

WOMEN OF VALOR

POLISH JEWISH RESISTANCE TO THE THIRD REICH

JOANNE D. GILBERT



WOMEN OF VALOR:
Polish Jewish Resisters to the Third Reich

Copyright © 2018 by Joanne D. Gilbert, M. Ed, all rights reserved.
UPDATED SECOND EDITION 2018

Cover designed by Joanne D. Gilbert

Published in the United States of America.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner either in print or electronically, including information storage and retrieval systems, without the written permission of the Author, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Requests for permission can be made in writing to:

Joanne D. Gilbert
P.O. Box 370021
1611 Spring Gate Lane
Las Vegas, NV 89134-9998

-
1. World War, 1939-1945—Underground movements—Poland—Biography.
 2. World War, 1939-1945—Women—Poland—Biography.
 3. World War, 1939-1945—Participation, Female.
 4. Anti-Nazi movement—Poland—Biography.
 5. Women—Poland—History—20th century.
 6. Poland—History—Occupation, 1939-1945
 7. Jews, Jewish History, Holocaust, Nazis, Partisans

Title: WOMEN OF VALOR: Polish Resisters to the Third Reich

ISBN Print Copy: 978-1-7324451-1-6

Printed in the United States of America



DEDICATION

Dedicated with love and admiration

to my Grandmother Micheleh (Millie) Wineman Ron
(1885/Vilna, Lithuania – 1989/Southfield, Michigan)

And to my Granddaughter
Julia Grace Zambrano Gilbert
(2004/Las Vegas, Nevada)

Women of Valor . . . Past and Future

*“A Woman of Valor is robed in Strength and Dignity and faces the Future
with Grace”*

— PROVERBS: 31

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	xi
<i>To The Reader</i>	xvii
1. Hitler's Third Reich Begins	1
2. Germany Occupies Poland	5
3. Poland and the Jewish People	11
4. Roots of Polish Jewish and Gentile Female Resistance to Oppression	20
5. Manya Feldman	30
6. Faye Schulman	67
7. Lola Lieber	104
8. Miriam Brysk	141
Epilogue	166
<i>Afterword</i>	171
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	177
<i>Glossary</i>	179
<i>Discussion Guide</i>	189
<i>Appendices</i>	191
<i>About the Author</i>	201

ROOTS OF POLISH JEWISH AND
GENTILE FEMALE RESISTANCE TO
OPPRESSION

“Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter—The only reply to a murderer is resistance. . . it is better to die as free fighters than to live at the mercy of killers. Resist, resist, to our last breath.”

— ABBA KOVNER (1918-1987) JEWISH PARTISAN
LEADER, WRITER, POET

DESPITE BEING LABELED HISTORICALLY—AND INACCURATELY—AS “THE weaker sex,” women have had a long history of resisting oppression and fighting successfully for survival, even against seemingly impossible odds. Countless role-models of courageous, strong, and successful women stand in striking contrast to their image of being weaker and less brave than men. This is particularly evident in circumstances that involve protecting themselves and their loved ones against a deadly enemy. For almost 1,000 years, Polish Jewish and Gentile and Gentile women grew up near each other, albeit in many ways, worlds apart, within a country that had a long and rich history of valiant women. The following very brief overview of the cultural legacies of these heroic women provides insight into what might have influenced them to defy the Nazis.

In Poland, Gentile women of valor have always been held in high esteem. The historic archetype of the *Matka Polka*—the revered “Mothers of Poland”—represents the strength of women, not only in caring for and protecting their families, but also in taking up arms and fighting for the Polish people. Some of the many heroic Polish women role models include the fabled Princess Wanda (c. 8th century), who upon the death of her father, King Krakus, became Queen of the Poles. In the 14th century, Queen Jadwiga (c.1373-1399) ruled Poland from 1384 until her death. Emilia Plater (1806-1831) was a Polish–Lithuanian aristocrat and revolutionary, revered as the “Polish Joan of Arc,” who cut her hair and dressed like a man in order to fight for Poland in the famous 1831 November Uprising. Warsaw-born scientist Maria Skłodowska (1867-1934), who became renowned as Madame Curie, eventually moved to France and was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize. In fact, she won two (1903/Physics and 1911/Chemistry)!

Jewish history, which has been traced as far back as the second millennium BCE, predates Polish history, and its reverence for women of valor informed Jewish life in Poland. One of the earliest references to Jewish women of valor occurs in the Bible. The famous tribute to “A Woman of Valor” in the Jewish Bible, extolls strong women for possessing value “far beyond pearls.” (*See Appendix A for lines 10-31.*) One such Jewish woman was Deborah (the “Mother of Israel”), who as a prophetess and the only known female Israelite Judge, inspired a successful attack against the ancient Canaanites.

Another woman of valor described in the Jewish Bible was Queen Esther, who saved the Jews from the evil Persian Haman, giving rise to the festive Jewish celebration of *Purim*.²² In 16th-century Spain, Jewish Donna Gracia Mendes (c.1510-1569) was known as “the Queen Esther of her time.” As the head of a large banking empire, and a powerful activist for Jewish rights, Mendes helped rescue many Jewish victims of the *Spanish Inquisition*.²³

Hannah Verbermacher (c.1805-1888), known as *The Maiden of Ludmir*, was said to have defied strict *Hasidic* Jewish rules to become the only female Hasidic Rabbi in history. Sarah Aaronsohn (1890-1917) was born in a village in the Ottoman Empire (now in Israel’s Haifa district), and after witnessing the horror of the Armenian massacres by the Turks,

became a spy for the British. She also worked tirelessly to create a Jewish homeland in Israel.

In the years immediately following World War I, (the “interwar” years) Poland had become its own independent country for the first time in over a century. Despite having suffered huge human, economic, and infrastructure losses, it was vibrant and eager to move into the future under the leadership of popular patriot and statesman, Jozef Pilsudski. For many young women, the future of their country and their personal lives looked bright. One shining example of Poland’s commitment to modernization was its granting women the right to vote in 1918—two years ahead of the United States!

Some Polish Jewish and Gentile women became very active outside their homes in business and politics. These activities provided them with important contacts and training as leaders, and ironically, a highly organized network for eventual anti-Nazi resistance. Additionally, the many technological advances of the early 1900s—including improvements in automobiles, radios, plastic, and nylon—made women’s lives easier, gave them more mobility, and allowed them more time for activities outside of the home.

Emerging industries also provided many new kinds of jobs that needed workers, so even more women left the countryside to work and live in cities. As these women became more exposed to the outside world, as well as to different people, and new ideas, their perspectives broadened, and their roles in business and political life expanded. Urban Gentile and Jewish women were generally more educated, sophisticated, and worldly than their rural sisters, so they were better prepared to understand, communicate, and be comfortable with each other. This familiarity with Polish culture and community made it more possible for Jewish women to pass as Gentiles.

The urban Jewish and Gentile women who were married to, or daughters of, men who were prominent in the professions, the government, and the military, had the social, professional, and financial connections that housewives and rural women lacked. Because of their greater visibility, they were widely known, and easily recognized, so they had to be extra careful about their resistance work. Rural Jewish women, similar to their Gentile counterparts, were usually traditional rather than modern in their thoughts, appearance, and behavior. They were isolated, less educated, and

not usually familiar with Gentiles beyond surface greetings. Religion was central to the lives of rural families, and created barriers between the two groups. Since the Catholic Church actively fostered antisemitism, the very basis of their belief system was fearful of and antagonistic to Jews.

Rural women typically lacked the linguistic and social skills of urban women, so they did not have the same opportunities to interact and develop friendships with each other. This made it extremely difficult for them to engage in any resistance activities that required mutual trust. An additional hardship for rural Jewish women was that they were known as Jews in their communities, so passing as Gentile was not an option. Finding a trustworthy Gentile family to hide them was all but impossible, but it did happen.

The historically accepted assumptions that women lacked the skills, the strength and the courage to effectively defy the Nazis provided women with unique opportunities to resist the Nazis that were not available to men. The Polish Jewish and Gentile women who defied the Nazis showed that their “weaknesses” were really strengths. They were courageous, resourceful, resilient, creative, intelligent, quick-witted, selfless, and independent. They were able to improvise on a moment’s notice, using whatever was at hand to confront life or death challenges. It was their traditional role as secondary citizens that would make it almost impossible for women to be seen as anti-Nazi resisters.

Women took advantage of this bias by pretending to be silly, or weak and simple-minded as they carried out daring acts of sabotage—often right under the noses of the Nazis. Women could often incorporate resistance work into their routine activities as daughters, sisters, mothers, and wives. Laundry baskets—especially those filled with dirty diapers—could also include secret documents, medical supplies, and food ration cards. A seemingly feeble-minded old woman would not be suspected of coordinating the transmission of coded intelligence to the partisans and the Allies. A handicapped and hard-of-hearing female apartment manager couldn’t possibly be hiding thirty Jews in the basement. How could there be anything more than a baby in that carriage? And if a Jewish woman were blonde and blue-eyed, she had even more options to resist, because she could pass as a Gentile. On a train, a fragile looking blonde girl who appeared to need help lifting a suitcase filled with illegal documents, could gain assistance from a big, strong and gallant Nazi.

The youngest of the female resisters, some younger than 12-years old, had been accustomed to being both protected and controlled by their parents, teachers and religious authorities. They were expected to be respectful and to obey the rules. While some of the older teenagers might have been more independent and adventurous, most were still bound by their culture's traditional belief that good girls stayed home and helped their families until they were married. Following marriage, they would make a home with their husbands, and take care of their own families.

There were, however, a few independent girls, sometimes to the fear and dismay of their traditional families, who ventured out of their homes, and explored the world beyond their immediate community. There were also some girls who came from more sophisticated families, and who were encouraged to be independent, to pursue a higher education and a profession.

Some of these professional women were extremely effective in the resistance. Both Gentile and Jewish (until they were prohibited from working) female teachers, social workers, doctors, dentists, and lawyers interacted with students, patients and clients on a daily basis. Teachers participated in early resistance activities providing places for people to exchange messages, and organized escape-strategies for their students and their families. Doctors and dentists helped by continuing to serve their Jewish patients, as well as secretly obtaining and storing medications and medical equipment. Attorneys drew up legal documents that helped Jews obtain false citizenship papers and new identities. Gentile female professionals often refrained from denouncing Jews who they knew were passing as Gentiles. Professional women also used their connections to find hiding places and provide emergency health care.

While many resistance activities could be surreptitiously incorporated into women's daily household and professional routines, there were others that were both far from routine, and even more dangerous. One of these involved the rescue and subsequent care of Allied airmen. Women had more opportunities than men to move about the town and countryside because any man who was not military or working would be arrested or shot on the spot. Women gathered and communicated vital information about Nazi locations, military strength, and movements. They also scouted areas where Allied airplanes were supposed to be landing, or parachuting men and supplies. Women took great risks to find these men and supplies,

and then transport them to safe houses. Women hid, fed, and nursed injured airmen who had been shot down, and then helped them escape.

Another highly dangerous and complicated resistance activity that often fell to the women was finding safe-houses for Jews, especially Jewish children. First, the head of a Gentile home or farm had to be identified, approached, and then determined to be reliable, willing and able to house Jews. Next, the Jews had to be found and persuaded to go to a safe-house—or to let their children go. Then, it was necessary to secretly transport the terrified Jews to the new hiding place, which all too often meant a cramped bunker under the floorboards of a barn, or a small space in an attic, or even between walls.

Resistance workers also had to provide the necessary food and medicines to keep these hidden Jews alive. If neighbors or Nazis became suspicious, or if bounty-hunters appeared, the Jews had to be immediately moved to a new hiding place. Sometimes resistance-workers even escorted Jews over mountains, through forests, and across borders. Who could have imagined that such clandestine, and perilous resistance activities would be needed in the 20th century?

Wanda Krahelska-Filipowicz (1886-1968), who was married to a former ambassador to Washington D. C., not only sheltered Jews herself, but also used her social, military, and political connections to provide significant aid to Poland's Jews. A life-long political activist, she was a respected leader of the anti-Nazi Polish Underground, and understood the necessity of centralizing all efforts to help Jews. Filipowicz joined with Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (1889-1968), a well-known writer. Their shared commitment to defying the Nazis led them to join others in founding *Zegota*. *Szczucka* was eventually arrested for aiding Jews, and sent to Auschwitz. Upon her release in 1944, she participated in the Warsaw Uprising along with almost 5,000 other Polish Jewish and Gentile women.

Also involved with *Zegota*, were Irena Sendler (1910-2008) and Matylda Getter (1870-1968). Sendler has been credited with helping to save numerous Jewish children and adults.²⁴ Sendler was eventually arrested, imprisoned, and brutally tortured—but she never divulged the names of her comrades in the resistance, or the names of the hidden children. Also helping the resistance protect children, was Matylda Getter (Mother Matylda), a Catholic nun in Warsaw. She was in charge of several children's homes and orphanages which hid Jewish children.

As a member of the Polish underground, Barbara Szymańska Makuch (1917-2004) took in a 7-year old Jewish girl whose parents were being deported. Makuch took care of the girl until neighbors became suspicious, making it necessary to move her to a convent, where she and 35 other Jewish children were kept safe. Before Makuch was captured by the Germans, she visited the girl regularly. While a concentration-camp prisoner, Makuch was tortured, then forced on a death march, but she never revealed the names of her comrades. She was liberated in 1945.

Gertruda Babilinska (1902-1995) began working as a nanny for a wealthy Jewish family when she was 19. She was especially close to their little son, Michael, and promised the mother that she would take care of him—and bring him up to be Jewish—if anything bad happened to the family. Upon the father's disappearance, and mother's death, Gertruda took the boy as her own, barely managing to support him with her earnings as a housecleaner. She somehow managed to teach him both Jewish and Catholic religious practices so that he could act appropriately in either situation. When the war ended, after she and Michael had been held in displaced persons camps, she was finally able to take him to live with her in Israel.

In addition to sharing dangers faced by Polish Gentile women, such as lack of male relatives, and financial resources, Jewish women also had to deal with their conspicuous visibility as Jews. Most were not assimilated into the dominant culture, and this was reflected in their dress, language, and religious practices. Despite all the obstacles however, there were innumerable Polish Jewish women who dared to fight the Nazis. Three of the most prominent were Haika Grossman (1919-1996), a leader of the Jewish Underground, Eta Wrobel (1918-2008), who organized a partisan fighting unit in the forest, and Tosia Altman (1918-1943), who was a leader of the dauntless *kashariyot*,²⁵ underground couriers who traveled throughout Nazi-occupied Europe.

Zivia Lubetkin (1914-1976), a top-ranked ZOB commander, was one of the many Jewish women who fiercely fought the Nazis during the final uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto (4/19/43- 5/16/43).²⁶ The following year, she joined the city of Warsaw's uprising against the Nazis, 8/1-10/2/44.²⁷ After the war, she moved to Israel, where in 1949, she helped to establish the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum.

Some Polish Jewish and Gentile women sought a completely different

way to defy the Nazis. They went to England to join the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). This secret war department was formed in 1940 to support underground resistance movements in Nazi-occupied countries. These women were trained in combat, communications, parachuting, and assuming the identities of locals so they could blend in when sent to countries such as Germany, France, Poland or Hungary. One of these daring women was Maria Krystyna Janina Skarbek (1908-1952), also known as Christine Granville. Born to a mixed Catholic-Jewish family, she was renowned for her bold secret missions into Nazi-occupied Poland and France.

Faced with discrimination, impossibly crowded and squalid living conditions, starvation, disease, and the prospect of death at every turn, Polish Jewish and Gentile women were determined to protect their loved ones at all costs. As Jewish husbands, sons, and fathers—many of whom were decorated World War I veterans—were beaten and murdered, or arrested and deported to certain death in the camps, traditional gender-roles changed. This new circumstance placed greater responsibilities upon women both within their families and within their communities.

Many Polish Gentile women, whose fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons had also fought in World War I, and were now being sent German labor camps, were similarly alone. They also faced poverty and hunger, and risked death every time they helped a Jew. Whether Gentile or Jewish, these women were constantly responsible for making life and death decisions—for themselves and others.

With few, if any resources, and so little hope, why did some of these women, unlike so many others, choose to defy oppression? Despite their many differences, what qualities did they share that compelled them to fight? After talking with them, it became clear that whether rich or poor, rural or urban, these remarkable women did have much in common. First, was their determination to fight oppression rather than surrender. Second, they did not see themselves as heroines, and would not allow anyone to refer to them as such. Third, instead of feeling gratified about their incredible achievements, they felt only despair over the lives they had not been able to save. They each insisted that they were just ordinary people who, when confronted with the senseless Nazi horror, tried to do the right thing. And over seventy years later, they have never stopped trying to do the right thing.

What follows are the unforgettable stories of four young Jewish females who had been living normal lives until the Nazis changed their world forever. Three were teenagers. The fourth was a 7-year old. While each of their experiences was unique, they each had adoring parents, who instilled in them a love of family and Judaism. Additionally, each was multi-lingual, and could therefore understand and communicate with Polish Gentiles, Germans, and in some cases, Russians and Hungarians.

Of great importance to the survival of each of these remarkable young women was that at important points along the way, they were helped by Polish Gentiles. Each woman felt it was essential that the actions of these Gentiles be included in her story. First you will meet *Manya Feldman*, the laundress, nurse, fighter, and “crazy Jewess.” Second is *Faye Schulman*, the nurse, fighter, and photographer. Third is *Lola Lieber*, the artist and forger-on-the run, who passed as a Gentile. Finally, there is *Miriam Brysk*, the little girl who dressed liked a boy, and carried a gun.

²²*Purim* is a joyful festival that celebrates the rescue of ancient Persia’s Jewish people from evil King Haman’s plan to kill them all.

²³*The Spanish Inquisition* (1478-1826) consisted of a series of deadly attacks, heinous tortures, and deportations initiated in by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, in order to rid their country of non-Christians.

²⁴Irena Sendler was a social worker whose extraordinary actions in saving Jews are chronicled in the PBS documentary, “Irena Sendler: In the Name of Their Mothers,” www.pbs.org/program/irena-sendler/, as well as in many plays and books.

²⁵Lenore J. Weitzman, “Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust.” Jewish Women's Archives. www.jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust. Accessed on May 16, 2018.

²⁶The final uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto was conducted under the direction of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) and the Jewish Fighting Union

(ZZW), who decided to die fighting rather than passively accept their fate as the Nazis liquidated the Warsaw Ghetto.

²⁷Warsaw was the only city in Europe that planned and implemented its own armed uprising against the Nazis. Conducted by the Polish Underground Army, this struggle attempted to liberate Warsaw and its 1,000,000 inhabitants. Many felt that their ultimate loss could have been prevented if the Allies had provided support.

MANYA FELDMAN

(1923/DOMBROVITSA, POLAND –
2015/WEST BLOOMFIELD, MICHIGAN)

***“I only survived because of my
youth and plain good luck!”***



*Manya Feldman — West
Bloomfield, MI 2012 ~
(photo courtesy of Manya
Feldman)*

ELEGANTLY ATTIRED, WITH HER THICK, impeccably styled strawberry-blond hair providing a chic frame for her youthful face, Manya Feldman sat gracefully on the shaded veranda of the Fleischman Retirement Home in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. From her appearance, the last thing anyone would have imagined or believed is that 74 years ago, this lovely woman was a tough teenage partisan, fighting Nazis in the dense Polish forests.

Ever alert, she quickly spotted my car entering the crowded parking lot. I waved, and realized even before I met her, that she still exhibited many of the qualities that had served her so well during her time as a young Polish Jewish partisan during World War II. Seemingly calm and cool despite the 95 degrees and 95% humidity of a Michigan July, she was ready to talk

with a total stranger about deeply personal, and searingly painful experiences.

Greeting me with a warm hug, she was immediately concerned about my needs: Did I have any trouble finding her residence? Was I thirsty? Too hot? Too cold in the air-conditioning? At 89-years of age, she was the perfect hostess—treating me as if I were the important person instead of it being the other way around. She was charming. She was competent. She was confident. And she was in charge. And if we had been surrounded by Nazis in a frigid Polish forest, in the middle of the night, she definitely was the one I'd want to follow.

In fact, I was already following her. Briskly pushing her walker and its small attached oxygen tank, she led me through the bustling lobby en route to a private meeting room. With her eyes constantly scanning our surroundings, she never missed a detail, stopping every few feet to make an introduction, or to indicate a point of interest—a lovely piece of art, a lively bird habitat, a notice for an upcoming art exhibit.

Finally seated, and assured that I was comfortable, and just as if we were having a routine conversation, she began her story. Within a few sentences, the clean, well-equipped, modern building in which we comfortably sat—as well as almost three-quarters of a century—evaporated. In its place was a dark, cold room in a primitive, and brutally overcrowded ghetto. And I was listening to the voice of a terrified and confused Jewish teenager whose life was about to change forever.

The next three years would take Manya through horrors that still defy the imagination, as she learned to live, to fight, and to survive along with the Soviet partisans in the dense and swampy forests of Poland. And as her story continued, I began to hear the strong voice of a heroic young woman



Manya Barman, West Berlin, Germany 1946 ~ (photo courtesy of Mary Blowers, The Fleischman Residence, West Bloomfield, MI)

who made heart-rending decisions on a moment's notice, faced death on a daily basis, and overcame overwhelming dangers—eventually surviving events that for far too many others, had been unsurvivable.

HERE IS MANYA'S STORY . . .

West Bloomfield, Michigan, 2012

I was born in 1923, and grew up in Dombrovitsa, a town in the eastern part of what was then Poland, not far from the Russian border. The closest big city was Pinsk, which is now in Belarus. Approximately 3,000 of Dombrovitsa's 5,000 residents were Orthodox Jews, who very poor. In our immediate family, there were five children: four daughters and a son. Our extended family was huge: close to 200. Of those, only three of us, first cousins, survived the war. And of these three, I am the only one still living.

My father had been wounded when he fought for the Czar in the Russian Army during World War I, and as a result, his four fingers on one hand had been amputated. After the war, since he couldn't do heavy manual labor, people looked down on him for being handicapped. He was an industrious man, however, and determined to provide for his family, so he went into the grocery business and opened a small market. Both of my parents worked hard at the market, and even though we weren't rich, we were considered to be middle-class. My parents were very loving, and their greatest goal was for us children to become educated. We adored our parents and worked hard to please them. We didn't have much, but we had our family, our religion, our clubs, and cultural organizations. Looking back, I think that having had a happy childhood gave me strength to overcome the difficulties that came later.

As an Orthodox Jewish family, we eagerly looked forward to our joyful Friday night *Shabbos* dinners, which we always shared with those who were less fortunate. We had a very lively family, and enjoyed laughing and singing the traditional songs. We must have made quite a commotion, because sometimes Gentiles who lived nearby would stop and watch our celebration through the window. While this might seem strange now, we never acknowledged their presence or said anything to them. Our interactions with Gentiles never developed into more than "hello" and "goodbye." This was because when we were in the presence of Gentiles,

we were subjected to a lot of antisemitism. They would call us names, shout terrible insults, and sometimes throw rocks at us when they saw us on the streets. There was often anti-Jewish graffiti on the walls of Jewish homes and businesses, and Jewish stores were sometimes picketed and boycotted. We were also subjected to many legal restrictions, including the ability of Jews to go to public schools, universities, or have professional careers. So whenever possible, we stayed away from the Gentiles. We lived right next to each other, but in completely separate worlds.

Inside the Jewish community, our lives were peaceful and happy. We were well-educated at our own Jewish schools by Jewish teachers. In addition to our Hebrew education, we were fortunate that we learned Polish history, geography, customs, and how to speak and write the Polish language. That way, if necessary, we could fit in with our surroundings. Little did I know that this knowledge would soon help keep me alive. Other Jews, who lived in communities where they learned nothing about the Polish culture or language, would not be so lucky.

Even as a young child, I was always very active, always a “doer.” I wanted to be involved in my parents’ store rather than spend my time at home, sewing and keeping house. My parents trusted me, and gave me a lot of responsibilities. As a matter of fact, when I was only eight years old, I was the one who went early to open the store. This was because my father had to go to *Shul* (a Jewish house of worship) in the mornings, while my mother was busy with my sisters and brother. I would wait at the store until my father or mother came, and then I would go to Hebrew School. After school, I’d go back to work in the store. When I finally got home, ate dinner, and finished my homework, there still was plenty of housework and gardening to do, so I was always busy.

Other than the one Jewish doctor, there were very few Jewish professionals in our village. Our little store did alright because even though our Gentile customers were antisemitic and rude to us, there wasn’t anywhere else for them to shop. On Christmas and Easter, however, the store was closed. On those days, we had to stay shut up in our house. We didn’t dare go outside, because the Gentiles were even more hostile than usual toward Jews on these holidays. In their churches, their priests told them that the Jews had killed Jesus, so after their services, they would be riled-up and come out ready to kill any Jew that they could find. We always had to be careful, but we understood the “rules” and knew how to live with them.

Our village didn't have a Jewish high school, so when the time came, those few parents who could afford it, would send their children to live and continue their education in bigger towns. I wanted more than anything to be able to go to high school. Despite my endless tearful and bitter begging, however, it wasn't possible because it was too expensive. My father had four daughters, and at that time, getting them married was considered much more important than getting them educated. So when my older sister finished elementary school, she became a seamstress. When I finished, I went to work in our store. Since boys were expected to marry and support their own families, however, it was important for my older brother to learn a well-paying skill. So the plan for him when he finished school was to train to become a watchmaker.

Even in the midst of these challenges, we didn't feel particularly threatened. Our Jewish culture had evolved over centuries within unfriendly environments, and we knew how to create a sense of warmth and security for ourselves. There were several Zionist groups in town, some of which were very religious, believing that God would protect and save them. Other Zionist groups were totally secular (non-religious), and believed that Jews would have to work, and even fight if necessary, to get to *Palestine*,²⁸ the homeland of our ancestors. As teenagers, we belonged to the *Hashomer Ha-Tsa'ir-Halutz*. We had meetings, sang songs, and read a lot of literature. We talked about the Zionist movement, and instilled in the younger children the desire to go to Palestine. That was our dream, and the dream of our parents. These well-organized groups, with their large number of members and highly trained, effective leaders, would later provide strong networks for anti-Nazi resistance activities.

In August 1939, when I was sixteen, something important happened that we didn't know about. And even if we had known about it, we wouldn't have understood it: the Nazis and the Soviets made a secret agreement that they would soon split Poland between them. A week later, the Nazis invaded and occupied western and much of central Poland. Then, two weeks later, the Soviets invaded and occupied eastern Poland. So the country of Poland disappeared. Just like that. No more Poland. Our village was suddenly under Soviet Communist rule. And although life became very hard, we considered ourselves fortunate because since we lived in what was now the Soviet sector, we weren't under Nazi control and targeted for extermination. The Russians closed the Jewish schools,

but they allowed the Jewish children to go to the Russian public school, which was very good. Jews were still allowed to work and live in their own homes, although under communism, Jewish-owned businesses were taken over by the government, or “socialized.” We could manage to survive only as long as we were careful, and stayed in our own little world—far away from the Gentiles.

Throughout history, the Jewish people had survived oppressions by adapting to the conditions that were imposed upon them. So we felt we would survive as long as we could adapt to what was happening. Tragically, we believed it was temporary. How could it *not* be temporary? Once we adjusted, we even felt lucky. The Soviets were better than the anti-semitic Poles. And anyone was better than the Germans. Although the circumstances were difficult for our parents, we innocent children were happy. And so during the almost two years that we were under the Soviet Occupation, we were spared the horrors of Nazi Germany, never imagining what was to come.

In a surprise attack, on June 22, 1941, the Germans broke their pact with the Soviets. Suddenly, instead of being their allies, the Soviets had become the victims of the Nazis, and many were massacred or taken to prison-of-war (POW) camps where they were brutalized and starved. So on a lovely, but eerie, Sunday morning, while we sat together on our front porch, our lives changed forever. Amidst the sunshine, soft breezes, and the cheerful sounds of singing birds, we could hear the rumbling, and felt the vibrations of the Germans before we saw them. We didn’t understand what was happening. How could we? Suddenly, as if they had been dropped down from the sky, the Nazis came roaring down our street on motorcycles followed by huge tanks. We just continued sitting on our porch, petrified. Completely quiet, barely breathing. And then, as if it hadn’t happened, the Nazis were gone. In fact, it was easier to believe it actually hadn’t happened than to comprehend what it meant.

Soon enough, we could hear the joyous crowds of Polish Gentiles welcoming their heroic “liberators” with shouts of thanks, songs of welcome, and bouquets of flowers. They were grateful that the Nazis had gotten rid of the despised Soviets, who had oppressed Poland for centuries. We Jews certainly didn’t show any enthusiasm for the Nazis’ arrival. We knew all too well what had happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany, starting in 1933, in Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, and

since 1939, in western Poland. Soon, we were in for another shock, when our Polish neighbors, taking their cues from the Nazis, quickly started screaming at us, "Now it's going to be your end. Now you will die!" It was utter chaos. And we watched and listened in utter disbelief and sorrow.

Next, while we were still trying to comprehend what was going on, a truly terrible thing happened. Two men, who for years had done business with my father, came and snatched him from our porch, hitting and shaking him and shouting, "Come with us, you dirty Jew!" Shocked and terrified, Papa tried to keep his voice steady so we wouldn't worry, and asked, "Where are you taking me? What's happening?" They handled him roughly, and ordered him to shut his mouth, saying, "You'll find out soon enough. Dirty Jew." Unable to believe our eyes, we watched them drag Papa away.

One minute our family was sitting together talking on our front porch, and the next minute our beloved father was being dragged away in a riot. My brother somehow had the presence of mind to run inside the house and hide in the attic. The rest of us followed quickly, closing the doors and shutters behind us. We didn't know what was going on, so how could we know what to do? What was happening to our father? What was happening to our world? The unknown was unbearable.

In the stuffy, hot attic, we sat together in bewildered silence. After a couple of hours, my mother and I couldn't take it anymore so we decided to go and see what was happening. As we ran through the town, we saw that we weren't alone. The terrified mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters of other prisoners were also running to the village square. When we got there, we couldn't believe our eyes. The Germans had taken 200 middle-aged Jewish men, forced them to sit on the ground, and pointed machine-guns at their heads, ready to shoot for any—or even no—reason. We saw my father among them. We felt as if we would explode from the helplessness. Then, my mother and I, along all the women whose husbands, fathers and brothers had been taken, ran to the mayor and to the priest to beg them to help us. Hundreds of women crying, "*Please! Do something for us!*"

This call for help, this spontaneous and desperate act of resistance, infuriated the Germans, who then felt compelled to show that they would not tolerate any rebellion. So they grabbed the Jewish prisoners, and accused them of being communists, screaming, "This is what happens in a communistic town . . . these are all communists and now we're going to

get rid of the whole group.” Finally responding to the women’s agonized begging, the priest and the mayor came to the Germans and said, “Yes, there might be a few communists in town, but these men are all good Jews.” Eventually, towards the evening, the Germans released all but twenty-two of the men, who been picked at random to be used as hostages. The rest of them, including my father, were sent home. The Nazis announced that if anything happened to any German soldier, the hostages would be executed.

Once again, we tried to adapt to these new authorities, hoping that we could outlast whatever they intended to do. For a while, until the ghetto was established, we still lived in our own homes, but we were continuously subjected to terrible new laws. For example, since the sidewalks were for Gentiles, who were considered to be “humans,” Jews, who were “non-humans,” had to walk in the streets with the horses. Jews couldn’t own a store or any kind of business. Jews couldn’t have any livestock, and since we’d all had our own geese and cows, this was the first step toward starvation. Then Jews had to relinquish all their furs, silver, gold—whatever was valuable. Within two weeks, a *Judenrat*, consisting of Jewish men who’d been selected by the Nazis, was established to keep the Jews under control.

The situation was becoming impossible. We were deprived of food, of medical care, of all personal freedom, of everything. One day, the Nazis announced that they were granting the Gentile population complete freedom, telling them that they could go and loot and steal whatever they wanted from the Jewish homes. And that’s just what they did. They went on a violent looting rampage, making it obvious that the Jews of Dombrovitsa would not be able to survive by *adjusting* to the Nazis. When their only goal was for us to die, what was there to adjust to? Death? The only way to survive was to try to escape. But where could we go?

By the third month of the Occupation, a ghetto was formed, and the Jews were forced to leave their homes and move to an overcrowded area that was roped off from the rest of the town. There was no actual wall, they just roped off two streets, and put in a single guarded-gate entrance so we couldn’t go out or go in. The windows of the houses that faced outside the ghetto were boarded up so we “non-humans” couldn’t see where the *real* human-beings lived. The *Judenrat*, under Gestapo orders, was now in charge of the ghetto. Every Jew was counted and registered. If someone

escaped, others would be punished or even killed. In this way, they made us responsible for each other. We had an understanding, "I'll see to it that you can't escape so that nothing will happen to us." Resistance would mean hurting our own people. They used us against each other, and therefore against ourselves.*

**Note: Years later, I often spoke to schools and other groups, and the same question would always come up, "Why didn't you escape?" You know why? Because we were surrounded. It wasn't just by the German Occupation. We were surrounded by enemies who were all too willing to help the Germans. I'd say that about seventy to eighty percent of the Gentiles were in tune with the Germans. Even if we got out, there was nowhere for us to go, and almost nowhere that we could hide. Wherever we went, we were immediately recognized as Jews because our clothes were so different from the Gentiles. And during the liquidation of the ghetto, Gentiles were promised for each Jew they found, they'd get a kilogram of soap or a kilogram of sugar. So they caught Jews left and right.*

We all had to wear yellow Stars of David sewn on the front and back of our clothes. Our family was put into a small house along with two other families—thirteen people. There was a living room, a small bedroom and a kitchen, so our family lived in one room, another family lived in another room and the third family lived in the kitchen. There were no telephones, no beds. We slept on the floor. Sanitary conditions were disgusting—instead of indoor plumbing, we used filthy, foul-smelling outhouses. Instead of clean indoor running-water, we used outdoor wells. Food rations were so limited that we began to starve, and in the streets we could see people—friends, neighbors—dying of starvation, dysentery and typhoid.

Still, in spite of the misery in the ghetto, we tried to make it seem as normal as possible. A little black-market soon developed. Gentiles would come to the fence, and if we had anything they needed, they would give us food in exchange. Maybe we'd get a scrawny chicken for a gold wedding ring. Or a loaf of bread for some salt or tobacco. Since our family had managed to smuggle in some merchandise from our store, we were able to

make trades for a while. Jews also created secret make-shift schools and synagogues. We managed to celebrate the holidays. Some resemblance to Jewish life went on no matter what the circumstances. We were determined not to lose our humanity, so we resisted dehumanization in whatever little ways we could.

The Nazis forced everybody to go to work at hard, physical labor. It didn't matter what it was, just as long as we worked, and worked hard. It was day-to-day living, we just worked and prayed to live one more day. In the wintertime, we cleaned snow off the streets and railway tracks. If the Nazis felt like it, they would give us old toothbrushes and make us clean the sidewalks. In the summer, we dragged all kinds of construction materials to the bridges that were being built, or we worked in the fields. At that time, I was running the threshing machine in the fields. It was hot and dirty, and the dust made it a struggle to breathe or even see clearly. It was a miserable way to spend eight hours a day.

One morning, I don't know what got into me, but I just decided not to go to work. I knew I was taking a terrible risk, but I just couldn't face another day in that field. Looking back, I guess that this was my first individual act of deliberate resistance, but of course, I didn't know it then. That night, the Nazis asked the *Judenrat* to give them a list of the people who hadn't reported to work that day. I was arrested and taken to Gestapo headquarters.

Much to my surprise, it turned out that there were several of us: men, boys, women, and girls, who had all been arrested and taken to headquarters. We sat there all night and saw and heard horrible things. In front of us, two Germans beat a Polish Gentile man so badly with rubber pipes that he was bleeding from every part of his body. Then they took him out and they shot him. They screamed at us, "You see what's going to happen if you don't follow orders!" This was their way of killing our thoughts of resistance.

Unknown to me, and in spite of the danger, my father, brother and older sister had been discussing ways to save our family. The only option was to escape to the forest and try to live there. Of course, they had no idea what would happen in the forest, or if they could live long enough to even *get* to the forest. So they decided that the family would have to split up, that way, hopefully, someone from the family would survive. My father, brother and older sister decided that since they were the strongest,

that they would go first. If they survived and established a place in the forest where we could all live, they would then come back for my mother, my little two sisters, and me. They had already packed small knapsacks and were ready to go to the forest at a moment's notice. Our neighbor and his two sons would join them. All that they waited for now was the right moment to escape. Until then, our days continued as usual.

One day when I was at work at a construction site, the authorities told us that we didn't have to come to work the next day. That was very strange. So we knew it was going to be the end. As we slowly returned to our ghetto "homes," we had no idea what to do. How do you think about—how can you endure—something like this, knowing that tomorrow you and your family—everyone you know is going to be killed?

That night at bedtime, our father told us to put on a couple of dresses along with our pajamas, and go to sleep. Despite my terror, I did somehow fall asleep. At about midnight—out of nowhere—there was a soft knock on our window. It was our neighbor, who asked Papa, "Do you know the ghetto is surrounded? Jews are trying to run into the forest! There are already many dead . . . the Nazis are shooting everyone! We need to run—*NOW!*"

By then, I was out of bed and standing nearby, watching what was going on. My father, brother, and sister rushed around with strange expressions on their faces. My mother stood by silently, holding on to my two small sisters. Even though I saw what was happening, I couldn't comprehend that my father and brother were about to leave us. I was soon stunned to see that my older sister, who I really looked up to, was also getting ready to go.

I asked her, "You mean to tell me you're going?" She said, "Yes, I'm going." "You mean to tell me you're going to leave mother?" She didn't answer. But for a short moment, she looked me straight in the eye . . . and then she didn't even glance at me again. As I stood there watching in absolute bewilderment, I tried to make sense of what was going on. And I tried to decide what would be the best thing for me to do. Should I stay and help my mother and the little ones? Or should I go with my father?

This is a decision that no one should have to make. How could I leave my mother? Ultimately, however, I decided, that if my older sister was going, then I was going, too. So in agony, I chose to go with my father. And, in a rush, we left. My mother didn't say a word. We left her and the

two sweet little girls . . . just standing there. Our hope was that they would somehow be safe in the ghetto. But we never saw them again.

So there were seven of us that night: my sister, my brother, my father, me, and the neighbor with his two boys. We walked to the momentarily unguarded ghetto gate and quietly slipped out, proceeding down the street, all the way out of town to the river. I still wonder if the guard had been paid off to leave the gate for a few moments so we could escape. We spotted a little canoe, and in two shifts, we crossed the river. On the other side, we ran to a Gentile village where the mayor had been a customer of my father's. We knew that he was a good man, so we headed to his house. My father told him that the ghetto was surrounded and the Jews were being killed. So at great risk to himself and his family, the man offered to find us a place to hide. We couldn't stay at his house because he was the head of the village, and Germans came there often. So he put us up in bushes not far from another river, where we sat for hours, wondering what would happen next.

Towards the afternoon, his son came and gave us some food, and told us that the ghettos were being liquidated. He said that the Jews from neighboring cities had all been taken on trains to the town of Sarny, where mass "graves," meaning vast, shallow pits, had already been prepared for them. "Don't stay here. Go—do what you have to do," he urged us. From our hiding place we could hear the trains going by. We could also hear the constant pops as the Nazis shot Jews who were jumping from the trains. We knew we had to go.

So we got up and headed further into the forest. I would learn much later that my mother and precious little sisters were among the fifteen-thousand innocent Jews that were rounded up and sent to Sarny to be "liquidated" during that hideous week in August 1942. To this day, I have never lost the vision of them standing there, watching me as I left them. I think of it all the time. I see them in front of me, my mother silent, my sisters confused and crying. I feel so guilty for leaving them. Guilty for living, when they died. I am now 89 years old, and the memory still haunts me.

We didn't have equipment or skills for living in the forest, but we soon learned how to scavenge for edible roots and berries. We also learned to disregard our usual respect for honesty, in order to steal potatoes, often rotten, from nearby farms. We learned how to sleep on the frozen ground

in the winter, and in the insect and disease-infested mud in the summer. Constantly on the move to avoid discovery, we hid in fields, small villages, and sometimes with various groups in the forest. At one point, we were spotted by a bounty-hunter, who would have turned us in for a reward. So we raced deeper into the forest. Antisemitism was so strong where we were that many Gentiles would have killed Jews with their own bare hands, even without a reward. Since they had been taught that we were "Christ-Killers," they considered it a good deed to kill a Jew. If they hadn't assisted the Germans the way they did, thousands and thousands of Jews would have been saved.

Our first November in the forest, we were living in a little bunker that my father and brother had built out of rocks and branches. But when the snows began, we were afraid that we'd leave tracks that the Germans could follow. We would only be safe if we could get out of the snow. It turned out that there were some good people not too far away. They were Seventh Day Adventists,²⁹ who are committed to non-violence. So my father took me and my sister to them and we held our breath as he asked them politely if they could keep us during the wintertime. We were so relieved when they said they would take me, and they would also find another family to take my sister.

These people, without any notice, risked their lives, to open their homes and hearts to desperate strangers. They made us feel welcome even though we came from such a different world. And we did our best to help them in every way possible. Once, my host-family questioned the Jewish belief in a God that would single them out for such horror. When they mentioned the possibility of my converting to Adventism, I said, "Oh, no. I was born a Jew and I'll die a Jew." To this day, I am so grateful that there were some Gentiles, unlike so many others, who risked their lives to help Jews. They were true heroes.

During that time, we'd been hearing rumors about fierce partisan fighting groups that were being established in the forests. They were organized by Soviet soldiers who'd escaped from brutal Nazi prisoner of war (POW) camps, where they'd been dying like flies. Determined to fight the Nazis in any way they could, they formed their own combat units. They soon realized, however, that partisan fighting was different from the traditional military fighting for which they'd been trained. Now they would be fighting the Germans from the *back* instead of the front-lines, as they had

in the military. Since they didn't have enough supplies and weapons, they had to raid villages and farms to get what they needed. When the partisans were eventually able to make contact with their government's headquarters in Moscow, the government started parachuting important information, food, medicines, supplies, and weapons into the forest. They also sent a highly trained military man to lead them.

His name was Sydir Kovpak (1887–1967), and I learned later that he had been a famous Russian military hero, personally decorated in World War I by the Russian Czar Nicholas II.³⁰ Following the Russian Revolution, he had joined the Russian Communist Party, then joined the Red Army, and fought against the Germans. In addition to his other skills, he was also a master of *guerilla*³¹ war tactics. The Soviets parachuted him down into the forest one night, and he then proceeded to find, organize, and train his own group of partisans. This was a very tricky operation in the middle of the swampy forest. Word of these partisan activities spread, and little by little, the Kovpaks were joined by other escaping Soviet soldiers, as well as some Jews, and even some Ukrainians and Poles, who were also running from the Nazis.

At this time, the Kovpak *Otriad* (Russian for a “group apart” or “on its own”) was stationed only around twenty kilometers from where we were, and they were scouting Jews, and even local Polish people to join them. A few weeks after my sister and I had moved in with the Seventh Day Adventists, my father was approached by a Kovpak scout, and he decided that we should join them. He felt very strongly that even though we probably wouldn't survive, that at least we could kill some Germans. We would not accept our fate passively. We would avenge the deaths of our murdered family.

So he took my sister and me from the Seventh Day Adventists, and we went into the forest to search for these partisans. At that time, I was sorry to leave the family that had sheltered us. I felt my sister and I would be safer in the village than in the forest, especially in the winter. My father, however, had become committed to doing whatever was necessary to fight the Nazis. So we said our sad goodbyes, wished our kind “families” well, promising to contact them when the world was safe again. At that point, leaving a warm house with food to eat and going to the cold forest and having only occasional food, didn't make me feel very lucky.

To our shock and sorrow, we learned much later that their entire

village had been destroyed soon after we'd left . . . no one was left alive. I was haunted by the feeling that it might have been our fault. That maybe someone had found out about us, and denounced our host families to the Nazis. And that because of us, the innocent villagers had been obliterated in retaliation.

After walking for what seemed like forever, but actually was only one long night in the cold forest, we finally got to the Kovpak headquarters. I don't know what I was expecting, but I was definitely surprised by what I saw. It was a complete community of different kinds of people—all busy—and totally hidden in the forest. From inexperienced teenagers, to farmers, to military heroes, this determined and disciplined group would create many serious problems for the Germans. While the partisans knew they would never actually defeat the Germans, their goal was to inflict as much damage as possible. And they did. In fact, the Nazis hated and feared them.



*Manya Barman, Poland 1943
~ (photo courtesy of Manya
Feldman)*

Upon our arrival, the first thing they told us was, "You know this is a partisan movement, so families don't exist here. There are no families. We have to separate you. Wherever you'll be told to go, that's where you go." Thus began our partisan training. There were five battalions, each with one-thousand members, scattered throughout the area. Each had a leader who got his commands from their headquarters. Each headquarters communicated by radio with the Soviets in Moscow. My father and my brother were assigned to one battalion, and my sister and I went to another. My father worked so hard. He felt badly that he couldn't be a fighter because of his hand, so he gladly took on all kinds of chores. My brother, who was nineteen, soon became a regular combat soldier. My sister and I stayed in Battalion #1, which was responsible for domestic work like food preparation and laundry. We started in the laundry, but eventually, I became a nurse, and my sister went to another battalion, where she became a combat-fighter with a rifle.

In the laundry, there was no soap, so I used ashes instead. Ashes contain *lye*, a dangerous chemical which creates an extremely harsh

laundry cleaner. I washed the clothes in water I'd heated to boiling on the fire. The partisans' clothes were very heavy, heavier than canvas, and very rough, like burlap. It was a horrible job, my hands were always bloody and running with sores, but I was very diligent. I did my work, and didn't complain. I knew that what the others had to do was much worse.

Fortunately, the guys that were in charge liked me and decided to "promote" me to kitchen duty. So no more laundry. But then I had to get up at four in the morning to work with whatever food was available. For a while, there was meat from stolen cows, and small, wild animals, as well as potatoes, and bread. We ate our meals, and afterwards, when possible, we even sang, danced and told stories. Many of us had been in Zionist clubs and knew the same Zionist songs. It might seem weird, but in spite of our circumstances, we were still young people, and did what we could to keep our spirits up.

We were often on the move because the Germans were always on our tails. We stayed a few days, sometimes even a week, in one place, until we had to run again from the Germans. We were constantly on the go, just moving around and doing all kinds of damage to the German Army. Since our partisan group had been established and supported by the Soviets, its primary goal was to protect their own country from the Nazis, who were advancing into the Soviet Union. So the Kovpaks were like a grass-roots branch of the Soviet military. They weren't particularly interested in the problems of local people. And they definitely weren't interested in the problems of the Jews. The Soviets had a job to do, and although there was some antisemitism, as long as we helped them, they let us stay.

Despite the challenges, the partisans were amazing fighters and a tremendous hindrance to the Germans. They went out and found German installations and destroyed them, bringing back whatever supplies, food, medicines, blankets, and clothing they could carry. It was not unusual to see a partisan wearing German clothes, which made it hard to know who was who!

One of the partisans' major goals was to prevent the Nazis from transporting troops, weapons and supplies to the front. Partisans shot up Nazi trains, ripped up train-tracks, and also used dynamite to blow up the train-cars, tracks and bridges. Our group often participated in armed combat, inflicting heavy casualties on the Germans, always taking their weapons, and whatever else would be useful, back to the group. During that time,

my primary responsibility was to be a nurse. I worked hard assisting a doctor who was part of our group, and learned how to take care of patient's wounds and sicknesses.

Partisans also communicated crucial information about the Germans to other partisans and to the Soviet government. Today, even senior citizens have cell-phones, and use the internet, so it's hard to imagine communicating without our modern technology. But back then, some of the forest partisan headquarters did have access to radio communication with their government in Moscow, but otherwise, the partisans had only the most primitive means of communication, such as using couriers to carry information, money, and medications from group to group. Our "runners" raced through the forests and villages carrying important news and secret information about both partisan and German activities. Sometimes the information was written in code. Sometimes it was memorized, also in code.

Getting supplies was of paramount importance. Of course, the partisans couldn't just go into a city to buy what they needed. Sometimes it was parachuted down to us, but since we were always on the move, and the forest made it hard for pilots to find good places to drop the supplies, we usually had to steal what we needed from nearby villages and farms. The inhabitants of the villages had to go along with what we said, because we were tough, and had weapons, just like a regular army. There was a chain of command, and everyone followed orders . . . *or else*.

I can't over-emphasize how important it was to get a hold of any kind of weapon—a knife, a pistol, a hunting rifle, any rifle—and the materials for making explosives. These weren't just to fight the Germans or unfriendly peasants, and bounty-hunters, but also to protect ourselves and each other. We each knew that if we were captured, that we had to try to kill ourselves. Otherwise, when we were tortured, we might give up information that could damage our cause, and endanger others. So, in addition to learning how to be a nurse, I also learned how to be an effective fighter in one-on-one combat, as well as in blowing-up trucks, train-tracks, and bridges.

In addition to weapons, it was also crucial that we have access to water. When we could, we carried it with us. Other times, if we were lucky, there would be a river or stream nearby. If not, we had to break through the ice, or dig for it in the marshy land. The forest was filled with swamps, but if untreated, that disease-infected water would make us sick.

While on the run, we often had to dig holes for water, which would be black and thick, just like coffee. And it was filled with who knows what? Insects, disease. Some people ended up dying from the water.

Every hour, every day, we were constantly under the strain that we were going to starve to death. Or die of hideous diseases . . . or get caught . . . get tortured . . . get killed. There was never any relief from this. All we thought about was just living through that hour. Just living through that day. And for more than two years, while I lived in the forest as a partisan, sleeping in teepees, sleeping on the ground, in holes in the ground, the whole time, I never took off my dress. It had become a part of me.

The winter of 1943 was especially harsh. By then, I'd been promoted to being a nurse, and was responsible for the sick and wounded, including 18 terribly ill typhus patients. Today most people are vaccinated against this bacterial disease that is spread by lice. It is easily prevented by routine good hygiene, and can usually be cured with antibiotics. But we didn't have either, so death from typhus was very common.

Eventually, I also contracted the disease. In a way, however, even though I was burning up with fever, I was lucky. This is because we ended up staying in one place for a whole month. So at least I didn't have to be on the run while I was sick. The reason for this month-long stop, however, wasn't so lucky. It was because we had accumulated an awful lot of wounded and sick people, and we were also lacking in ammunition, dynamite, and medications.

This camp was near a huge and very deep lake, which was solidly frozen. So the partisans decided to make an airfield out of it. Right there on the ice! And so we did. Airplanes from Russia came in at night—landing on ice—with their lights and noisy engines turned off! They glided in through the darkness, bringing ammunition and medications, blankets, and clothing. They also evacuated the sick and wounded. Everything had to happen fast, so they could get back in the air before being spotted. The partisans scurried around as quietly as possible, unloading the supplies . . . everyone was silently slipping and falling. Each night when they left, the Russians took some of the sick and wounded with them. Can you imagine all this activity going on at night in the winter, in the middle of a forest for a whole month?

In the midst of this, I was trying to help, but I got so sick that I couldn't even move. My brain was hazy and everything hurt. At some

point, a woman doctor came to me and said, "My dear, you have to get out of the cold. Go and lay down, you're too sick to help here." I had been burning up with a high fever for about ten days. So I went to the so-called infirmary. When the fever finally broke, they transferred me to a safe-house to recuperate. It was completely empty. I lay there alone for a couple of days.

Then, two soldiers with rifles came to me and said, "Manya, you came to the partisans to work not to be sick." I told them that I hadn't chosen to be sick, but that didn't matter to them. It turned out that they needed me to go help another woman who had also come down with the fever. She was the mistress of a partisan leader and had been sent to another safe-house to recover.* This turned out to be very fortunate for me. The woman and her lover were very kind to me, even though I was still too weak to really take care of her.

** Note: Since no one knew if they would live another day, it was common for unmarried people to become couples, and live as much as possible as if they were married, in order to experience whatever comfort and love that was still available. Women in these relationships were safer than women who were alone.*

We were provided with a horse and wagon and a wonderful young man to be our driver. When he saw my condition, he said, "You sit—I'll do everything." And he did. During the five days we stayed there, he brought us food, and since the sick woman couldn't eat, I ate her food, too. Finally, for the first time that I could remember, I wasn't hungry. Then, on the fifth night, the driver rushed to us shouting, "The Germans are surrounding us—we have to run!" He urged me, "Come on, quickly—dress the sick woman.

But for some reason, I couldn't move, and said, "I can't." No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't move my legs. I was in terrible pain. It was hard for me to hear. And I was terribly cold. So he dressed the other woman, put her on the buggy, and then he ran to tell the others that I wasn't moving. When they came to get me, I told them, "I'm not going anywhere." The battalion leader and the others tried to convince me, saying, "You know what's going to happen to you if you stay? The

Germans will find you and they'll torture and kill you." At that point, my brain wasn't working anymore, and I just said, "Okay." I just couldn't move. So they left. And I stayed. I was left alone in that house.

Somehow, I got lucky again. It turned out that a sympathetic Gentile girl lived nearby and had seen our partisan group. So she knew that one partisan girl was left alone. The fact that I'd refused to go, she didn't know, so she thought I'd been abandoned. And she decided to help me. So she sent me a young man with a horse and buggy. And he came and called to me, "Come on, we're going to catch up with the partisans. They couldn't have gotten too far." He also had another girl with him. Somehow, then I could move, and he helped me into the buggy. When he noticed that I was shivering, he asked if I was cold. And I mumbled, "Oh yes, I am terribly cold." He said, "Okay, I'll tell you what, I'm going to let you off at a farmer's house, and you can stay there and get warm, and tomorrow I'll come and get you."

So we got to the farmer's house and the young man knocked on the door and said to the farmer, "Listen, I have a girl here, she's not well. Could we leave her here for a while? But I warn you, she's a partisan so don't do anything bad to her. I'll be back to get her in a day or so." Well, a day went by, two days went by, and nobody's there. I found out later that after he left the village, he had driven only about five kilometers, when the Germans caught up with him, and killed him and the girl. So this was yet another time because of a kind Polish Gentile, I was lucky.

With the Germans getting so close, the farmer was afraid to keep me any longer than a couple of days. He knew that there were some Jews, who weren't partisans, hiding in a nearby village. So he went to them and he said, "Listen, I have one of your own. Why don't you come and get her?" And despite the danger, these brave Jews, who didn't know me, came to the farmer's house, but they didn't come in. They spoke to me through the window, and they saw that I was very sick. I was able to tell them that my father, sister, brother and I belonged to the Kovpaks. So they made a deal with the farmer: if he would keep me a little longer, they would bring him meat, which was almost impossible to find. So he agreed, and the next day they brought him some meat. My good fortune did not last long, however. The following day, the farmer's little boy came running into the house, screaming, "Papa, the Germans are in the village!"

So the farmer said, "We have to get her out of here." He told the little

boy to take me to the house where the Jews were. They took me in, but that night, when the Germans came into the village, they had to run to the forest. They asked if I wanted to come along, but I still was too sick to run. So again I said, "No, I'm not going. I'm cold and I'm not going anywhere." And they left.

That night, the whole population of the village, not just the Jews, had run away into the forest. They knew that the Germans would kill them for helping partisans, even though they really hadn't been given a choice. They'd had to comply with the partisans' orders. But their motivations weren't as important as what they did. Again, I didn't feel so lucky . . . *but again, I was.*

So there I was, left by myself in a house. In one room there was what we called a "Russian" oven. On one side, you could have a fire for cooking, and on the other side there was an opening, like a ledge, where you could sleep. So I went on the oven ledge and I slept. That night a group of partisans were passing by the village. When they saw that all the homes were empty, they decided to find a place to sleep. They came to the house I was in. They brought in hay and put it on the floor to sleep on. Then, much to their surprise, they saw a person was sleeping on the oven ledge. Me. We talked for a while and I told them I was with the Kovpaks. It felt good to be able to talk with friends. I soon fell asleep, and when I woke up the next morning they were gone.

Later that afternoon, I saw tanks coming in, tanks with German soldiers, who must have been on the partisans' trail. I knew I had to hide fast. Lucky for me, there was a ladder just outside the front door. I pulled it inside so I could climb up into the attic. And through a crack in the attic wall I could see Germans right across the street. They were wrecking a house that had once been a local partisan headquarters. They began shooting their machine-guns outside and inside, at the walls, at the furniture, and especially at the posters of Lenin and Stalin that had been left behind. Terrifying as it was, all of a sudden I had gotten very cold again. I must have gone into shock, because I wasn't thinking clearly. I thought, "I don't give a damn, I'm going down." I took the ladder, went down, got back on the oven ledge, and went to sleep. At that point, death no longer meant anything to me.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep when a group of Germans came into the house and saw me. They pointed their rifles at me and asked me

who I was. Even in my confused state of mind, somehow I knew I should not let them know that I understood German. So I acted a little crazy, and pretended that I didn't know what they were saying. I repeated in Polish, "I am Polish. I am Polish. And I'm sick." After that, I said nothing.

They communicated to me that they would be staying in the house overnight and that I should make them dinner. They brought out a lot of food: bread, salami, eggs, cheeses, tea. And I made scrambled eggs for them. When they sat down to eat, they motioned that I should join them at the table. So I joined them. I sat at a dinner table with Germans! And they shared everything they had with me. And I ate. And ate. And in their conversation they asked each other, "Who do you think she is? What nationality is she really? Do you think she's crazy?" Since I did understand German, I knew everything that they were saying, but I didn't bat an eye. I just kept wondering when they were going to kill me.

After they finished dinner, I cleaned up and went back to the oven ledge. The Germans made a lot of noise outside—constantly shooting all night because they were afraid partisans were nearby and would attack them. They wanted the partisans to think that there were a lot of them and that they were heavily armed. They also wanted to distract the partisans because some small German airplanes were coming to pick up the bodies of Germans who had been killed by partisan land-mines. Even with all that noise, I still fell asleep.

When I woke up, there was a complete quiet. And I realized that there were no Germans in the house. Peeking out the window, I saw that it had snowed heavily during the night. I walked outside, and there were no Germans on the street. In fact, nobody was there. Empty. Everything covered in snow. Like a frozen ghost-town. And just then, after two weeks of being in a kind of crazy, hazy, black-out, my head suddenly cleared from my sickness, and I wasn't freezing. Just like that. I was able to think clearly enough to start making an escape plan for myself. I still can't explain it. I wandered into another vacant house and found a toothbrush, a piece of bread, some salt and matches, all of which I put in my pockets. I knew that I'd be able to use them. And then I just walked around. There were cats and dogs and chickens and cows roaming through the snowy streets, but no people.

Somehow, once again, I'd been lucky.