



## My Mother's Secret

*J.L. Witterick*

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**A novel based on a true story, a mother and daughter risk their lives to provide shelter to two families and a German soldier--all unbeknownst to each other--in a tiny two-room house in Sokal, Poland, during the Nazi invasion.**

Based on a true story, MY MOTHER'S SECRET is a profound, captivating, and ultimately uplifting tale intertwining the lives of two Jewish families in hiding from the Nazis, a fleeing German soldier, and the clever and "righteous" mother and daughter who teamed up to save them.

Franciszka and her daughter, Helena, are unlikely heroines. They are simple people who mind their own business and don't stand out from the crowd. Until 1939, when crisis strikes. The Nazis have invaded Poland and they are starting to persecute the Jews. Providing shelter to a Jew has become a death sentence. And yet, Franciszka and Helena decide to do just that. In their tiny, two-bedroom home in Sokal, Poland, they cleverly hide a Jewish family of two brothers and their wives in their pigsty out back, a Jewish doctor with his wife and son in a makeshift cellar under the kitchen floorboards, and a defecting German soldier in the attic--each group completely unbeknownst to the others. For everyone to survive, Franciszka will have to outsmart her neighbors and the German commanders standing guard right outside her yard.

Told simply and succinctly from four different perspectives, MY MOTHER'S SECRET is a reminder that there are, in fact, no profiles of courage and each individual's character is a personal choice.

This book was inspired by the true story of Franciszka Halamajowa, who, with her daughter, saved the lives of fifteen Jews in Poland during the Second World War. She also hid a young German soldier in her attic at the same time. Before the war, there were six thousand Jews in Sokal, Poland. Only thirty survived the war and half of those did so because of Franciszka.

## My Mother's Secret Details

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Author : J.L. Witterick

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empathy, and then goes one step further by taking action to help. That is you. You didn't leave the cat there to perish. I am proud that you are my daughter. Think what a wonderful place the world would be, if everyone was like that."

Heart breaking. . . . choosing between what you want and what is right. . .

Considering this is a debut novel of the author, I thought it was well- written. If I didn't read the part in the book where the author told the readers how the book was published, I would have never guessed this was her first. I highly recommend this book, like any other Holocaust stories, My Mother's Secret is totally life-changing. The story will definitely remain with me for a long long time.

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### **Carla says**

A wonderful "true" story of a woman and her daughter who harboured Jewish families at their farmhouse during Poland's occupation from Nazi Germany. The lady, and her daughter were not fictional. The story however is somewhat fictionalized. You'd think from the reviews this book should be, or was the top book of 2013. It's a heartwarming story, has no unique aspect from literally thousands of stories along this topic in print, and is written by a woman, who writes like she is a young teen. Chapters are short, choppy, and simplistic. The style of writing suggests the writer has no experience writing, except perhaps children's books. So disappointing. Character development was almost non-existent. I see either an author who truly wanted to write this book because it resonated from her heart, or someone who wanted to make some money. I doubt we'll hear from her again.

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### **Carole P. Roman says**

With simple prose, J.L. Witterrick has written a stunning novel of bravery and sacrifice during World War II. Franciszka is a Polish cook with two children married to a brutal Ukrainian seduced by Hitler's promise of prosperity. She leaves him to move back to Poland to live with her children, selling eggs to the locals. Like a diary, we watch the horror of the war unfold and new characters are introduced. There is a poor Jewish family, a wealthy Jewish doctor and his family as well as a war weary German soldier. All their stories intersect, their destinies knitted together as their lives are saved by the courage of a Franciszka and her daughter Helena. This is a book that teaches us that heroes come in all sizes from heartbreakingly thoughtful children, to women who willing to sacrifice their futures as well as their very lives, to stay true their values. A quick but intense read, this book captures the spirit of "Righteous among the Nations" and is a testimony to their courage. J.L. Witterrick is a master of understatement, with a deft hand on knowing that her spare, but intense chapters tell a profound story of the human spirit. Well done!

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### **Angela M says**

Once in a while a book comes along that makes you want to be a better person . This is a moving , beautifully written novel based on the true story of Franciszka Halamajowa and her daughter , Helena , who saved Jewish families in Poland during the German occupation . It's impossible to describe the unbelievable courage and humanity of these women who risked their lives for others because they believed it was the decent thing to do . It is a small book with enormous heart and hope and I cannot recommend it more highly .

### Jackie says

This book is one of the most beautiful I've ever read. While it's set in the time of the Holocaust, there is love, joy, compassion and profound bravery. This is a novel, but it is based on real people, a woman and her daughter, who saved 15 people from death despite the many difficulties and sorrows of their own. This will make you remember how good people can be, how amazingly resilient they are, and what even just a couple of people can do to truly change the world. This book renewed my faith in humanity, and I will put this book in as many hands as I possibly can.

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### Fabi says

Que livro fabuloso! Li de uma só vez! Com capítulos pequenos como eu gosto!

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### Vastaa gorgij says

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### Stephanie says

4.5/5

Dang, this little book packs quite a punch!

My Mother's Secret is a Holocaust novel based on a true story. Franciszka is a Polish woman living in the small town of Sokal, Poland, with her teenage daughter, Helena. When Poland gets invaded by the Germans, the two women hide two Jewish families and a defecting German soldier in their tiny home, all without any of them knowing about each other. For more than a year, Franciszka must keep this secret and outsmart everyone to keep them all alive.

First and foremost, the Holocaust fascinates me and I will read anything about it that I can get my hands on. It is, without a doubt, one of the biggest tragedies the world has ever seen. One of my all time favorite college courses was a Holocaust literature class that opened my eyes to an abundance of literature about the Holocaust touching on many of the lesser known stories and topics about this tragedy. While this book, like all Holocaust books, was incredibly heart-wrenching and just plain sad, it was a true treat to read about some of the rare do-gooders whose hearts seem impossibly huge. That these two women would care for and hide people that they hardly even knew speaks wonders and volumes about the human spirit and makes you

believe that there is good in the world, even amidst the worst of things and the worst of times. It is rare to be uplifted by a Holocaust story, and this one manages to do this, even despite all the sadness that is also involved.

I have to admit, the first little bit of the book had me a bit bored to start. The story is narrated by several different characters and starts out with Helena. I think I just wasn't into it right away because Helena's part didn't touch as much on what she and her mother were doing, and focuses a lot on her romantic relationship. When it switches to some of the people that are in hiding, however, I couldn't stop reading. For real. I stayed up really late and read the last 150 pages in one sitting. I needed to know how it would end and it was totally worth the late night.

This story is very short and fast, filled with quick, sparse chapters, but as I said, it REALLY packs a punch and will leave you emotionally reeling. I will forever have this story and these people etched into my mind. The fact that these people were real people makes it that much more jarring and touching to me. If only all of us could be just HALF as good as Franciszka and her daughter, the world would be a better place.

For anyone who reads Holocaust literature, I highly recommend this one. It's a different side of things, and a viewpoint that I was so touched by. If you're not a Holocaust reader but enjoy historical fiction or inspirational stories, I recommend this to you as well.

Note: I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Shaghayegh A says**

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### **Barb says**

Having read this inspiring book in one sitting, I am overwhelmed with emotion and hope. This fictional account of a true story of two women's heroic actions to save two Jewish families and a German deserter during WWII restores and deepens my belief that there are angels among us. And I'm thankful that on a whim I picked up this short, poetically written novel because I've needed to have my faith restored with all the turmoil and tragedy in our world. I've read so many Holocaust novels, but this tiny book captures the horror, fear, bravery, moral decency and love that the people who endured this horrific war experienced.....at least in this one corner of Sokal, Poland where 6000 Jews perished. As humans we are capable of unimaginable savage cruelty but as this book demonstrates...also great love, bravery and sacrifice for our fellow human beings.

There is a plaque and a tree at the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem honoring Franciszka Halamajowa and her daughter, Helena. Those who helped the Jews escape execution during the Holocaust are recognized as "the Righteous among Nations" .....indeed they were.

My deepest wish is that this novel shows up on every required reading list in our schools.



## Theresa says

I read this book in two sittings but I made myself take a couple of days before attempting to review. It is one of the hardest ratings I've ever had to make a decision on. (not the written review itself, I'm simply saying the number of stars it deserves) I'm going to call a spade a spade here. If I was an English Prof. and I was grading this manuscript for a creative writing class I think I might have sent it back for many, many revisions. As it is written I would have had to assume the intended target was lower middle-grade students instead of adults. However, I would have been puzzled because the themes and how they were handled was definitely not entirely suitable for impressionable middle-grade students. (Maybe US 7th grade and above would be ok with some of the scenes). However, the language and sentence structure is honestly about a 5th grade level and even then not a very challenging read. (again not content)

**So, you're probably wondering why I gave it 5 stars then aren't you? I'll also say here I'd have given it 100 if I could have!!**

I do not know for certain the reason the author wrote this book with such simple mechanics and language. I've seen the argument since finishing that it was purposely simplistic to let the story shine and not the words. However, I read the book with the mindset that the author is not really an author by trade or training but she so desperately wanted to tell a story. (After finishing this book I learned my assumptions were probably accurate). The author simply felt compelled to write a fictionalized story based on a true-story and get it into reader's hands. The true-life story behind this book touched her profoundly and she tried her hand at writing a book. I say kudos to her. If you read this with that mindset you will see just how beautiful the story is. I was so touched during one particular scene that I had to close the book for the night otherwise this could easily have been read in one sitting. I don't want to spoil that scene for others but I'll just say the incident that sucked the breath from my lungs did so despite years and years of reading Holocaust and/or Genocide based literature. I have extremely thick skin and have seen and lived through a lot but I thank our dear God in heaven that I cannot truly imagine what it was like to be in that mother's situation. (I'm crying just typing this!!)

I plan to have my 14 year old son read this book. As much as his father and I would like him to love reading, he simply does not. He will only read when he's forced and that's certainly not fun for any of us. He just finished a elective history class in his school that was all about the Holocaust. In that class they were required to read "*The Hiding Place*" by Corrie ten Boom. I have not read the book so I can not be sure of it's suitability for him or how it compares with this book but I can say **HE** struggled and hated it. I wonder if this book would have been a better for him? Perhaps all of the kids? (of course, I really think the kids should have read both!) The only sense worthy criticism I could get out of him was that "*The Hiding Place*" felt too preachy. I laughed because this is came from a child in Christian school. But then after reading *My Mother's Secret* it dawned on me that perhaps this story that was not faith based would actually have been a better fit for him. It showed situations straightforward as they were. There are characters who are not necessarily Christian but still doing what God would want them to do. The same characters were sometimes shown to be doing things God would not necessarily want for them. There were flawed characters. There were devout characters. There was divorce. There was a bit of romance. It also touched on the fact that evil walks in many forms too. Maybe that's what he needed! He needed to see the goodness in the world is not only done by Christians, and he needed to be able to relate to the characters in the book he is reading.

Ok...just read this book! Overlook the simplicity. Just absorb the meaning!

Here is one quote that grabbed me:

"I always thought that courageous people were those who were not afraid. Meeting Franciszka and her daughter, I realize that courageous people are afraid like everyone else. They just act despite the fear."

5\*/4.13

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### **Jesse Kimmel-Freeman says**

Having grown up listening to stories of the Holocaust and the things that people had to do to escape the brutality of the Nazis, when I was approached to review this book I knew I had to. There's something that is amazingly powerful and beautiful about the stories that come out of this moment in history.

I must say that this book follows suits of all the other stories I've heard or read. It is written in a way that seems to flow through the mind as you read the words. It is beautifully crafted.

I love how you get more than one perspective- allowing you to see the different stories and ways things are looked at differently. This is a great book to get older children and YAs introduced into the nit and grit that was part of the Holocaust. But that doesn't mean that it should be limited to youths. I'm 28 and I enjoyed it.

This is a powerful, amazing story that everyone that has any interest in the Holocaust should read. It's beautiful!

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### **Evalunasyva says**

Maravilhoso, comovente. Uma história de muita coragem em tempos de guerra, medo e sacrifício. Baseado em factos verídicos. Lido num dia.

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### **Allyson says**

It was a good story but short, so I am not sure the day-to-day issues were fully addressed. This was kind of like the "Cliff's Notes" version of a longer novel (if there were a longer novel to read).

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