

# In My Hands

Irene Gut Opdyke  
with Jennifer Armstrong

*Random House Children's Publishers UK*

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## **About the Book**

*I knew I could only be killed once . . . I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb . . .*

Irene was a seventeen-year-old nursing student when the Nazis invaded Poland. They took over her country and her life. Nothing in her innocent girlhood could have prepared her for the horrors she was to witness. However, instinctively, Irene knew she had to resist the evil in any way possible. Standing by was not an option. Eventually forced to work as a housekeeper to a Nazi officer, Irene carried out her most audacious and heroic act. She hid twelve Jewish people in the basement of the officer's villa and protected them even through the loss of her own freedom, and at the risk of her life.

An utterly remarkable true story of one young woman's courage and humanity which will fascinate and inspire readers of all ages.

# IN MY HANDS

Memories of a  
Holocaust Rescuer

IRENE GUT OPDYKE  
*with*  
*Jennifer Armstrong*

**RHCP DIGITAL**

To my daughter, Janina

And for the young people, who can accomplish the impossible and can achieve greatness by finding the strength in God and in the goodness of the human spirit. I dedicate my life story to encourage them to find hope and strength within themselves. Courage is a whisper from above: when you listen with your heart, you will know what to do and how and when.

With all my life -

Irene Gut Opdyke

I dedicate this book with love and respect to Irene.

Jennifer Armstrong

# Tears

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*There was a bird flushed up from the wheat fields, disappearing in a blur of wings against the sun, and then a gunshot and it fell to the earth. But it was not a bird. It was not a bird, and it was not in the wheat field, but you can't understand what it was yet.*

*How can I tell you about this war? How can I say these things? If I tell you all at once - first this happened, and then this, and these people died and those people lived and then it was over - you will not believe me. Sometimes I wonder if these things could have happened. Was it me? Was that girl me? Was I really there? Did I see this happening? In the war, everything was unnatural and unreal. We wore masks and spoke lines that were not our own. This happened to me, and yet I still don't understand how it happened at all.*

*So I must tell you slowly. Slowly, and with everything fine and clear. I will start at the beginning, because it started long ago.*

*Before time, before there was a Poland, the trees wept as they fell into the Wisła. The great river carried the trees north into the Baltic and mingled their tears with the sea. Centuries passed, and the fishermen on the coast hunted the shoreline for those tears - they had become golden pearls of amber washed smooth by the waves. From Byzantium, from Rome, from the steppes, and from the*

*Holy Land, the merchants came north for the amber that held the sun in its heart. Then the Teutonic Knights swept like a storm wave into Poland and took the amber trade prisoner. No-one could buy the gems except from these German knights, and Polish smugglers were put to death in the fortress of Malbork.*

*When the Germans stormed once more into Poland in 1939, we smuggled again. But this time it was not amber. They were tears of another sort.*

# **Part One**

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## **I Was Almost Fast Enough**

## Lilac Time

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Kozienice is a small village in eastern Poland. Here, on May Day, 1921, my mother went to the riverbank with her friends. It was dusk, and the breeze carried the scent of lilacs. The call of a cuckoo from the forest made the village girls laugh as they picked their way among the reeds and forget-me-nots at the water's edge, and the grasses brushed their ankles with dew as they passed. My mother carried a block of wood with her name written on it, Maria Rębieś. Also on the block of wood were a stub of candle and a small wreath of flowers.

Each of the laughing girls carried a block. Again the cuckoo called from the birch trees while Maria and her friends lit their candles. The smell of the matches and burning wax mingled with the scent of lilac. Clutching their skirts up around their knees, the girls waded into the chilly water to launch their boats. The fleet of candles drifted out into the current, turned and bobbed as though bowing farewell, and floated away.

Downriver were the young men, and among them was Władysław Gut, a young architect and chemist who was overseeing the construction of a nearby ceramics factory. He stood apart from the other young men on the riverbank, smoking a cigarette and watching as they joked and wrestled in the shallows.

Gut did not think, at first, that he would join the village men in their holiday game. The ancient folk customs of this rural countryside near the Ukrainian area of Poland

seemed like relics of a long-ago century. But the twilight was deepening, and the laughter rose in excitement as the flock of candles came into view, floating beneath the slender green fingers of a willow. The lights were bewitching. Gut tossed his cigarette into the damp grass and walked nearer to the water to watch the May boats drift toward him. Swallows dipped and skimmed over the water and arced away.

The men were wading out now, teasing one another over their sweethearts, each one hoping to get the boat with her name on it. Gut bent quickly to unlace his boots and peel off his socks, and then waded into the water with the others, the hems of his city trousers clinging to his legs.

‘How will you know which is Janka’s boat, Tadek?’ one man called.

‘She promised to put only bluebells on it,’ came a reply over the dark water.

‘Did you hear that, Marek? Janka’s boat has bluebells - if you want her that’s the boat to catch!’

Gut stood with the stream coursing past his legs. In the darkness of the woods behind him, an owl hooted. The hairs on his arms rose at the cold and at the eeriness of the fairy lights that moved silently towards him. One boat floated apart from the others, farther out in the current. He felt carefully with his bare feet over the stones on the streambed and stepped out deep. Maria Rębieś’ candle sailed straight into his outstretched hands, like a bird settling onto its nest.

I like to think of my parents meeting this way, to think of the sweet and happy years of Poland’s independence between the wars. I like to think of the scent of lilacs luring my father into the water in his city clothes, and my mother in her white dress, sitting on the bank upstream with her knees tucked up under her chin, dreaming of the man who

would catch her boat. They were married soon after, and I was born on May 5, in 1922, when the lilacs were blooming again.

We lived for my first year in Kozienice. Our house sat just above the river, and in the spring of my first year, the sound of the rushing water spoke to me through the open windows. While my mother was busy one morning, I made my baby way out of the house, toddling across the new grass to the water. Our dog, Myszka, followed. I tottered at the brink, watching the flashing water as it streamed past.

Then Myszka sank her teeth into my diaper and began tugging backward. Stubbornly, I tried to crawl forward to stare again into the water, but the dog would not let go. She also could not bark, so this tug-of-war went on for several minutes as I inched my way closer and closer to the edge.

Then, the silent voice that speaks in mothers' ears whispered to my mamusia. She looked out the window, and with a shriek she sped outside. 'Irena!' Gasping, she snatched me from the water's edge. Myszka collapsed on the ground, wagging her tail, as Mamusia praised and thanked her.

For several days, our heroic dog was the talk of Kozienice. Neighbours, friends, members of our church - one by one they stopped by to marvel at little Myszka and stroke my baby face. The rabbi from Kozienice's synagogue came by to bless us both, and our priest took Mamusia's hands in both of his. 'God has plans for your daughter, Pani Gutowna. We must watch to see what little Irenka does.'

Father, or Tatuś, as I called him, thanked the priest and the rabbi, and said they would indeed expect much of me.

Over time, as we moved from Kozienice to Chelm to Radom and to Suchednów for Tatuś' job, one sister, then another, then another, and then another arrived, every two

years or so, until there were five girls running and screaming around the house: Janina, Marysia, Bronia, Władzia, and me, Irena. Even our new dog, Lalka, was a female.

When my youngest sister, Władzia, was born, we moved to Częstochowa, northwest of Kraków. Thus, I spent several years living at the feet of the Black Madonna, the mother saint of Poland, who dwells in the shrine of Jasna Góra, the Bright Mountain fortress. Our home was next door to the church of St Barbara, and we had a clear view up the tree-lined avenue to Jasna Góra. Every year on the Virgin's important holy days, pilgrims would come from all over Poland to worship at the shrine. My first sister, Janina, and I would go outside to offer lemonade and water to the pilgrims, who made the final approach to the shrine on their knees.

We also lavished our tender, girlish care on wounded animals all the time. Cats, dogs, rabbits, birds - we brought our small patients home to Mamusia, who tended them expertly. The animals that could get better did, and we would let them go or find homes for them. The animals that could not get better died, and we held solemn burials in the backyard, in the shadow of St Barbara's lofty sanctuary. My mother once raised a baby blackbird we had found fallen from its nest, and it always lived nearby and would fly in through the open window when she whistled for it. One fall, when the storks began to migrate, we discovered a young stork with an injured wing who was trying to fly off with his fellows. He couldn't get off the ground, so we bundled our coats around him and took him home, being careful of his long, sharp beak.

'Mamusia, can you fix it?' I called as Janina and Marysia and I carried the lanky bird into the kitchen.

Mamusia and our hired girl, Magda, were chopping cabbage for pickles. Mamusia turned around, wiping her

hands on a towel. Her eyebrows went up in surprise at the ungainly creature standing before her, blinking its black button eyes and clacking its yellow beak against the back of a chair. It had a strong wild smell of mud. While Janina and Marysia and I watched, Mamusia flexed the stork's wing and then began to bandage it.

'What will you call him?' Magda asked us as our mother worked.

'Bociek,' Marysia piped up. 'Can we keep him, Mamusia?'

'He cannot go south with his friends this winter,' our mother said. 'But you cannot keep a big stork in the house. He might be dangerous, and we do not want him to lose his wildness. He should rejoin the other storks in the spring when they return. Put him in the cellar.'

'I can catch frogs for him,' Janina said.

'Me, too,' I said. 'And fish. We'll make him strong.'

'You might have to feed him mice when the winter comes and the water freezes,' Mamusia said.

Janina and Marysia and I all pulled faces at that. Bociek bobbed his head as though agreeing, and then dabbled with his beak at his new bandage.

The door to the dining room opened, and the little ones, Bronia and Władzia, peeked in. Bronia stared at Bociek. She stared at Władzia. The girls backed out and the door swung shut.

We moved Bociek into the cellar and kept him fed and warm. As the winter descended on Poland, many other birds flew south to escape the cold. And then the snow came.

The winters in Poland are very long and very bitter, but in our house, we were always warm and happy. After

dinner, we gathered around the piano to sing folk songs while Tatuś played.

Other nights, Mamusia would welcome her friends into the house for feather stripping. The women would sit around the table, peeling the soft fluff from duck and goose quills, and tell ghost stories while they stuffed pillows. Janina and I would sneak down the stairs to listen to their tales. The air would fill with floating down like softly falling snow and Janina and I would press our faces into our laps to muffle our sneezes.

Then, as the winter deepened, it would be time to think of Christmas. We spread the table with hay, to signify the manger, and then laid a fresh white cloth over it. All day long on Christmas Eve, we were busy in the kitchen, making pierogis, breads, cookies, pickled fish, potatoes, and cabbage. We would laugh and sing 'Bóg Się Rodzi' and other carols as the house filled with the scent of vanilla, cinnamon, and mushrooms.

When night fell, we bundled ourselves into our coats and hats, and stepped outside to walk to the shrine of Jasna Góra. The snow squeaked under our boots as we tramped toward the Bright Mountain fortress. I imagined the Holy Mother appearing over the fortress as she had when the invading Swedes had conquered all of Poland, and the last of the defenders were making their stand at Jasna Góra. It was said that her divine image had shielded the fortress from harm, allowing Jasna Góra to withstand the siege and throw back the invaders.

I tipped my head back and looked at the stars glittering in the frozen sky. No Holy Mary appeared to me, but the lights pouring from the windows of the fortress on the hill were a wonderful vision in themselves. With the other pilgrims, we wound our way, singing, up the hillside to the magnificent basilica. Inside the church, the high, vaulted ceiling echoed with song and prayer. The flickering light of

a thousand candles gleamed on holy relics and statues. And behind the altar, revealed behind its wooden door, was the Black Madonna of Czestochowa.

I was always awed when I saw the holy icon. It was a small painting, and it was dark with age. But the simple image of the Madonna and Child was said to have miraculous power, and on Christmas night, with the stuffy air full of incense and the voices of the priests murmuring in Latin, on that night it was possible to believe the painting was miraculous, that it was the protector of Poland. It was easy for me to believe that with such a powerful guardian, Poland would never fall.

This was in the early 1930s, when it was still possible to believe such things.

## **Before the Storm**

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In 1934, German president Paul von Hindenburg died. By August, Adolf Hitler had become both chancellor and president of Germany, taking the title *Der Führer*. I was oblivious to politics, however; if, some evening over cigarettes and vodka, Tatuś and his partner discussed the rise of Hitler and his fanatical cronies in neighbouring Germany, I did not pay attention.

My teenage years had begun, and we now lived in the small town of Kozłowa Góra, in the Polish district known as Upper Silesia, or Oberschlesien. Here, we were only six kilometres from the German border, and many of our new neighbours were of German descent. We began to learn German in school, and grew accustomed to seeing it written in town and hearing it spoken on the street. People came and went easily across the border, especially in the countryside, and there were some little towns that had never quite made up their minds whether they were Polish or German. Indeed, the borders had shifted so often over the centuries that to many people, it did not make any difference whether they were governed from Berlin or Warsaw.

Because of our name, Gut, many people assumed that we were of German descent, but my parents were fiercely patriotic. We were Polish. I was raised to be proud of that fact. Lessons in school had told me the cruel history of my country, which had been invaded repeatedly over the centuries – from the west by the Germans, from the north

by Swedes and Lithuanians, from the east by Tatars and Russians, from the south by Hungarians. Always, Poland had struggled to preserve itself. Its borders had shifted over the centuries and sometimes dissolved altogether as it was sucked in by a larger or fiercer power. Beautiful, bountiful Poland, a country whose very name means 'field', had the richest agricultural land in Europe, and every other country wanted to reap that harvest. We Poles knew we were surrounded by grasping hands; the knowledge made us guard our land and our identity all the more loyally.

But as I say, I was a teenager, and politics was abstract to me. Also, the subject was never discussed at dinner - in those days, it was not a suitable topic for girls. Besides, I was busy with other things. In high school, I became a member of the school dance group, and we performed traditional Polish dances at festivals all over the western and southern part of the country.

Performing with the dance group gave me a taste of the spotlight, and I began to try out for school plays. Sometimes I actually daydreamed about being a movie actress, but I was secretly afraid that I was too plain. I was thin and pale; often, on the way to school, I tried to darken my eyebrows with burnt matches and put some colour in my cheeks and lips with red paper that I dampened with spit. But as my sisters and I grew older, it became clear that although I was the eldest, Janina was the standout. She was taller than I was, elegant and graceful. She turned heads wherever she went, and I always seemed to be in her shadow, the ugly duckling.

I did not worry, particularly. At that time, I was not interested in boys, except as friends. I wore my hair short, and climbed trees and rode horses and made up adventure stories that I wrote down in my diary. In my fantasies, I was always caught up in heroic struggles, and I saw myself

saving lives, sacrificing myself for others. I had far loftier ambitions than mere romance.

One Christmas, I became convinced these fantasies would come true. My grandmother Rebieś had taught us an old custom: we melted candle wax and poured it into a bowl of very cold water. The moment the wax hit the water it hardened into a twisted, fantastical shape, and we tried to read our fortunes by holding the blob of wax up against the light and seeing what sort of shadow it cast. When it came to my turn, I held my wax up to the light and we all studied the silhouette on the wall. It resembled a ship crossing the ocean, we decided. A ship with a crucifix on its prow. My sisters were awed into silence by this fortune, and I was thrilled: I was destined to have adventures. Righteous adventures.

However, in Kozłowa Góra in the mid-thirties, there weren't very many righteous adventures available. Mamusia urged us to direct our energy into useful - although unexciting - projects. Along with my sisters, I helped her prepare baskets of food for the poor and the sick. We scavenged in the ash heap at Tatuś' glass and ceramics factory, looking for rejects of coloured glass. We gave these to women who crushed them into fake gems for decorating picture frames. In every charitable act we performed, Mamusia and Tatuś were our models; they were generous and kind to everyone, even to the Gypsies who camped in the woods outside town and made people suspicious with their strange costumes and language. Wounded animals, out-of-luck neighbours, sick strangers - Mamusia and Tatuś welcomed them all.

With their encouragement, I decided to become a volunteer for the Red Cross, and I donned the uniform of a candy striper. At our candy striper meetings, we practised bandaging one another, learning first aid, and preparing ourselves for unspecified emergencies. We visited the

hospital, bringing flowers and fruit to the patients and trying to be helpful. It was in the hospital that I began to admire the nuns who had devoted their lives to the sick. Over time, I concluded that I should be a nun. It was not the nuns' life of piety that attracted me, but their sense of purpose and their devotion to service.

Tatuś was surprised when I told him. He suggested that I first train as a nurse. If that did not satisfy me, then I could begin studying to become a nun. I would enroll in the nursing school of St Mary's Hospital, in Radom. It was over two hundred kilometres away, but it was the best nursing school in Poland.

So, in 1938, I began my studies in Radom. The city was an industrial centre filled with munitions plants, enamel works, steel foundries, ceramics factories, and tanneries, which filled the smoky air with a rank, animal-chemical smell. I lived in a rooming house with other student nurses, and threw myself into my work. I missed my family, and I was nervous to be in a strange city, so I hid behind my books and studied hard to forget my loneliness. Most of the other girls took their duties lightly, and went out in the evenings to the movies or to dances. But I took my responsibilities very seriously and, being shy, I shunned their company. My mother's sister, Helen, lived in Radom, and I sometimes had dinner with her; but for the most part, when I was not at school or in the hospital I stayed in my room and studied anatomy or chemistry. I intended to be the best in my class and make my parents proud of me.

The practical experience I gained in the hospital taught me many things that weren't in my books. One thing I learned on my rounds was that men love to make young nurses blush, and I came to dread entering the men's wards. Winks and grins and requests for baths sometimes brought such colour into my face that the men would howl with laughter and tease me even more. I was only sixteen,

after all, and I was as easy to startle and flush from cover as a pheasant.

As evening fell, most of the girls in my rooming house would chatter and laugh as they went out, leaving the house quiet in their wake. I was happy to stay alone. From my window as I studied, I sometimes saw groups of university students walking arm in arm in the glare of the streetlights, singing patriotic songs, their coats flapping open in the breeze. I was beginning to be aware that Hitler had made threats against Poland. Under the Treaty of Versailles, which had settled the Great War of 1914-1918, Germany had lost much territory that it had won in earlier conquests. Now Hitler was determined to reclaim that land, to revive the power and might of Germany and make it great once more in the eyes of the world.

But much of the land Hitler wanted was Poland's, and always had been. Many German immigrants had settled there, especially in the west, where my family was, but that did not make it Germany! Hitler wanted *Lebensraum*, living space, for the Germans, and our Poland was the space he wanted.

'Irena, we want you to come home,' Tatuś and Mamusia wrote to me in their letters. 'Many people think war is imminent, and we hate to think of you so far from us. The family should be together.'

But I did not listen. If it came to war, I would do my part for Poland. If it came to war, my country would need trained nurses. No, I wrote to my parents. I must stay here. I know what my duty is. If Hitler tries to come here, we will fight him and we will chase him all the way back to Berlin. Besides, we knew that old enemies Germany and the Soviet Union watched each other like two dogs guarding a bone; if one of them made the slightest move toward Poland, it would be considered an act of war against the other. The

mutual suspicion and hatred between the Germans and the Soviets was our guarantee.

When I returned home for the summer at the end of my first year, I found Kozłowa Góra had changed. Many of our neighbours had become German, renouncing their Polish heritage, speaking only German, openly admiring the policies of Hitler and his National Socialist party, the Nazis. And in some shops - not many, but some - there were signs saying, 'Don't Buy from Jews!' or 'A Poland Free from Jews Is a Free Poland.'

This mystified me. In my home, there had never been any distinction made between people. Many of our friends were Jewish, but we did not say to ourselves, 'Our Jewish friends, the Gonsiorowiczes.' It had never occurred to me to distinguish between people based on their religion. But this was precisely what Hitler was doing a mere six kilometres away.

We did not imagine where it would lead. How could we? To us, Germany had always been a seat of civilization, the home of poets and musicians, philosophers and scientists. We believed it was a rational, cultured country.

How could we know that the Germans did not feel the same about us? How could we know the depth of their scorn for us? Despite our centuries of glorious achievements, despite our Chopins and Copernicuses, our cathedrals and our heroes and our horses - despite all this, Germany viewed Poland as a land of Slavic brutes, fit only for labour.

And so Hitler wanted to destroy us.

# **The Lightning War**

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That summer after my first year of school was the last happy time I was to spend with my family, but none of us knew it in August when I returned to Radom to resume my studies. On the twenty-fourth, Germany and the Soviet Union stunned the world by announcing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression treaty: neither would make war against the other. People gathered on the streets and in the cafés, speculating about what this news meant to Poland. We sat defenceless between these two countries: would they simply carve us up and eat us? There was no topic of conversation besides politics.

Suspense grew, and the heat was sweltering. I kept a basin of water on my desk at night so I could wipe down my face and arms and neck while I studied in my hot, stuffy room. The rattle of trucks and cars reached me through my open window, and the smell of exhaust fumes, and the sour breath of a cheap restaurant next door. As the month ran out, all of us began to look toward the sky, thirsty for rain. Dust rose from the roads as we walked from our dormitory to St Mary's. In the pastures on the edge of town, horses pawed at the hard, baked ground. It was the kind of dry, oppressive heat that comes before a thunderstorm.

On September 1, the storm broke, but not in the way we had expected. I was on my way to the hospital, walking across an empty lot, when a steady, pulsing drone reached my ears. I looked up, one hand on my Red Cross cap to keep it from slipping as I tipped my head back. Before I

even saw the planes, I began to hear explosions, and then there they were – the sky was black with them: row after row of German bombers, flying in formation over Radom. Even as I covered my ears against the roar, I felt the earth shaking with detonations. Across the field from where I stood, the front of an apartment building suddenly sheared away, and a blue plush sofa toppled to the street. Dust and smoke billowed up from every corner of the city. I stood frozen, too stunned to move. The air was filled with the screams of falling bombs and the roar of their blasts. Sirens wailed from every direction.

‘Get down, you idiot!’ someone screamed at me. ‘You’re going to get yourself killed!’

I felt someone catch my arm and drag me toward a ditch. In a daze, I looked to see who was with me; it was one of the interns from St Mary’s, Dr Gribowski. We crouched in the ditch as the German planes charged by overhead. With each bomb blast, my whole body jumped. Clumps of dirt rained down on my head, and a sharp chip of masonry cut my cheek. From nearby I heard the terrified scream of a horse, and then the crashing of glass and an engine racing, and all the time the sound of the airplane engines kept pounding against our ears.

‘Come on!’ Gribowski shouted. ‘They’ll need us at the hospital.’

Together, we began dodging across the lot. Craters filled with bricks and rubble blocked our way as we bolted into a street. The city was on fire. People were running wildly, screaming for their children, screaming from terrible wounds. A toddler whose face was streaked with dirt and tears sat naked on a set of front steps; behind him was only empty space where a house should have been. A truck barrelled down the street, honking its horn continuously; it crashed into a lamp-post, reversed, and jolted off again. I jerked at another huge explosion from the direction of the

munitions factory. As I stumbled along the sidewalk I saw a woman whose hands were covered with blood, and I opened my mouth to say something but could not speak. A dog was barking, barking.

'The hospital!' the intern yelled. The sirens shrieked like lunatics. I thought I would begin screaming myself at any moment.

St Mary's was in chaos when we arrived. Plaster dust rained down from the ceiling with each blast, and the lights swung wildly, throwing weird shadows across the wards. Doctors and nurses barked orders over the moans of patients. Nuns sped from one bed to another, their black habits billowing around them. And the wounded - the wounded were everywhere, on beds, on chairs, on the floor, holding themselves up against the walls, crowding the stairwells. I hurried into a surgery ward and my foot slid out from under me; I looked down, and saw a smear of blood on the floor. It was unreal - one minute I had been home in the shelter of my loving family and the next I was standing in blood and ducking at the whistle of a bomb. This could not be me!

'Irena Gutowna, we need you over here!' someone shouted.

My whole world was now St Mary's Hospital. I slept in my clothes, huddled under a sink or inside a broom closet, flinching at every loud noise. The rest of the time was one grotesque emergency after another. We were out of food, now we were out of sulpha drugs, we had no clean sheets, now the electricity was out - and the wounded kept arriving. In addition to civilians, we soon had Polish soldiers in the hospital, and from them we began to hear reports of the ground invasion.

German tanks had rolled over the border by the thousands. The ground, baked hard by summer sun, made