

THE GIRL WHO FOUGHT BACK

Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

JOSHUA M. GREENE

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Nazis are on the march, determined to wipe out the Jewish people of Europe. Teenage Vladka and her family are among the thousands of Jews forced to relocate behind the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto, a cramped, oppressive space full of starvation, suffering, and death. When Vladka’s family is deported to concentration camps, Vladka joins up with other young people in the ghetto who are part of the Jewish underground: a group determined to fight back against the Nazis, no matter the cost. Vladka’s role in the underground? To pass as a non-Jew, sneaking out of the ghetto to blend into Polish society while smuggling secret messages and weapons back over the ghetto wall. Every move she makes comes with the risk of being arrested or killed. But Vladka and her friends know that their missions are worth the danger—they are preparing for an uprising like no other, one that will challenge the Nazi war machine. This astonishing true story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, told through the lens of Holocaust survivor and educator Vladka Meed, introduces readers to a crucial piece of history while highlighting the persistence of bravery in the face of hate” — Provided by publisher.

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Chapter 1

IN DISGUISE

Four years earlier, on a warm November evening, a teenager named Feige Peltel—whom we will call by her code name, Vladka—hurried down the city street with a tray of sewing supplies. If she was lucky, she might sell all the colorful ribbons, zippers, fasteners, and spools of thread, and make it home before dark. She was headed to Warsaw's wealthier section, where people had money to spend.

This was Vladka's first attempt at disguising herself. She had put on makeup and was wearing her best dress. With her light-brown hair and gray-green eyes, Vladka looked how a non-Jew was thought to look. Unlike most Jews whose first language was Yiddish, Vladka spoke fluent Polish, which counted for a lot when pretending to be a Christian. Naturally, she had taken off the white armband with the blue star that all Jews were required to wear. If people found out that she was a Jew trying to do business with non-Jews, the police would be summoned, and she would be carted off to jail.

Vladka reminded herself to stay calm while streetcars drove by with the familiar *clang-clang* of traffic bells. The streets were filled with cars, trucks, horse-drawn carts, and bicycles. Vladka dodged the traffic, impatient to get to Saski Park before it got too late. Even non-Jews could be arrested for staying out past the 7 p.m. curfew.

It was November 1939. Germany had invaded Poland two months before, and Vladka thought about how different things were now. Warsaw had once been the largest center of Jewish life in all of Eastern Europe. Theaters put on plays in Yiddish, and movie houses showed films featuring Jewish actors. The city was home to Jewish publishing companies, sports clubs, and cultural centers, and Jewish businesses thrived. Jews made up almost 30 percent of the city's 1.1 million residents, including many of Poland's most respected doctors, lawyers, educators, writers, and artists. Vladka's family wasn't rich, but she had many friends, and she loved attending cultural and artistic events. Her life was good.

That all changed when Nazi Germany invaded, and an unending series of edicts restricted the lives of Polish Jews. Vladka and her family, like all the other Jews in Warsaw, were forced to surrender their bicycles, radios, and any

other valuables they possessed. Vladka knew many Jews whose businesses were taken away by the Nazis and given to non-Jews. Jewish people were not allowed to shop outside specific hours. The Nazis also forbade Jewish children from attending school, so Vladka had stopped going.

Vladka didn't know this yet, but soon Jews would be forbidden to use the railways without special permission. Next would come decrees that forbade Jews from entering restaurants and public parks. By the fall of 1940, the German authorities would conscript more than 100,000 Jewish men, women, and children into slave labor, forcing them to clear away piles of garbage and debris from the city streets and work in factories that made weapons and other supplies for the German army. The Jews received no pay for this labor, the hours were long, and their Nazi bosses didn't hesitate to use whips and clubs to make them work harder.

What Vladka *did* know was that her non-Jewish friends had changed, almost overnight. Her Christian neighbors and schoolmates, once kind to her, had become fiercely antisemitic, ready to report to the police any Jews who tried to hide their identity. The Nazis had unleashed something dark and cruel in the people around her, turning friends into enemies.

Vladka finally arrived at Saski Park and politely approached people sitting on benches. With a bright smile and speaking impeccable Polish, she described the various sewing supplies she was selling. Around her, handsomely dressed couples strolled arm in arm on their way to dinner or a show. Herons and ducks from the nearby Vistula River flew overhead. *Perhaps they are heading south for the winter*, Vladka thought. She looked past the park at the skyline of the city and admired the intricately carved Gothic buildings that rose from the ruins of other buildings, the ones that had been destroyed by Nazi bombs during the invasion.

Warsaw is still such a beautiful city, she told herself.

There was no way she could have known that, by the end of World War II, 90 percent of everything around her would be razed to the ground. Most of the city would be reduced to rubble. By then, too, most of her friends in the underground would be dead.

After selling as many sewing supplies as she could, Vladka took a trolley back to her family's apartment in the suburb of Praga. At home, she found her parents and younger siblings—her sister, Henia, and brother, Chaim—listening to the radio. Vladka recognized the voice of Adolf Hitler, chancellor of Germany and head of the Nazi Party.

Hitler was shouting another one of his tirades against Jews, something about how Jews were not human, that they were bacteria that had to be removed before they could contaminate German society.

Vladka was disgusted and frightened by Hitler's strong rhetoric, but her father, Shlomo, told her not to worry.

"I knew many Germans when I was a soldier in the First World War," he said. "They're good people. They won't treat us the way Hitler is telling them to."

Vladka loved her father very much. He was a good man, handsome, with blue eyes and gray hair, and he was respected by their friends for his learning. But Vladka knew he was a bit of a dreamer and naive about what the Nazis were capable of doing to Jews.

In Vladka's opinion, her mother, Hanna, was the more practical parent. It was Hanna who kept the apartment clean and ran their small haberdashery store that sold hats, gloves, scarves, and sewing supplies. Vladka's mother was optimistic by nature, and very resourceful. She could make meals from a handful of potatoes and a little flour. Ever since the Nazi occupation, it had become almost impossible for Jews to find someone willing to sell them food. Yet Hanna somehow managed to find enough food to feed the family.

Each morning, Vladka's thirteen-year-old brother, Chaim, ran several blocks to the spot where bread rations were handed out. German officials had authorized distribution of bread to the citizens of Warsaw, but only to the Christians. Jews were excluded, yet Chaim took the risk of standing in line for his family every day.

Unlike Vladka, Chaim had what the Nazis considered to be stereotypical "Jewish features," including a prominent nose, dark-brown hair, and dark-brown eyes. One morning, a man on the bread line pointed at him and yelled, "Look, there's a Jew!" Soldiers ran over and beat Chaim with clubs. He managed to escape before they could do worse.

Vladka handed her mother the money she had earned in Saski Park, and a thought came to her: Looking like a Gentile could be useful. She had gotten away with pretending not to be Jewish this one time—maybe she could get away with it again.

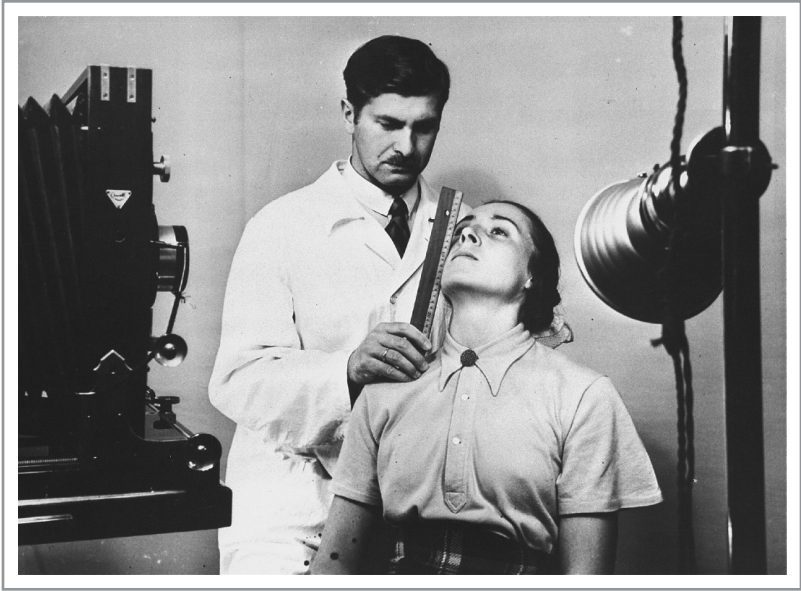
NAZI RACISM

The Nazis invented a description of an ideal human: blond, blue-eyed, athletic, tall, strong, and Christian. They called these ideal persons “Aryans,” even though many Germans did not fit the description. Adolf Hitler himself had brown hair and was average height.

Nonetheless, the Nazis believed that Germans were the “master race” and should be protected from infection by “inferior” races, Jews in particular. In 1935, the Germans passed racial laws—called the Nuremberg Laws—that defined a Jew as anyone who was born Jewish, who had three grandparents who were Jews, or anyone who believed in the Jewish faith. Even Jews who had converted to Christianity were still considered Jews under these laws.

Students in Nazi-run schools were taught *Rassenkunde*, Nazi racial theory, which considered a person’s genetic history and physical features in determining their racial “purity.” Jewish “impurities” included a pronounced nose and skull, dark eyes, and dark hair. The Nazis pointed to these and other fabricated

“impurities” to encourage the non-Jews of Germany to hate Jews and other minorities.



1930s—A Nazi teacher measures a German student’s nose in a class on *Rassenkunde*, Nazi racial theory.