

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

RESISTANCE



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A note to readers: While some of the dialogue spoken by real historical figures in this text, including Aharon “Dolek” Liebeskind, Gusta Draenger, Shimshon Draenger, and Mordecai Anielewicz, was actually spoken by these men and women, and recorded in various volumes, the author has also created portions of it. Among other sources, the author employed extensive research in the archives of Yad Vashem (yadvashem.org) and a book written by Gusta Davidson Draenger, titled *Justyna’s Narrative*, published by University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1996.

Additionally, German, Polish, and Yiddish words will be italicized upon their first appearance in the text.

CHAPTER
ONE

October 5, 1942

Tarnow Ghetto, Southern Poland

Two minutes. That's how long I had to get past this Nazi.

He needed time to check my papers, inquire about my business inside the ghetto. Maybe he wanted a few seconds to flirt with a pretty Polish girl. Or for her to flirt back.

But no more than two minutes. Any longer and he might realize my papers are forged. That it's Jewish blood in my veins, no matter how Aryan I look.

"*Guten Morgen.*" This one greeted me with a smile and a hand on my arm. I learned early not to smuggle anything inside the sleeves of my coat. You only had to be stupid once, and the game was over.

This officer was younger than most, which I once believed would give me an advantage. I'd thought the younger ones would be more naïve, and maybe they were. But they were also ambitious, eager to prove themselves, and

fully aware that capturing someone like me could earn them an early promotion.

“Guten Morgen,” I replied in German, but with a perfect Polish accent. I smiled again, like we were old friends. Like I wasn’t as willing to kill him as he was my people. “*Wie geht’s?*” I didn’t care how he was doing, on this morning or any other, but I asked because it kept his attention on my face rather than my bag.

Like other ghettos throughout Poland, Tarnow Ghetto had been sealed since nearly the beginning of the war, cut off from the outside world. Cut off from Jews in other ghettos. This isolation gave total power to the German invaders. Power to control, to lie, and to kill.

For the past three months, I’d worked as a courier for a resistance movement known as Akiva. My job was to break through that isolation, to warn the people, and to help them survive, if I could. But we were increasingly aware that time was running out. We’d seen people being lured onto the trains with promises of bread and jam, pacified into thinking they were being relocated to labor camps. Then they were crammed into cattle cars without water or space to move. And their destination was never to a labor camp.

They were headed for death camps, designed to kill hundreds or even thousands of people a day. I’d seen them. Been sickened by them. Had my heart shattered by them.

The Nazis called these camps their solution to the so-called “Jewish problem.”

Yes, I very much intended to be their problem.

Which required me to stay calm now. Just inside the ghetto, I saw an open square that used to be a park. Now it was a place for trading, for begging, for a population with little more to do than wander about and wonder when their end would come. Maybe some even wished for it.

As was generally the case at the gates, there was one other Nazi on duty, this time a man in an SS uniform, the more specialized military force. There were also two Polish police officers and two members of the Jewish police, whom we called the OD. They often were as brutal as the Gestapo, and no more trustworthy.

I offered the soldier my *Kennkarte* before he could ask, because he'd need to see the identification anyway and my two minutes were halfway up. The passport-sized bifold contained my picture and fingerprints. Everything else inside—the dates, the stamps, the personal information—was forged.

One of our leaders, Shimshon Draenger, did all the forgeries for Akiva. He was so talented I believed he could forge Hitler's signature and fool Hitler himself with it. We sold Shimshon's forged papers inside the ghettos as our way of funding the resistance.

"You are Helena Nowak?" the soldier asked.

I nodded, a lie that I'd told many times over the last three months, and one that I would certainly tell again. A thousand other Polish girls might have the same name, which

was the plan. If all went well, he'd believe me, then in the same instant, forget me.

"Why are you coming to the Tarnow Ghetto today?" he asked in German.

I scrunched my face into a pout, a careful balance between hinting that I wished I could go on a picnic with him instead, but not enough to actually encourage him to invite me. I replied, "Shawls for the women. Winter is coming. I can make money in there."

He frowned. "Where do you get these shawls?"

"My grandmother knits them."

My grandmother, whom I recently smuggled into hiding with a Christian family in Krakow. She sews, cooks, and cleans for them. In exchange, they don't have her killed. They saw it as a fair bargain, and maybe it was. If they were caught, they'd be killed too.

"Let's see your bag," the officer asked.

It was worn on my back, and was narrow and deep. Deliberately sewn that way. I had packed the top half of the bag tightly, making it difficult for him to dig around, if he felt the need to do so. But I hoped he wouldn't because today, the thick shawls hid the potatoes I was smuggling in, along with some forged identification papers. For sneaking in a single potato, this Nazi could shoot me here on my feet. For the papers, my punishment would be far worse.

I turned and hummed a little tune while he looked the bag over. This was by far the most dangerous part of my mission.

If I'd raised his suspicions. If he wanted to impress his commander. If he looked at me and saw the Jewish girl inside, the one who has trained herself to look these evil men in the eye and to smile and make them think I sympathize with their slaughter of my people. If he saw *that*, it was all over.

But I'd get in today. And tomorrow I would lie my way into another ghetto, and do the same every tomorrow after that until my last breath, or theirs. After three years of war in which I'd felt helpless against the overwhelming force of the German army, I was finally doing *something*. I was bringing my people a chance to survive.

Ghettos themselves were nothing new to the Jews. Many times throughout our history, we'd been forcibly segregated, often behind walls. Which made it harder to get people to listen now. They believed the German lie that if we cooperated, we would get through this, as we had in the past. They wanted the ghettos to be what they'd always been: a separation, and nothing more.

But it was different this time. The German plan was not to divide us from the population. It was to eliminate us from the population. To exterminate us.

The ghettos played a key role in their plans, suspending the Jews in a halfway point to everything. Half-starved, treated as much like animals as humans. Existing halfway between hope and despair.

Halfway between life and death. The one became the other in the ghettos.

And I was doing everything I could to stop it.

It began with smuggling. I'd become creative about how I brought things in: weapons baked into loaves of bread; fake identification papers sewn into the linings of my coat; or, occasionally, the smuggled object might make my bust appear larger than it really was. Whatever I was secretly carrying, I always brought information to the residents of these sealed ghettos about what was happening elsewhere, and then learned everything I could to warn the next ghetto.

But that was only the beginning. My mission today was bolder than usual, and I was nervous.

"You must leave before the ghetto curfew at seventeen hundred hours," the Nazi told me, then with a smile added, "Come out through this gate, pretty girl, no?"

I offered him a smile of my own, one that shot bile into my throat. I couldn't come out this gate now. Not if he was specifically watching for me.

He let me pass, and then I was in.

I wondered if he'd sensed how hard my heart was beating back there, if he'd known my palms were dampened with sweat. I'd talked my way past the soldier by making him think I was Polish. Now came the harder part: convincing my own people that I was one of them. For if they did not trust me, coming here was a waste of time.

I turned down the nearest street, hoping to get out of sight if any guards looked back. It was time to be Jewish again. I put the necklace with the Catholic crucifix in my

pocket and repeated my true name under my breath: Chaya Lindner.

I was named for my grandmother, as she was named for hers. Every time I passed myself off as a Christian girl named Helena, I wondered: Was I dishonoring my name, or preserving it?

Maybe it didn't matter. I was committed to my fate. I'd be a courier for as long as a courier was needed. I'd be a fighter if that was needed.

If a martyr was needed, I'd be that too.

But for now, this ghetto needed to see a Jewish girl. If it was difficult to pass myself off as a Pole back at the ghetto gates, it was no easier now to make the people here trust me as a Jew. I was a stranger with a Polish look, and that made me suspicious.

I was supposed to make contact with a resistance member here, but until he found me, I began distributing the potatoes. Like everything else, I passed them out as quietly as possible. I didn't want to be recognized, or remembered. Even among my own people, there were some who might point me out to a Nazi if they thought it'd buy their family another day to live.

So whenever possible, I distributed food to children, slipping a potato into their bag or coat pocket, then quickly moving on. I sometimes looked back to see their eyes light up when they felt it with their hands, but they were always smart enough not to bring the potato out in the open, and

too excited to look around for me. Usually, I didn't look back. It wasn't worth the risk. I moved fast, eyes down, trying not to think about who got the potato and who I'd passed over. They didn't deserve hunger more than the child whose bag happened to be open, but such was the randomness of life. I would never be able to bring in enough food for everyone.

At my best, I could not save them all.

That thought always destroyed me. Always.

Far too soon, the supply of potatoes was gone. So what if twenty families had a potato to eat today? Couldn't I have snuck in even one more? I lowered my eyes and clutched my bag in my hands. I couldn't give out the shawls—no matter how cold it was about to become, I needed them for the second part of my mission. But I had to find my contact soon.

The German invaders had taken everything from me: my home, my family, even much of my faith, which had once been the center of my life.

So I had no problem taking something back from them: my dignity, my fight. My will to live.

But if I'd learned anything from this war, it's that we can never go back.