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Dedicated with gratitude and love to Krystyna Bierzyńska Stamper, and in memory of her parents Beniamin and Stefania and brother Adolf.

Acknowledgments

My greatest thanks go to Krystyna Bierzyńska Stamper for her generosity, patience, time, effort, and willingness to share both information and contacts as I familiarized myself with her story, family, and life in Poland. You are my beloved hero, Krystyna! I am awed by your capacity for friendship, indefatigable drive to do the right thing, and super sense of humor.

I thank Krystyna and Jim Stamper for their gracious hospitality during my visits to Newport Beach, California. I am grateful to Grażyna Stęcka and Eve Chapman for the information they provided me about the extended Bierzyński-Stęcki families.

I am indebted to my two readers at Academic Studies Press for their astute queries, criticisms, and suggestions. Their feedback greatly improved the manuscript. The mistakes remaining are mine. Thanks also to the colleagues who responded to my questions about life and death in interwar and wartime Poland—Madeline G. Levine, Antony Polonsky, Karen Auerbach, Magdalena Kozłowska, and Sean Martin.

I am grateful to the staff at Academic Studies Press who handled the review, editing, and production process of *Warsaw Is My Country* so well—Faith Wilson Stein, Matthew Charlton, Oleh Kotsyuba, and Kira Nemirovsky. Thanks also to the editors who worked with manuscript: Eileen Wolfberg and Suzanne Wertheim.

Travel costs for my trips to interview Krystyna Stamper were covered by a grant from the Josiah Charles Trent Memorial Foundation, an important donor for many worthy educational projects undertaken at Duke University.

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List of Illustrations

Introduction

In October 2008, I first met Krystyna Bierzyńska (Bye-ZHIN-ska) Stamper in Santa Ana, California. I had flown out from my home in North Carolina, where I teach Polish and Russian literatures and cultures at Duke University, to give a lecture on Helena Modjeska (1840–1909), a great Polish and American actress who had built her star home, called "Arden," in the inland wilderness of Orange County, California, in the 1880s. Krystyna, an attractive, vigorous woman in her seventies, was one of the founding members of the Helena Modjeska Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the actress's California home and legacy. She had volunteered to drive me from my Santa Ana hotel to Modjeska's "Arden." As I soon learned, helping maintain this site of Polish American heritage for visitors and special delegations was the sort of dedicated service that came naturally to Krystyna.

As we swapped stories about ourselves during that drive from the coast into the countryside, I learned that long before Krystyna Bierzyńska had married James Stamper and settled in Newport Beach, California, she had fought in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. I had met other Poles who had served as soldiers, orderlies, and couriers in this horrific sixty-three-day street-by-street battle between the David of the Polish Home Army and the Goliath of the German Reich. (In this version, alas, Goliath prevailed.) But I had never met someone who had been so young when the Uprising erupted. Krystyna had been just sixteen when the battle began and had thrown herself into the fray. After the battle's end, when the German army recognized her and over seventeen hundred other Polish women combatants as prisoners of war—a rare distinction given the Reich's treatment of most captured Poles as slaves or worse—she became one of the youngest inmates in the female POW camp that the Germans hastily outfitted at Oberlangen.

I wanted to know all the details of Krystyna's war story. What could be more inspiring, more thrilling, than the tale of an adolescent girl who takes up arms against the Nazis and survives as a much-commemorated veteran? I knew so many women, myself included, who longed to be that kind of girl, though it is doubtful many of us would have had the courage to do so.

Krystyna described her 1944 service as a foregone conclusion. Her parents were already dead, and her brother was off serving as a doctor in General Władysław Anders's Army, a 100,000-man force that fought alongside American and British Allies. (Krystyna always believed her brother was alive, and did not know until after the war that he had been wounded saving the lives of Polish soldiers during their hard-fought battles up the spiny boot of Italy.) Earlier, after her mother's arrest, Krystyna had left her relatives in the south and had returned to her hometown of Warsaw, where her beloved surrogate family, the close friends of her parents and relatives, conspired together to keep her safe and sound. By 1944, many Varsovians, most of them young, were champing at the bit to oust the hated German occupiers before the Soviet Army, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, could "liberate" Warsaw on its own occupying terms.

By the end of my California visit in 2008, I was dying to hear more of Krystyna's story and urging her to share it. Krystyna was not yet sure she wanted to commit it to print. I begged her to call me if she changed her mind. In the meantime, I completed the cultural biography I was writing on Helena Modjeska and embarked on several other projects. I was delighted to meet Krystyna again in April 2012, when I returned to Santa Ana to give readings from my just-published Modjeska book. I did not pass up this opportunity to encourage Krystyna to write—if not with me, then with some other author. Finally, after multiple phone calls, Krystyna decided to work with me on her story in spring 2014, the year that marked the seventieth anniversary of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Before I committed, however, Krystyna requested that I review material that she had just mailed to me.

As it turned out, it was not only Krystyna's combat experience that was remarkable. As I learned from the material Krystyna had sent to me, a video of her interview with a Shoah volunteer, she was in fact an acculturated Jew who had survived the Holocaust through sheer good luck, personal moxie, and the combined efforts of her parents, friends, and unknown helpers. This born-and-bred Warsaw girl had been spirited out of the capital as the Nazis corralled Jews into their newly made Ghetto. Through her parents' foresight and quick action, Krystyna had survived the majority of the war mostly in plain sight in

southern Polish towns, while her blonde-haired, blue-eyed mother traveled to the Częstochowa and Warsaw Ghettos to buy her relatives' freedom (or, when that was impossible, to provide them with food and other staples). After her mother's arrest, Krystyna returned alone to her native city, where that network of family friends helped keep her alive even as she prepared to fight for Warsaw's liberation.

The conscientious Shoah volunteer in Krystyna's video clearly did not realize just how exceptional Krystyna's experience was. I desperately wanted to project myself into the interviewer's seat, put Krystyna at ease, and ask her a thousand more questions. Even before I had finished watching the video, I was on the phone to Krystyna. We planned our first three-day marathon interviewing session in September 2014.

The interviewing process proved to be exhilarating, exhausting, and, once started, impossible to stop. It was as if Krystyna and I were trying to unearth a fragile artifact with endlessly branching parts. Krystyna was an excellent storyteller and I was an eager, if at first somewhat fumbling, questioner. After each recording session, we would start by going over what we had just discussed. As I transcribed the recordings at home in North Carolina, I'd call Krystyna with more requests for clarification. In return, she'd contact me as forgotten memories rose to the surface. By the time Krystyna and I plunged into a second interview marathon in October 2015, my interim research on the Warsaw that Krystyna had known, the memoirs of other Holocaust survivors, and histories of Poland and its Jewish citizens during World War II prompted me to ask questions I hadn't known I needed to ask before. During this session, we both worked at an accelerated rhythm and with much greater familiarity, often dissolving into laughter or tears. I believe that our question-and-answer exchange will continue the rest of our lives.

The result of our collaboration is this book, Krystyna Bierzyńska's story from her birth in Warsaw in 1928 up to the few months after the war's end in May 1945, when she was finally reunited with her brother, Dolek. This story defies categorization as either Holocaust or Warsaw Uprising memoir. It tells the tale of a remarkable young heroine and a diverse supporting cast of extraordinary individuals—Polish Jews, Polish Catholics, and at least one Russian. It is also a Warsaw story, a biography that demonstrates how in early twentieth-century Polish culture and society, being a liberal educated Pole and being an acculturated, but unconverted, Jew overlapped significantly. Krystyna's story tells us a great deal about the complicated identities, obstacles, and possibilities Jews encountered in interwar urban Poland. The acculturated children

of Orthodox Jewish parents or grandparents—in this story, the parents of Krystyna's father —walked a fine line between an old-fashioned religious milieu they did not wish to endanger (but had no desire to inhabit) and a tantalizingly modern world of both obvious opportunities and lurking antisemitism. At the same time, the many acculturated Jews who were busy creating the culture and developing the economy and industries of independent Poland at last dared to believe that they qualified as Poles—as citizens and patriots whose differences in ethnicity and religious orientation would no longer stigmatize them.

Krystyna's story details a Jewish girl's remarkable experience of three very different Polands: a cosmopolitan oasis of high culture, modern amenities, and tolerance engineered by her educated, affluent parents; a sequence of shabby provincial quarters pervaded by fear, loss, and hypervigilance as the Germans pursued all Jews as permissible prey; and an occupied capital intoxicated and united by conspiracy, where the residents joined together to overthrow a common enemy. Warsaw was her defining, magnetic context. More than any other narrative that I have read or heard, Krystyna Bierzyńska's memories of her prewar childhood and wartime adolescence reveal the fascinating and infuriating complexities of what can constitute Polish Jewish identity.

I am indebted to Krystyna Bierzyńska for this extraordinary education. But I most treasure our collaboration because it allowed me to get to know, love, and unabashedly adore a wonderful, passionate, frank, funny, caring, sharp-witted, and fearless real-life heroine. Krystyna Bierzyńska's friendship has become one of the most precious relationships in my life.

CHAPTER 1

Under the Portrait of Gustawa

In 1967, after an absence of twenty-three years, Krystyna Bierzyńska felt compelled to return to Poland. When she had last seen her native country, her capital had lain in smoldering ruins, her Jewish relatives were dead or in hiding, and Nazi Germany had reinforced its vicious occupation of Poland in the wake of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Now thirty-nine years old, Krystyna was settled in the United States with a husband and two children, but she insisted on going back to Poland alone.

Her goal was to find photographs. She longed most for a picture of her mother, who had been arrested in Warsaw in 1943 and very likely had been murdered in the Nazi death camp of Treblinka. Krystyna also planned to visit her Polish "family," the friends who had loved her as a daughter and had helped her survive after her mother's disappearance. But she did not forewarn these friends about her impending arrival. The People's Republic of Poland in 1967 was alien, possibly dangerous, territory for her and any Polish citizens she might contact. The Moscow-allied Polish government kept track of visitors from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Besides, Krystyna wanted to experience the first hours of her return on her own.

Over the course of the two and a half weeks she spent in Poland, Krystyna grieved, wept, reconnected with loved ones, and carried out her search. She revisited the familiar Warsaw sights of her childhood, many of which had been rebuilt since the war. She rejoiced to see her friends, with whom she swapped stories of postwar experiences and news of family. And she hunted for photographs. Krystyna first searched in Warsaw, where her father had stored family property in his company's warehouse for safekeeping. She then continued her search in the small town of Zabierzów, near Kraków, where she, her parents, and her paternal uncle's family had taken refuge in the first years of the war, before the Germans had begun rounding up Jews.

But all of her family's belongings had vanished. They had disappeared under the rubble of Warsaw, had been sold by those entrusted to take care of them, or had been destroyed by former landlords who feared Nazi reprisal if it was discovered that they had been harboring Jews. During the war, the Nazi penalty for any Pole aiding a Jew had been execution.

Just before Krystyna finished her trip, she paid a final visit to one branch of her "Polish" family, Dr. Janina Marczewska and her grown daughter Maria in Warsaw. In dental school, Doctor Marczewska had become fast friends with Krystyna's youngest maternal aunt, Janina (Nina) Warszawska, and that friendship had extended to other members of Nina's family. When Krystyna had traveled alone to Warsaw in 1942, searching for her mother and fleeing the ever more frequent Nazi roundups of Jews in southern Poland, she had knocked first on Doctor Marczewska's door. From that moment on, young Krystyna's welfare had been the responsibility of a female triumvirate assembled by Marczewska. In 1967, when the adult Krystyna told Doctor Marczewska that her hunt for family photographs had turned up nothing, the elderly dentist wrought one more miracle. While she had not saved any photographs of Krystyna's mother, she was able to present Krystyna with a large photograph of an attractive, middle-aged woman gazing intently into the camera. The woman's high-collared dress and thick, dark hair piled up in a bun suggested that her portrait had been taken in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Figure 1. Portrait of Gustawa Landau Neufeld. From collection of Krystyna Bierzyńska Stamper.

The photograph that Doctor Marczewska had managed to preserve was of Krystyna's mother's mother, Gustawa Neufeld (née Landau).

Krystyna knows very little about her maternal grandparents. Her grandfather Neufeld died young, leaving Gustawa widowed at an early age with three daughters to bring up and marry off. Gustawa herself had died years before Krystyna was born. Yet the vaguely remembered figure of Gustawa Neufeld is of immense importance to Krystyna's heritage and story. She not only engineered Krystyna's birth by matching her middle daughter, Stefania,

with Krystyna's father, but she also forged her daughters' fates and Stefania's character through her ingenuity, adaptability, and pluck. Gustawa was her daughters' most astute and powerful role model. In testament to their love for her, all three of Gustawa's children—Aniela, Stefania, and Nina—hung her portrait above their beds in lieu of the usually matched portraits of father and mother. The copy that Doctor Marczewska gave Krystyna was from Nina's home. It was the one family memento that had survived the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Gustawa Neufeld was most likely an educated, middle-class Jew, a woman familiar with big-city life and Polish sociocultural advantages. She and her daughters lived in Łódź, a city growing at breakneck speed in the latter half of the nineteenth century along with its burgeoning cotton industry. In this volatile "Polish Manchester," German and Jewish merchants made and lost fortunes overnight, while working-class Jews and Poles labored in its mills, which polluted the surroundings. The large Jewish community in Łódź included Hasidic and non-Hasidic Orthodox Jews, Zionists, Bundists, socialists, and modern secular Jews who often made common cause with an educated Polish Catholic intelligentsia.

It is unlikely that Gustawa was a religiously observant Jew. She wears no *sheytl* (Orthodox wig) in her photograph, and, if her daughters' behavior is any indication, she did not insist that they carry on Jewish religious traditions, observe Jewish holidays, or cook Jewish foods. Her children's Polish diction was flawless; Polish, not Yiddish, was probably the language they used at home. Based on the cultural and professional ambitions of Stefania and Nina, Gustawa had not raised her girls to become good Orthodox wives and mothers. Instead, her two younger daughters emulated modern, emancipated Polish women.

In one matter, however, Gustawa followed Jewish tradition for her daughters' material, if not spiritual, welfare. She moved the family from busy, sprawling Łódź, where the Jewish marriage market was most competitive, to the nearby, much smaller, and more manageable town of Tomaszów Mazowiecki. Here, Jewish industrialists and merchants thrived on a somewhat lesser scale: in the 1880s and 1890s, Jews made up between 40 and 50 percent of the population.[1] In Tomaszów Mazowiecki, the cost of living was lower and access to wealthy Jewish bachelors easier, and Gustawa was able to find the perfect husband for her oldest daughter, Aniela. Adolf Zylber was a blond-haired, blue-eyed acculturated Jew, a factory owner, and a consummate gentleman.

1 Information from webpages for Tomaszów Mazowiecki on Virtual Shtetl, http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/article/tomaszow-mazowiecki/3,local-history, accessed January 3, 2017.

Adolf and Aniela adored each other all their lives, even after Adolf's fortune dwindled. Zylber was also a generous brother-in-law for Stefania and Nina. While he was still well-to-do, he sponsored both young women as they pursued their modern dreams. The artistic middle daughter, Stefania, gravitated to Kraków, where she worked in a photographer's studio retouching negatives and studied for some time in the city's esteemed Academy of Fine Art. Nina likely depended on Adolf to finance her degree in dentistry. Nina also found a good husband: she married Fabian Warszawski, a doctor specializing in dermatology. The two of them lived and worked as a professional couple, sharing contiguous offices in the same building where they had their apartment.

Once Stefania had tested and abandoned the dream of becoming an artist, Gustawa arranged for her marriage in 1912 to an up-and-coming young merchant, Beniamin Bierzyński. It was an auspicious match of two highly intelligent people, if not the serene idyll of Aniela and Adolf's union, and Gustawa had found Stefania an ambitious and forward-looking provider.

Benio, as his family called him, had no intention of limiting his life and work to what was on offer in small-time Tomaszów Mazowiecki. By 1918, he and Stefania had moved north to Warsaw, Poland's grandest and most cosmopolitan city. Here, Benio's business in the fur trade prospered and Krystyna was born. Krystyna's older brother Adolf, nicknamed Dolek, had been born in Tomaszów Mazowiecki four years before the Bierzyńskis resettled in the capital. Though very different in temperament and behavior, Stefania and Benio lived together in relative harmony. Stefania often deferred to her flamboyant husband, but instilled her values in her children and ran the household with a sure, kind hand. As the war years revealed in full, Stefania had inherited her mother's resourcefulness and courage.

Krystyna knows nothing more about her grandmother. But she was glad and grateful to receive Gustawa's portrait. Krystyna has accorded it a place of pride in her Newport Beach home, where it hangs as both welcome and blessing next to the front door. Gustawa's knowing eyes looked on as Krystyna and I delved into her past for this biography. During those interviews, it struck me that Gustawa would approve of her surviving granddaughter as a kindred spirit. Krystyna had been a resilient young woman who literally moved on after her father's death and her mother's disappearance, braving the return to her hometown. Krystyna survived and created a life for herself in spite of the successive challenges of the Holocaust, the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, seven months as a prisoner of war, and permanent displacement. In so doing, she demonstrated the strength and adaptability of her mother and her mother's mother before her.

Gustawa, moreover, would likely have tolerated the coexistence of Krystyna's Jewish heritage and strong Catholic faith. As an acculturated Jew, a widowed and anxious single parent of three daughters, and a mother revered by those daughters, be they cultivated wives or licensed dentists, Gustawa Neufeld was the grandparent best equipped to accept what worked, to appreciate the complex needs of Krystyna's worldly, war-torn life. If anyone could qualify as Krystyna's pragmatic guardian angel, it was Gustawa Landau Neufeld.

CHAPTER 2

Being a Bierzyński

Figure 2. Group photo of the Bierzyński family. From collection of Krystyna Bierzyńska Stamper.

Krystyna returned home from Poland in 1967 with the unexpected treasure of her grandmother's portrait, but never gave up her quest for more family photos. Her mother's missing image haunted her most. She also hoped that her mother's albums, filled with pictures of her and Dolek as children, had survived somewhere, somehow. Krystyna did not want to believe that a former landlord had burned all these memories as "incriminating evidence" of his kindness to her Jewish family.

The one photo of her mother that Krystyna did eventually recover literally appeared on her doorstep. In 1972, Krystyna's cousin Henryk, the son of her paternal uncle Bernard, came to visit the United States and presented her with a copy of a Bierzyński family portrait. The photo depicts two generations

of Bierzyńskis, divided into standing and seated tiers, posed somberly around a small table. Krystyna's mother, Stefania, is on the far right, behind her seated husband, with one hand placed on his arm as if to mark possession. Stefania looks lovely and wary, haloed by her wavy blonde hair, not at all resembling the older mother Krystyna remembers. She is a young, aloof-seeming woman outnumbered by the strong dark clan of the Bierzyńskis.

In contrast to Gustawa Neufeld's three daughters, all of whom married well, paid little attention to their Jewish heritage, and lived the sort of lives that they themselves improvised, the Bierzyńskis were more connected to Jewish religious and cultural traditions and strongly influenced by maternal rules. Benio's parents, Natan and Berta (née Warmbrünn), were observant Jews who had settled in the provincial town of Koło, where they raised four children: Matylda, the eldest and the only daughter, and three sons, Beniamin, Bernard, and Henryk. Natan was a grain merchant who earned his family a good living and traveled as far as the European capital of Vienna on business. Berta, a German Jew with a penchant for cleanliness, order, frugality, and fresh air, believed in strict discipline and rugged physical conditioning (a belief that apparently stemmed from her temperament, not her piety). A strong-willed woman who ruled over both servants and children, Berta ordered her maid to wash the windows each day in a relentless battle with dust. In the winter, she insisted that the dustless windows be kept wide open and her boys not given hot water bottles at bedtime. She wanted to make sure that her children were not made soft by the comforts that Natan's money could give them.

Family history, on careful display in the photo, shows the Bierzyńskis already acculturating in Natan and Berta's generation. The Bierzyński men do not wear the long beards typical of traditional Orthodox Jews. Instead, three sport well-trimmed mustaches, conforming to the secular fashions of the modern world. None of the women, including the rule-obsessed Berta, cover their luxurious hair with a *sheytl*.

Though the photo is clearly staged to serve as a portrait of the family Bierzyński, the husband of the eldest child, Matylda, is not in the frame, and Matylda herself poses differently from the others, expressing diffidence or irritation, her elbows on the table and forearms raised and bared. Krystyna filled me in on the mystery of the missing husband. Apparently Benio had quarreled with Matylda's spouse, Henryk Stęcki, just before the photographer's visit and had laid down an ultimatum about who would and would not be in the picture. Benio sits on the far right, as if guarding the family gate.

The family's surname also indicates a Jewish clan in transition. Natan had seen to it that their original surname, Bieżuner, which looked and sounded

Jewish to Polish Gentiles, was polonized as Bierzyński, the "ż" replaced with the more traditional Polish consonant cluster "rz" (both "ż" and "rz" are pronounced "zh"), and the suffix "er" dropped for the quintessential Polish "ski," a marker of gentry status. The Polish language facility of the Bierzyński children indicates that Natan and Berta spoke Polish as a first or a second language at home. In addition, Berta, proud of her German origins, taught Benio how to read and write in that language. The letters that she and Benio exchanged once he moved to Warsaw were written in German, in a Gothic cursive.

Though the Bierzyński children remained attached to their parents and to each other, they scattered in their choices of profession, location, and lifestyle. All four came of age around World War I, which brought them both hardship and opportunity. Benio and Bernard continued in trade, but not in their father's footsteps. They both went into the fur business, importing skins from Scandinavia to Danzig to be cured and selling the finished furs as luxury items for Poland's growing middle class, which included both Jews and Christians. The Bierzyńskis' youngest, Henryk, took the most ambitious professional step, completing his medical degree. His education was funded by a generous Benio, just as Nina Neufeld's dental school bills were paid by her generous brother-in-law, Adolf Zylber. As a doctor, Henryk and his family qualified as educated professionals, members of their small-town intelligentsia.

The boldest changes that Natan and Berta's children ventured involved relocation, moving into a heterogeneous Polish world populated by Jews and Catholics, manual laborers and aristocrats, educated professionals and business owners big and small. The devilishly handsome Henryk, married to the chic Regina, moved to the town of Zabierzów, which was not far from the picturesque old Polish capital of Kraków and quite remote from the mill towns that fueled his father's and brothers' fortunes. There, Henryk quickly established himself as the preferred doctor for local landowning aristocrats, who hired him to care for their many workers. Henryk came to know one branch of the fabulously wealthy Radziwiłł family, who once owned twenty-three palaces, over four hundred towns, and two thousand estates.

Henryk's relationship with the august Radziwiłłs allowed him to obtain a purebred Radziwiłł dachshund for his niece Krystyna. Named Żabka (Froggy) because of the shape of her legs, this dachshund was utterly spoiled by her new family, and was dressed on wintry days in a grey shearling coat with green wool backing, courtesy of B. Bierzyński and Company. Indeed, Żabka had landed in the Bierzyński family's most opulent home, and was the pet of the son who had achieved the greatest financial and social success. Benio risked