



# *Maria's Story*

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*CHILDHOOD MEMORIES  
OF THE HOLOCAUST*

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*Maria Segal*



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OF THE HOLOCAUST

Maria Segal



**BoehmGroup**

Linking Past, Present, and Future

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA, 2009

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9768008-2-8

Published by Boehm Group  
[www.boehmgroup.com](http://www.boehmgroup.com)  
Post Office Box 30133  
Santa Barbara, CA 93130  
TEL/FAX: 805-965-9889

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*A section of photographs follows page 38*



## CHAPTER I

### ❧ *My Early Childhood: 1935*

I WAS BORN into a Polish Jewish family of seven children, the second youngest of five girls and two boys. My family and I lived in Okuniew, a small farming community about ten miles from the metropolis of Warsaw.

If you remember the town of Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof*, you can visualize Okuniew. Similar to most small European towns, Okuniew was centered around a small plaza, a square with streets branching out in different directions like an octopus. The plaza was the commercial, political and social center and embodied the heart of the town. The main buildings consisted of an apartment house, a pharmacy, a police station, and several other small businesses. The plaza and its main streets were paved with cobblestones, while the less significant side streets were still dirt in those days. The Catholic church was prominently located on one side of the plaza. The Jewish house of prayer, the synagogue was on the other side of town. On Sundays I remember seeing Christian worshippers dressed in their finest clothes, conversing and chatting with each other about the weather and the week's events in general.

We Jews observed our Sabbath on Saturday. I remember men dressed in dark clothes, some with black hats covering their heads. They were bearded and had side-burns. The older and more Orthodox women shaved their heads and wore wigs known as *shaitels*. My mother was too modern to shave her head; she had beautiful black curly hair, as one of my sisters and I did. My other sister, Shandulka, had red

hair. Our synagogue was an Orthodox congregation where men and women were not permitted to sit together while praying. When I went with my family, I sat with my mother and sisters.

Jewish holidays were very colorful, especially Passover. Then my mother always made new clothes for the girls. Prior to entering the synagogue for worship, we would congregate outside the building to take note of what everyone wore, and to show off our pretty new garb acquired for the festive occasion.

My father, Lieb Polonowicz, and his family were from Okuniew. My mother Leah was from “the big city,” Warsaw. She didn’t fit into life in Okuniew. I think they met when my father traveled to Warsaw on business to buy leather for his shoe-making business.

My father was a very pious man. I do not recall him ever missing a Saturday morning service. My mother was not raised in an Orthodox home and was not as religious as he was. Still, she made a commitment to observe the Sabbath and the holidays in order to please my father. I recall my parents arguing at times, because my mother would not always or completely observe the rituals required for keeping a kosher house; for example, she was sometimes careless about separating meat dishes from dairy dishes. My father observed the Sabbath rigorously.

In a strictly Orthodox home, cooking is not permitted on Saturdays; therefore, all meals had to be prepared by Friday before sundown. My mother would do the cooking and baking on Friday morning and afternoon. Since we did not have our own oven at home, all the baking had to be done at the village bakery. The children would help Mother carry the cakes and pastries to the Jewish bakery, to be baked in their large ovens. I remember waiting in anticipation on Saturday afternoons, following services at the synagogue, for our main course to come out of the large communal oven. This was a dish called *chulent*, which had to be prepared on Friday and brought to the oven Friday afternoon. The *chulent* was prepared in a clay casserole dish. It consisted of brisket of beef, beans, and potatoes. Upon seasoning the food and adding some water, it was covered with a clay lid, wrapped with brown paper, tied up with string and marked with our family name. Following Saturday morning services each family would stop at the bakery on the way home to retrieve this succulent dish for the feast

to come. The real fun was in trying to identify the right dish, as most of them looked alike after the brown paper had burned—the likeness compounded by melted oozing grease on top. At this point the family was anxiously awaiting the serving of the meal.

The meal was taken at a large dining room table adorned by a traditional white damask tablecloth. Of course, we must not forget the traditional Sabbath bread called *challah*. The *challah* is always served preceding the meal. My father would make a blessing, a *moitza*, over this special bread, and break off small pieces of it to be passed around to each family member seated at the table.

Saturday was a day of rest. It usually consisted of spending the afternoon around the house reading, or taking a walk. There was no television or radio then for diversion; in fact we had no electricity or indoor plumbing—not unusual for the houses then. The entire village did not have electricity or running water. There was a *mikva*, a ritual bath, at the temple that my parents might have used, but I remember bathing in a wooden tub in the kitchen once a week.

I was named Miriam in those days, and I was the second youngest girl and very close to my father. The youngest in the family was my sister Sonja. My father was a short man and very dedicated to all of us. I remember walking with him in the nearby fields on Saturday afternoons, after the synagogue. He would hold my hand; sometimes we talked and other times he would go on praying. I looked forward to our walks all week, because my father was too busy working during the week to be able to spend much time with me.

My brothers, Moishe and Yoseph, and my sisters, Nicha, Elka, and Shandulka, were considerably older than I was. Often they had friends visiting at our house, or they would all go out to someone else's home. My parents must have been very accepting socially, as I recall frequent gatherings of young people at the Polonowicz household. There was no other entertainment for young people in those days—no movie theaters, no TV to watch. We had to amuse each other.

Passover (lasting eight days) always brings back some very special memories for me. It is a truly unique holiday because of the multiple rituals involved in its preparation. Prior to its onset, all dishes and kitchen utensils had to be scrubbed and cleaned in a major steriliza-

# THE WARSAW GHETTO



- Ghetto walls from November 1940 until October 1941
- Ghetto gates
- Ghetto walls from September 1942
- Inhabited ghetto area between September 1942 and April 1943
- Street network at the time
  - 1 - the Tlomackie Synagogue, 2 - the Nożyk Synagogue, 3 - the Moriah Synagogue
- Orphanage managed by Janusz Korczak (seat until 1940)
- Prisons
- Contemporary street network
- Memory sites:**
  - 1 - Memorial on the Umschlagplatz site
  - 2 - The gestapo building; thousands of Jews were murdered in its cellars in 1943
  - 3 - Memorial to the Ghetto Heroes
  - 4 - A stone slab commemorating the site of the Jewish Combat Organization bunker
  - 5 - A memorial plaque on the house where Józef Lewartowski lived
  - 6 - Janusz Korczak Memorial
- Esther Rachel Kamińska Theater
- Jewish Historical Institute

*Map of the Warsaw Ghetto.  
My street is marked with a yellow asterisk.*



*LEFT: Wanda (left) and her mother-in-law, Mrs. Hadrysiak Maria in front, age 9, Poland 1944.*

*BELOW: Abraham Polanowicz (center) with two Czech inmates from Auschwitz. All three escaped before liberation.*





*Maria and a student in front of the monument at Majdanek Concentration Camp.*



*Burned ashes of victims, Majdanek, May 2007.*

*RIGHT: Maria inside the  
school, Bydgoszcz,  
Poland 2007.*

*BELOW: Wanda and  
Maria at Maria's school  
in Bydgoszcz, Poland,  
June 2007.*

