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Foreword

During World War II, Poland was the only German-occupied country in which anyone caught helping a Jew was sentenced to death. At times, the whole family was killed and hanged in the town square in order to scare others, preventing them from saving the life of a Jew. And yet, in Warsaw alone twenty-eight thousand Jews were hidden, and of those, 11,500 survived. To save one Jew required more than one person to procure food, to obtain false identification papers, to transport them to a safe hideout, to stand vigil, and sometimes to get medication, or find a trustworthy doctor. But also, for a pound of sugar, a bottle of vodka, a pair of boots—valuable commodities in wartime Poland—some Poles would denounce a neighbor who they suspected of harboring a Jew.

The moral dilemmas that an individual confronted in deciding to save a Jew were emotionally consuming. Do you risk the life of your child to save the life of a total stranger? Do you endanger the health of your elderly parents? Do you bring into your home people with contagious diseases? Do you bring into your house additional mouths to feed if you barely have enough food to feed your own family? Do you risk being killed and leave your family without a bread winner in order to transport a Jew to safety? With all these dilemmas—impossible choices all—it is a miracle that there were any rescuers at all!

The official number of rescuers that have been honored as Righteous Among the Nations of the World by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel, does not represent the actual number of Christians and Muslims who risked life and limb to save Jews. Some Poles and Jews were caught and killed. Others were part of the network of rescuers and their true names were not known. Jews did not necessarily know the names of the people who forged false documents for them, or the priests who baptized them, or those who found refuge for them. Children most certainly did not know the names of the nuns or priests in convents, monasteries, and boarding schools in which they were hidden. If Jews were moved from one safe house to another, chances are that they did not know all the individuals involved in their rescue. In some instances, when the war ended, rescuers told their charges to not tell anyone their names for fear of retaliation. In small villages, rescuers were afraid to receive mail from other countries lest their neighbors suspect that they helped Jews during the war. Rescuers were also modest; they felt that what they did was the right thing to do, and they did not want any recognition.

In the case of Poland, 7,177 Poles have been honored by Yad Vashem (as of January 1, 2021). Clearly, thousands of others have not received recognition for the reasons discussed above. Those honored by Yad Vashem did not have ulterior motives for their activities, such as saving a life for Jesus, procuring a child to be their own, financial reward, or obtaining a business. At times, motivations changed. For example, there are cases of hiding a baby and then not wanting to give the child back to the parents who returned after the war. In such, instances, the rescuer was not honored by Yad Vashem.

What is interesting to consider is that even though the goal of rescue was the same in all cases—to save Jews from certain death—the rescuers were not a monolithic group. I interviewed hundreds of rescuers in order to study what they had in common in socialization in their formative years, in personality, and in their situation at the time of their initial decision to rescue. To my surprise, I discovered that rescuers came from all social classes, educational levels, political persuasions, religious beliefs, ages, and genders. Among them were rich people, aristocrats, and poor peasants. They ran the gamut from those with higher academic degrees to men and women who did not know how to read and write. Some were devoutly religious, while others were determined atheists. Still others believed in communism and socialism as their religion.

It is common knowledge that many of the priests in the churches in Poland continued to preach that the Jews killed Christ. Were the values that rescuers learned as children different from those around them? Not surprisingly, the values that a child acquires at home are more significant that those taught by religious leaders or teachers. And indeed, rescuers were imbued with the worldview that all people are people under one God. They were taught to respect and accept a tolerance of people who were different. Familial acceptance of the dynamic of "difference" was at the heart of many of the rescuers' childhoods. Of course, there was a small percentage of those who became rescuers who were antisemitic. They were, however, able to transcend their negative feelings towards Jews when they saw a child in distress or an adult who would soon be killed.

Mothers and fathers were described by rescuers as nurturing, loving, and not punitive. Their parents used explanation to teach what a child did wrong, rather than resort to what was the norm in European countries—corporal punishment. This method set the stage for children to think for themselves, to be independent, and not to fear authority.

One additional factor in the socialization of rescuers is that many of the rescuers grew up during World War I, when fathers were at war, food was limited, and everyone had to help one another. Children experienced loss and had family members and strangers care for them. Rescuers witnessed a central adult in their family perform altruistic acts of kindness. At times, they too were asked to engage in such behavior.

Rescuers shared therefore a heightened sense of empathy and a certain competence. Other qualities, such as resourcefulness, levelheadedness, a facility with role-play, and an ability to withstand anxiety and terror made it possible to continue engaging in rescuing activities for months and years.

Whereas the rescuers had socialization experiences and personality traits in common, their motivations for helping Jews during the German occupation vary. It is important to note that the men, women, and children who risked their lives were not on a suicide mission. Rescuers had some confidence that they would succeed in their risky efforts. I will set out the five types of motivation.

I describe the largest percentage as "moral rescuers." These individuals were either asked to help or they chose help to those they realized were in imminent danger of being killed. These rescuers felt they could not live with themselves if they knowingly let a person die. Their morality stemmed from

different sources. Some were more cognitively oriented: "It is the right thing to do." Others were inspired out of pity and compassion for a human being in distress. A third morality stemmed from religious values. Morally motivated rescuers, then, aided people they knew and did not know.

The "Judeophile rescuers" began their helping behavior with people they knew—a lover, spouse, or relative; a colleague, boss, or friend; a caretaker, schoolmate, doctor, or patient. Most of these relational rescuers went on to risk their lives for Jews they did not necessarily know.

Each rescue story is unique. The saga of Zofia Sterner in *How We Outwitted and Survived the Nazis* is that of a relational rescuer. Sterner's initial rescue efforts were undertaken to help her Jewish husband. Despite being in danger herself for being married to a Jew and being pregnant, Sterner was relentless in saving dozens of others. Many of those Jews whom she helped knew neither her name nor the risks she took to save their lives. Sterner did not just hide people in her apartment. Being a rescuer became her full-time occupation. She got Jews out of the Warsaw Ghetto, procured false identification papers for them, found safe hiding places, role-played when necessary, and provided people with food. For much of the war Sterner did not know if her husband was alive or dead; and throughout the war she had to raise her daughter in the grimmest of circumstances.

The "ideological network rescuers" were motivated by their anti-Nazi ideology. They often began by rescuing anti-Nazi resisters. When Jews became endangered, all the systems set in place to help anti-Nazis were used for saving Jews. Network rescuers developed mechanisms to print false identification papers, baptismal certificates, and ration cards; they had hiding places, access to good intelligence, and could communicate by code. Some of the networks were religious—congregants who had Jews living in their homes and rotated the risk among them. The conditions of the occupation necessitated that rescuers work with others where possible. For Sterner to help as many people as she did, she too depended on network rescuers.

"Concerned detached professionals" were teachers, doctors, nurses, clergy, lawyers, social workers, and mental health professionals who risked their livelihoods to save lives. During the occupation these people employed clandestine means to prevent Jews from going to the slaughter.

Diplomats constituted a special category of concerned detached professionals. They could not keep their rescue activities secret or the fact that they wrote visas for thousands of people to escape to neutral countries. They lost

their diplomatic status and lived a life of poverty after the war. Since many of those who received visas did not know the name of the diplomat, these diplomats were honored by Yad Vashem posthumously.

The "child rescuers" were youngsters who began their rescue activities at the request of their parents. They went into the ghetto with food and messages or to sneak Jews out. The children would travel with Jews to a hideout. The rationale was that if a man or woman was sitting with a child on a train or bus, the Germans would not think that a Jew was escaping. Sometimes these youngsters stood vigil outside a house to give warning if Nazis approached. As the war in Poland lasted six years, some of the children became teenage rescuers.

How We Outwitted and Survived the Nazis reads like a thriller. It is a page-turner. What makes it unique is that the story conveys the precarious lives of Poles under the German occupation and after liberation without whitewashing the antisemitism that existed. If, like Roman Dziarski, Poles and Jews can acknowledge the suffering of each group, perhaps these groups can transcend the argument about "who suffered most" and work together to teach the history of World War II and its aftermath.

—Eva Fogelman
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Preface

> I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.
> —*Dwight D. Eisenhower*

> Nothing will end wars unless the people themselves refuse to go to war.
> —*Albert Einstein*

War is often portrayed through epic battles that decide winners and losers. But for both civilians and soldiers, war is just trying to survive, hour by hour, day by day. This was even more true in World War II, which was not an ordinary war. It was an unprecedented, orchestrated genocide. It brought out, in sharp contrast, the worst and the best in people. Through their willingness—without hesitation—to risk everything and help others, ordinary people revealed their true humanity and heroism.

This story describes the daily struggles of ordinary people, Zofia Sterner and her family, not only to survive WWII and the Holocaust, but also to live their lives and help to rescue Jews from the Nazis. This story is about remaining human in the most inhumane conditions.

Marek Halter in his book *La force du Bien* (*Stories of Deliverance: Speaking with Men and Women Who Rescued Jews from the Holocaust*) writes of Zofia Sterner:

> [T]here is such a confidence . . ., such a gift, such an excess of Good! I was greatly struck by Zofia Sterner's account of how she led her charges out of the Ghetto . . . . For the entire occupation, the Sterners devoted their hearts and souls to the cause which they had voluntarily chosen: to save Jews, give them comfort, and help them leave for more secure places, with passes in their pockets.[1]

But what exactly happened? How did the Sterners do it? How did they themselves survive and avoid capture and extermination by the murderous Nazi regime? I have written this book to answer these questions.

The story is set in Poland during WWII (figs. 1 and 2) and is entirely true, as remembered by Zofia Sterner and her family (figs. 3–12). It is based on Zofia's diary notes,[2] transcripts of her recollections,[3] my conversations with her and her family,[4] the testimonies of her husband Wacek at the Warsaw war crimes trials in 1946 and 1947,[5–7] Wacek's book about his capture and internment,[8] and Zofia and Edward Kosman's letters. All the names and events are real, as the people in the story recalled and recorded them. To preserve historical accuracy, I have not added any fictional or imagined characters, events, dialog, or dramatization. I have written the story in the present tense, as though events are unfolding before Zofia's eyes.

In order to provide the reader with a better understanding of what the people in Zofia's "memoir" were facing at the time, I have included a few brief descriptions of the broader historical events as she knew them during or after the war. I have also included a few photographs from those dark days. These images are very disturbing. They show the callous brutality of the Nazi genocide that the people in this book were fighting against. I have also added some easily accessible references for further reading and additional historical details in the postface.

Abbreviations and Glossary

AK	Armia Krajowa—Home Army (the largest Polish resistance organization)
AL	Armia Ludowa—People's Army (Polish communist resistance organization)
Bund	Ogólno-Żydowski Związek Robotniczy Bund—General Jewish Labor Bund (Jewish socialist party in Poland)
Endecja	Narodowa Demokracja—National Democracy (Polish right-wing nationalist political movement)
NKVD	Naródnyy komissariát vnútrennikh del—People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Soviet political secret service police)
NSZ	Narodowe Siły Zbrojne—National Armed Forces (Polish right-wing resistance organization)
ONR	Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny—National Radical Camp (Polish fascist, far-right, ultra-nationalist organization)

PAL	Polska Armia Ludowa—Polish People's Army (Polish socialist resistance organization)
SS	Schutzstaffel—Protection Squadron (the foremost German security, surveillance, and terror agency). It included the Allgemeine SS (the main branch of the agency), the Waffen-SS (the combat section of the SS), the SS-Totenkopfverbände (SS-TV, the "Death's Head" units, which ran the concentration and extermination camps), and other groups, such as the Einsatzgruppen (Deployment Groups, which were SS paramilitary death squads)
UB	Urząd Bezpieczeństwa—Department of Security (Polish communist political secret service police)
ZWZ	Związek Walki Zbrojnej—Union of Armed Struggle (Polish resistance organization that in February 1942 became Armia Krajowa, AK, the Home Army)
Żegota	Rada Pomocy Żydom przy Delegaturze Rządu RP na Kraj—Council to Aid Jews with the Government Delegation for Poland (Polish resistance organization established to save Jews)
ŻOB	Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa—Jewish Fighting Organization
ŻZW	Żydowski Związek Wojskowy—Jewish Military Organization

The Main Characters

The Narrator (figs. 3, 4, 6–8)—Zofia (Zochna) Sterner (nee Domańska, November 5, 1908–August 24, 2006) was married to Wacław (Wacek) Sterner. Before WWII, she worked as a clerk in a bank in Warsaw, from which she was fired for organizing a worker's union and a strike. Later, she worked in the Ministry of Industry and Trade in Warsaw. After WWII, she worked for an export and import trade company in Warsaw. She was ethnically Polish, but because she was married to a Jew, the Nazi regime treated her as Jewish, which meant that she was supposed to live in the ghetto and eventually face extermination. This rule was enforced in Poland, but not in Germany and most other Nazi-occupied European countries. She did not comply with this rule and never lived in the ghetto.

Wacek (figs. 3, 4, 7)—Wacław Sterner (November 28, 1908–January 24, 1979) was Zofia Sterner's husband and a civil engineer. During WWII, he was a member of the underground Polish Union of Armed Struggle (Związek Walki Zbrojnej, ZWZ) and Polish People's Army (Polska Armia Ludowa, PAL); during the Warsaw Uprising, he was a lieutenant in the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK). His pseudonyms were "Boss" and "Adolf." After WWII, he was in charge of the displaced persons camps in Buchhorst, Krümmel, and Spackenberg in Germany; and in Poland, he was the deputy

director of the Warsaw Reconstruction Directorate. He was decorated with the Cross of Valor. Wacek's father was of German ancestry and his mother was Jewish. During the German occupation, the Nazi regime's rules classified him as Jewish, and thus he was supposed to live in the ghetto and face extermination. But he lived outside the ghetto, passing as an ethnic Pole.

Basia (fig. 5)—Barbara Sterner (later Kaczarowska, November 21, 1940–June 11, 2020) was a daughter of Zofia and Wacław Sterner. During the German occupation, the Nazi regime's rules classified her as Jewish because her father was Jewish, and thus she was supposed to live in the ghetto and face extermination. But she lived with her parents outside the ghetto. After WWII, she graduated from the University of Warsaw with a master's degree in Polish language and literature and became an editor at the Iskry Publishing House in Warsaw. She was the mother of Małgorzata (Małgosia) Kaczarowska.

Tadeusz (figs. 6–8)—Tadeusz Domański (July 16, 1913–September 14, 1981) was Zofia Sterner's brother. During WWII, he was a second lieutenant in the underground Polish People's Army (Polska Armia Ludowa, PAL) and had the pseudonym "Żuk." After WWII, he was in charge of the displaced persons camp in Krümmel, Germany; afterwards, in Poland, he was a foreign trade representative for the Polish government. He was decorated with the Golden Cross of Merit.

Niusia (figs. 8–10)—Janina Dziarska (nee Domańska, June 24, 1910–March 17, 2003) was Zofia Sterner's sister. She was a dentist and, during the Warsaw Uprising, was a nurse in the Polish Home Army.

Kazio (figs. 9–11)—Kazimierz Dziarski (November 27, 1907–December 29, 1986) was Janina Dziarska's husband. He was a dentist. During WWII, he was an officer in the Polish army in France (General Bronisław Prugar-Ketling's Second Infantry Fusiliers Division) and later in the Polish First Armored Division in Scotland.

Zofia (Zosia) Kosman (fig. 13) (c. 1910–January 11, 1994) was Edward (Edek) Kosman's wife. She was a biologist. Because she was Jewish, she was forced to live in the Warsaw Ghetto during the German occupation. She escaped and was helped to survive by the Sterner and Dziarski families. After WWII, she emigrated to Australia.

Ezra Edward (Edek) Kosman (fig. 13) (August 26, 1910–June 10, 1997) was Zofia (Zosia) Kosman's husband. He was born in Warsaw, graduated from medical school in 1933, and specialized in internal medicine. Because he was Jewish, during the German occupation he was forced to live in the Warsaw

Ghetto (on 12 Zamenhofa Street), where he worked as the chief physician in a Jewish hospital. He escaped from the ghetto and was helped to survive by the Sterner and Dziarski families. During the Warsaw Uprising, he served as a physician in the Polish Home Army. After the war, he emigrated to Australia and worked as a physician.

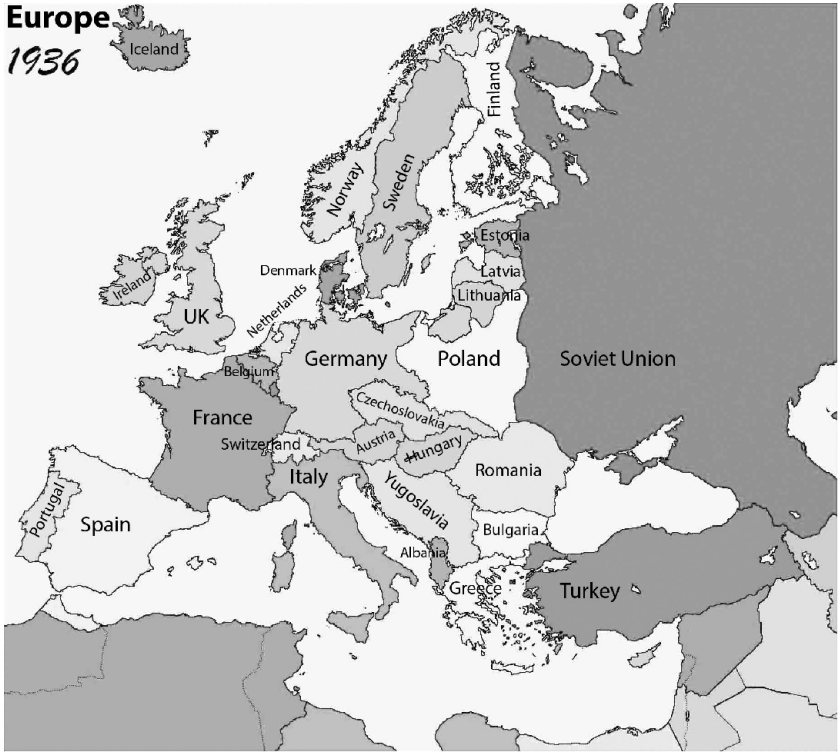

Figure 1. Pre-World War II Europe.

FIGURE 2. Pre-World War II Poland. The cities, towns, and villages featured in the story are indicated with black triangles; the border between the German and the Soviet occupation zones from October 1939 to June 1941 is shown by black dots. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the entire territory of Poland fell under German occupation.

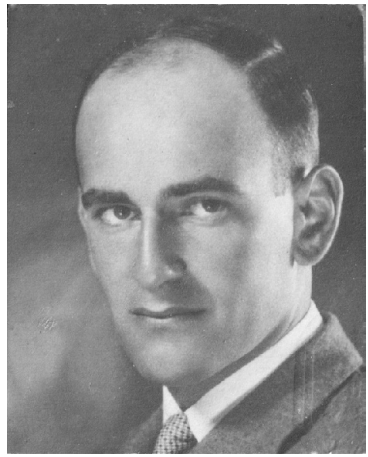

FIGURE 3. The narrator, Zofia (Zochna) Sterner (1943), and Wacław (Wacek) Sterner (1930s), Zofia's husband.

FIGURE 4. Zofia and Wacek Sterner on vacation in the Carpathian Mountains in Poland before WWII, late 1930s.

Figure 5. Basia—Barbara Sterner, daughter of Zofia and Wacek Sterner—in Warsaw, 1943.

Figure 6. Tadeusz Domański, Zofia Sterner's brother, with Zofia in Warsaw, early 1940s.