As You Read

The incredible true story of a teenage girl named Stefania Podgórnska, who risked her life to save 13 Jewish men, women, and children from the Nazis

By Kristin Lewis

The train barreled through the bitterly cold autumn air. Max Diamant, 27, did not know exactly where the train was taking him. But he was certain the journey would end with his death.

It was November 1942 in the country of Poland. World War II was raging across Europe. Earlier that day, a group of Nazis had forced Max and dozens of other Jewish people onto the train at gunpoint. The Nazis didn’t tell them the train was going to a death camp, but Max had his suspicions. He knew what the Nazis were capable of.

As Max saw it, he had two options: Die at the hands of the Nazis or jump from the speeding train. He made his choice.

With a pair of pliers he’d hidden in his pocket, Max began feverishly cutting the barbed wire that covered one of the windows. When he’d made a hole large enough, he wiggled through.

For a moment, Max clung to the side of the train with one hand. Wind whipped his hair and clothes. The clanging of the wheels on the metal tracks rang in his ears.

And then—

He let go.

Miles away in the city of Przemyśl [puh-SHEM-ish-le], 16-year-old Stefania Podgórnska was also gripped by fear. She had no idea that her friend Max had been taken—or that his life was in imminent danger. What she did know was that most of her own family was gone and that her food and money were nearly depleted. It was up to her to keep herself and her 7-year-old sister Helena alive in a war-torn city.

But Stefania would do more than protect her sister. She was about to become a lifeline for Max and 12 other Jewish people. She was about to risk everything to save them all.
Fear in the Air

Stefania was born in 1925 in a small village in Poland. She grew up on a farm. As a young girl, she longed to live in a big city. After her father died in 1938, her mother allowed her to move to the nearby city of Przemyśl, with her older sisters. Stefania loved life in the city. She loved the cobblestone streets, the cafés that served gooey pastries, the shops that sold fancy dresses. She loved the energy of city life, far from the chickens on the farm back home.

Stefania got a job in a grocery store owned by a kind woman named Mrs. Lea Diamant. There she met Max, one of Mrs. Diamant’s sons. Max was 23. He was studying to become a dentist.

Max’s parents treated “Fusia,” as they affectionately called Stefania, like part of the family. She ate dinner with them often and sometimes stayed in their apartment.

Like most Polish people at that time, Stefania was Catholic. The Diamants were Jewish. No doubt Stefania picked up new words in Yiddish, a language spoken by Jewish people in Europe. She probably learned that chutzpah means courage and that to kvell is to practically faint with pride. She likely knew to say yes when Mrs. Diamant offered her a bissel more cake.

But even in the cheerful warmth of the Diamants’ home, fear was in the air.

As Jews, the Diamants were part of a minority in Poland. Like people of all religions and cultures, Jewish people had their own unique rituals. For example, they worshipped in synagogues on Saturdays, not in churches on Sundays as Christians did. Many non-Jewish people viewed such differences with mistrust and intolerance.

For centuries, antisemitism (prejudice against Jewish people) had smoldered in Poland and across Europe. Soon it would explode into an inferno of violence and death.

Hitler’s Vicious Lies

Next to Poland was the country of Germany. And every day, it was becoming more dangerous for Jewish people.

In 1933, when Stefania was still a young girl living on the farm, Adolf Hitler became Germany’s leader. At the time, Germany was still suffering from its defeat in World War I, which had ended in 1918. In the years since, the German people had endured growing poverty, unemployment, and hunger.

Hitler and his Nazi Party gave Germans someone to blame for these hardships: Jewish people. In hateful speeches, Hitler called Jewish people “pests” and “vermin” and “a virus.” He said they were not human. His vicious lies stirred up old prejudices.

By 1938, when Stefania was working for the Diamants, life in Germany had grown unbearable for Jewish people. Nazi laws had stripped them of their rights and dignity. Violent attacks had become common. Many feared far worse was coming.

In 1939, Hitler and his armies began invading the countries of Europe, igniting World War II. One by one, Poland and other countries fell to the Nazis. By the time Max leapt from that speeding train in 1942, Germany controlled much of Europe.

Like a Prison

When the Nazis took control of Przemyśl, life for Max and his family changed overnight.

In Poland, as in all Nazi-occupied countries, Jewish people were cast out from society. They were fired from their jobs. Their possessions were stolen. They were banned from schools, stores, and parks. They were even banned from sidewalks and made to walk in the gutters.

Before long, all the Jewish people in Przemyśl were ordered to move into a restricted area of the city called a ghetto. The ghetto was like a prison, surrounded by a wall and patrolled by armed guards. No one was allowed to leave except to do forced labor. Max was forced to shovel coal for 12 hours a day, with little more than dirty water to drink and moldy bread or wormy cabbage to eat.

In the ghetto, people were starving. Diseases spread quickly. Max and his
family grew sick. Their clothes hung from their thinning bodies. Their faces turned gaunt.

Stefania worried constantly about the Diamants. She began smuggling food and supplies to them through a hole in the ghetto fence. She traded her finest clothes for food and became skilled at sneaking past guards with rifles.

She knew the risks: The penalty for helping a Jewish person was death. She did it anyway.

The Death Camps

By 1942, Stefania was the only member of her family still in Przemyśl. Her older sisters had moved away, and other members of her family had been forced to go to Germany to work. Stefania brought her younger sister Helena to live with her in Przemyśl.

Meanwhile, the Nazis were emptying the ghetto. Every day, more people were put on trains bound for death camps or forced-labor camps. The Nazis had a dehumanizing term for this: “liquidation.”

Although Stefania and Max may not have known this at the time, the ghettos were part of a Nazi plan to murder every Jewish person in Europe. About 6 million Jews were murdered in Nazi death camps. Some 2 million other people were also killed, including Communists, homosexuals, people with disabilities, and the Romani (known then as gypsies).

History would remember this genocide as the Holocaust.

Max’s whole family, aside from his younger brother, was murdered by the Nazis. Then, in November 1942, the Nazis came for Max. And that is how he found himself leaping from a speeding train.

Supporters and Spies

Max landed in the hard snow and tumbled into a pole. He was badly injured. His clothes were filthy and torn.

Only one night, please let me stay, he asked. He knew that his presence put the sisters in danger. Stefania and Helena gave him food and medicine. They cleaned him up as best they could and put him to bed.

A Daring Plan

As Max recovered, Stefania decided that he would stay with them. But it was dangerous. There were many prying eyes. Every time someone came to the door, Max had to hide under the bed.

Then Max had an idea: Why not find a bigger apartment where he and others still trapped in the ghetto could hide?

Stefania agreed. She found a cottage on a street named Tatarka. It had no electricity or running water, only an outhouse for going to the bathroom and a well for water. It had two rooms plus a kitchen and an attic. It would have to do.

With Helena’s help, Stefania got the cottage ready. Max was the first to move in. Later they were joined by Max’s brother Henek and Henek’s fiancée, Danuta. Eventually, there were 10 adults and three children hiding in the cottage.

Tiny Attic

For the next two years, while Stefania and Helena lived downstairs, the group lived in the tiny attic above. They went to the bathroom in a bucket that Helena emptied into the outhouse at night. Max built a false wall in the attic to hide behind when needed.

It was up to Stefania to feed everyone. She got a job in a factory. She used her earnings to buy food. When shop owners grew suspicious of how much food she bought, she went to different stores. Sometimes she sent Helena, who was too young to arouse suspicion.

Stefania was exhausted all the time. But she pressed on.

During those long years, there were many close calls. The worst was when an officer showed up and told Stefania he was seizing the cottage for army nurses, who were coming to work in the German hospital across the street. Stefania had two hours to leave, he said, or she’d be shot.

Max and the others begged Stefania to take Helena and flee—to save herself. But she refused to abandon them. She prayed for help. At the last moment, the officer changed his mind and allowed Stefania to stay, as long as two German nurses could move into one of the rooms.

Meet the 13

The men, women, and children who Stefania hid during the Holocaust

Max Diamant

Max Diamant changed his name to Josef Burzminski as protection from antisemitic attacks, which continued in Poland after the war. He married Stefania, and they moved to the U.S. Max later testified at the trial of a Nazi war criminal named Adolf Eichmann.

Malwina, Cesia, and Janek Zimmermann

Nabiewa Zimmermann came to Tatarka with Cesia and Janek, her children. They all eventually moved to the U.S. Janek has two sons and a grandson. Cesia has a son, a daughter, and four grandchildren.

Dr. Wilhelm and Dziusia Schillinger

Dr. Schillinger was Max’s employer. His wife was killed during the Holocaust. After the war, he remarried and lived in Poland, where he became an oral surgeon. His daughter, Dziusia, married and settled in Belgium. She has a son, a daughter, and four grandchildren.

Janek Dorlich

Janek was Stefania’s mail carrier. After the war, he moved to Israel with Monek and Sala Hirsch.

Heneck Diamant and Danuta Karföl

Heneck was Max’s younger brother. He changed his name to Henek Zawadzki after the war. He became a dentist and moved to Belgium with his wife, Danuta. They had one daughter and seven grandchildren.

Dr. Leon, Siunek, Monek, and Sala Hirsch

Dr. Hirsh and his son, Slanek, lived in Russia after the borders were redrawn following the war. Dr. Hirsh’s cousin Monek Hirsh and his wife, Sala, settled in Israel.

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A New Beginning

In 1945, Germany was at last defeated by the Allied forces of the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Russia. World War II soon came to an end. Hundreds of cities and towns were in ruins. In addition to the millions of victims of the Holocaust, about 80 million men, women, and children were killed in bombings, in combat, and by disease.

Every Jewish person Stefania sheltered during those long and difficult years had survived. But that wasn’t the end of the story for Stefania and Max. It was the beginning of a new one.

After the war, the two got married. They looked after Helena until she went to college. Later, they moved to the U.S., where Max worked as a dentist. They had two children. Helena became a doctor and settled in Poland.

In 1979, Stefania and Helena were named “Righteous Among Nations,” by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. This great honor recognizes those who helped Jewish people during the Holocaust.

The rest of Stefania’s family survived the war. But they never accepted Stefania’s marriage to a Jewish person, and they disowned her and Helena for harboring Jewish people during the war. Tragically, even after the Holocaust, there was still a lot of antisemitism in Poland and other countries.


Stefania was interviewed often about what she did as a teenager. She never expressed regret for the huge risks she took.

Given the choice, she said, she would do it all again.

Special thanks to Stefania’s son Ed Burzminski and the Stefi Foundation: thestefifoundation.org.