scenes, worrying that they were next.

Looking upward, Hinda searched the sky. It teemed with puffy clouds, appearing as fluffy pillows scattered across the heavens. As she gazed at the clouds, she felt a heaviness descend upon her. It seemed as if the clouds were prayer catchers; each one stuffed with the villagers' desperate pleas to the Almighty. With an ache in her heart, she decided to go to her synagogue, a magnificent building that she believed housed holiness.

The temple was more crowded than Hinda had ever seen it. Hundreds of people sat praying, beseeching God to take pity upon the faithful citizens of Zieluń, to save them from what they feared was coming. A blonde-haired woman, her face stained with tears, exited the doorway where Hinda was standing. "Go home, Hinda Mondlak. They've been praying for hours. And it changes nothing."

Her heart pounding like the hammers attaching the posters, Hinda hurried home. Choking back sobs, she asked her father, "Why, Tatae, why?"

In a surprisingly calm voice, Salomon said, "My dear daughter, throughout history Jews have been persecuted—the Spanish inquisition, the pogroms."

"Why us?"

"Because in the eyes of God, written in the Torah and in the Christian Bible, the Jews have always been *the chosen people*. And even with all the mass slaughter and discrimination, as a people, we have always survived."

"I don't want to be chosen."

"Oh, but you do. It is a privilege to be a Jew. Regardless of what happens, Hinda, do not ever forget that. It will give you strength."

Hinda nodded. "I went to the synagogue. Hundreds of people are there praying. A lady bolted through the door near me and said that their prayers were changing nothing." Hinda checked her father's facial expression, expecting to be chided for speaking of such faithlessness.

Salomon looked down, then steeped his hands together. "Prayer doesn't always change our outer circumstances, but it always changes us in here." He placed one hand upon his heart.

For the first time in her entire life, Hinda heard a tremor in her father's voice. She stared at him, trepidation filling her soul.

"I know you are scared, Hinda. We all are."



The following week, Salomon opened his door to an assemblage of men, all talking at once. Lamenting loudly, many held their fists in the air. Earlier that morning, the Nazis had begun closing all Jewish-owned businesses in Zieluń. Panic, despair, and rage were evident in the men's distressed faces and defeated postures. After lengthy discussion, they decided to return to their homes and start hiding all objects that contained material or sentimental value. Salomon spoke to Esther, instructing her to begin stowing away their valuables too.

That afternoon, between classes at the yeshiva, Salomon experienced a foreboding he had never, under any circumstances, felt before today. Visibly disturbed, he stroked the stack of sacred books on his desk, his fingers gently caressing them. Having difficulty concentrating, which was rare for him, he decided to go home.

At the house, Hinda met him at the door, "Tatae, you're home early."

"Yes, I have work here to tend to." Salomon clutched his satchel, but he did not take it to his desk. He went to the back of the house, opened the latch in the ceiling, and lowered the stairs to the attic. The rickety steps creaked as he climbed upward.



The Silver Bell

August 1939 | Mława, Poland

With an onslaught of gunfire surrounding him, Wojtek Wiskowski hunkered down in the trench beside two other soldiers from his platoon. Two alive, that is; another lay dead next to him, a bullet lodged in his neck. The Germans had encroached upon the small Polish camp in the early morning hours. It was now midday.

His throat tight and dry, Wojtek reloaded his submachine gun, his ammunition sack now empty. Hours ago, the squadron officer had radioed for help. Yet no troops, weapons, or ammo had arrived.

Suddenly, dirt whirled all around him. A German grenade had landed nearby. Shrapnel filled the air along with rapid gunfire. Wojtek grabbed at his leg, which had been hit; blood spurting wildly from his groin. Then he was knocked back again. When the shell fragments collapsed his lung, Wojtek gasped for air, a name winging on his breath, "*Hinda*."

His eyes closed. Vivid colors erupted in Wojtek's mind. And then, a scene of a riverbank came into view. A beautiful girl rode a blue bicycle, a bike he had designed especially for her. It had a tan woven basket in front and a silver bell on the right handlebar. The girl's russet hair and eyes of azure came into focus. She waved to him and rang the bell. The chime pealed in his ears. Wojtek's lips parted in a slight smile just as shrapnel from a shower of mortar shells struck his cerebral cortex and rained down upon the center of his heart.



The Hulking Canister

Late September 1939 | Zieluń, German-occupied Poland

Doors nailed and barred, Zieluń's yeshivas were closed. Salomon Mondlak had no job now, his teaching salary gone. And with all Jewish-owned businesses shut down, Salomon's previous supplemental income had also vanished. His expert accounting services were no longer required. His private religious tutoring of children was no longer a priority or affordable to Jewish families who had lost their livelihoods.

Plus, notification had come that the Wkra River and the forests surrounding Zieluń were off-limits to Jews, a new decree from the Nazi regime. This meant that the Mondlaks and their Jewish neighbors could no longer enjoy the river and forests. Moreover, two of their major food sources were no longer available to them. No more fish from the river; no more fruits and mushrooms from the forests.

Salomon went to his wife to discuss their larders. Surprised and relieved, he saw the cupboards lined with small jars of meat and vegetables that Esther had been quietly canning, the rumors of war encouraging her. Her eyes glowing, Esther showed him flour sacks and other non-perishable food items that she had collected. With careful meal planning, she had said, they could survive for many months.



After Salomon left the kitchen, Esther studied the calendar on the wall. She flipped its pages, viewing the next six months, calculating meals, and wondering if she had accurately assessed how long their current supplies would last. Deciding that she was correct, she flipped back to the month of September. Today's date jumped out at her. It was exactly two weeks ago that the Germans had burned their synagogue. Tears fogged her green eyes. Unconsciously, she sniffed, remembering how awful Hinda and Salomon had smelled when they returned home that night. For days afterward, she had soaked their clothing in herb-laden water to remove the smoke odor. She wished herbs would as easily remove the weights

from her daughter's and husband's hearts after witnessing the horror of it. Salomon had looked hollow-eyed, as if his very soul had burned in the fire. He barely ate the next day and then decided to fast and pray for three days. Hinda had moved in slow motion as if anchors were attached to her feet. Frequently, she would sit in the living room and just stare out the window for prolonged periods. Esther, too, had deeply grieved the unjust loss of their temple, having cried uncontrollably for days.

Ever since the night of the synagogue fire, it seemed to Esther that no place was safe. Even the walls of their home, once secure and warm, emitted fierce warnings. Cooking and cleaning had become distractions, ways to quell her persistent unease. Esther fingered her apron, giving in to the overwhelming desire to make a special dinner tonight, to pretend that all was well, just for this one night.



At dinner, the Mondlaks eyed the array of bowls and platters spread across their table. In the past, it was a typical sight, an abundance they took for granted. Now, such a meal was surprising. Smiling, the family whiffed the air, enjoying the aromas. When everyone was settled, Esther gave the nod to dig in. But within minutes, thunderous knocks rattled the front door.

Salomon rose from his chair and went to the door. Hinda leapt to her feet, following behind her father.

A Gestapo officer waited on their stoop. In the front lawn, three Nazi soldiers stood at attention, their guns in hand, their presence ominous.

"All your books right now, over here," commanded the officer. His voice was guttural, loud, and harsh. He pointed to the yard where the other soldiers waited.

Salomon froze, his hand on the doorknob, not moving.

"Did you hear me?" The Gestapo officer shoved the barrel of his rifle into Salomon's abdomen. "Right now, *all* your books, over here on the grass."

"Tatae, I'll help you," Hinda whispered to her father. Bravely, she pried his hand from the doorknob.

The officer pushed his way into the house and went to the small study across from the entry. He began ripping books off the shelves, throwing them onto the floor.

Salomon regained his senses. His hands trembling, he began gathering the beloved books of his personal library, a lifetime collection, many of which were

antique and inherited from his father. He and Hinda carried them to the lawn, piling them onto the grass.

The officer found the other family members cowered in the kitchen. He ordered them out to the front lawn. Esther, Rachel, Sara, and Joel filed out the door. Rachel picked up Sara, who was bawling. Esther's chest heaved, her hands folding over themselves again and again.

One of the soldiers stepped up to Joel, standing nose-to-nose with him as if daring him to fight back. After a moment, the soldier drew back the handle of his semi-automatic service pistol and struck Joel on his right cheekbone. Joel yelped; blood dribbled down his face.

"Weasel Jew boy," said the soldier, taunting him.

After the study had been emptied of all books and journals, Salomon said, "It is done. That is all."

The Gestapo officer threw his head back and laughed, a cackle that made the hair on Hinda's arm prickle. He exclaimed haughtily, "No, you thieving Jew, it is not."

Salomon's jaw tightened, his shoulders instantly sagging.

"How about those you've hidden? The books you stole from the school?" The officer pushed the barrel of his rifle into Salomon's back, shoving him forward into the house.

Raising his arms upward in surrender, Salomon said, "I'll get them." A soldier followed him to the rear of the house. It was then that Hinda understood why her father had climbed the stairs to the attic earlier in the week.

Salomon returned, clutching the sacred texts; all were handsomely bound in leather. Although he showed no outward signs of bruising, he suffered a beating on the inside, his heart punneled. Carefully, Salomon laid the religious books from the yeshiva on the pile.

The Gestapo officer kicked at the hallowed tomes, stomping and twisting his black boot on them. He nodded to a soldier, who handed Salomon a large container filled with gasoline. Their guns drawn, they forced Salomon to saturate the hoard of books, to dispense the entirety of the hulking canister. Nauseous fumes sickened the night air.

A Nazi officer, who had not yet spoken, handed Salomon matches and a striker. In a full-throated authoritative voice, he said, "Jew Salomon Mondlak, you are hereby ordered to burn these obscene books. Light these matches now."

Striking one match at a time, with the Nazi officer pointing where to drop it, Salomon ignited the fire. Instantly, flames leapt through the parchment paper and bindings. Hinda glimpsed her father's face illuminated in the brightness of the roaring fire. His jaw tight and moving in a grinding motion against his teeth, his eyes flooded with tears. In her entire life, it was the *only* time Hinda had ever seen her father shed even one teardrop, let alone weep.

Books, sacred text and knowledge, had been Salomon's life, his treasure. Helpless against the agony, his mouth quavered, his whole body shook. Looking upward to the sky, Salomon wailed, "Why? Why? Why?"

Watching the flames spike, Hinda remembered the upsetting premonition she had experienced when her father and she had watched the synagogue burn. Her instincts had predicted another Nazi-ordered fire, one more personal. Here it blazed.

Questions clattered her brain: How had the Nazis known that her father had taken the books from the yeshiva? Hinda flashed on the memory of seeing a well-dressed man in handcuffs on the street. He had worked at the yeshiva with her father. Rigor-like chills shook her entire body, paralyzing her arms and legs, rendering her unable to move, unable to offer comfort to her father who she had believed, until now, had all the answers.