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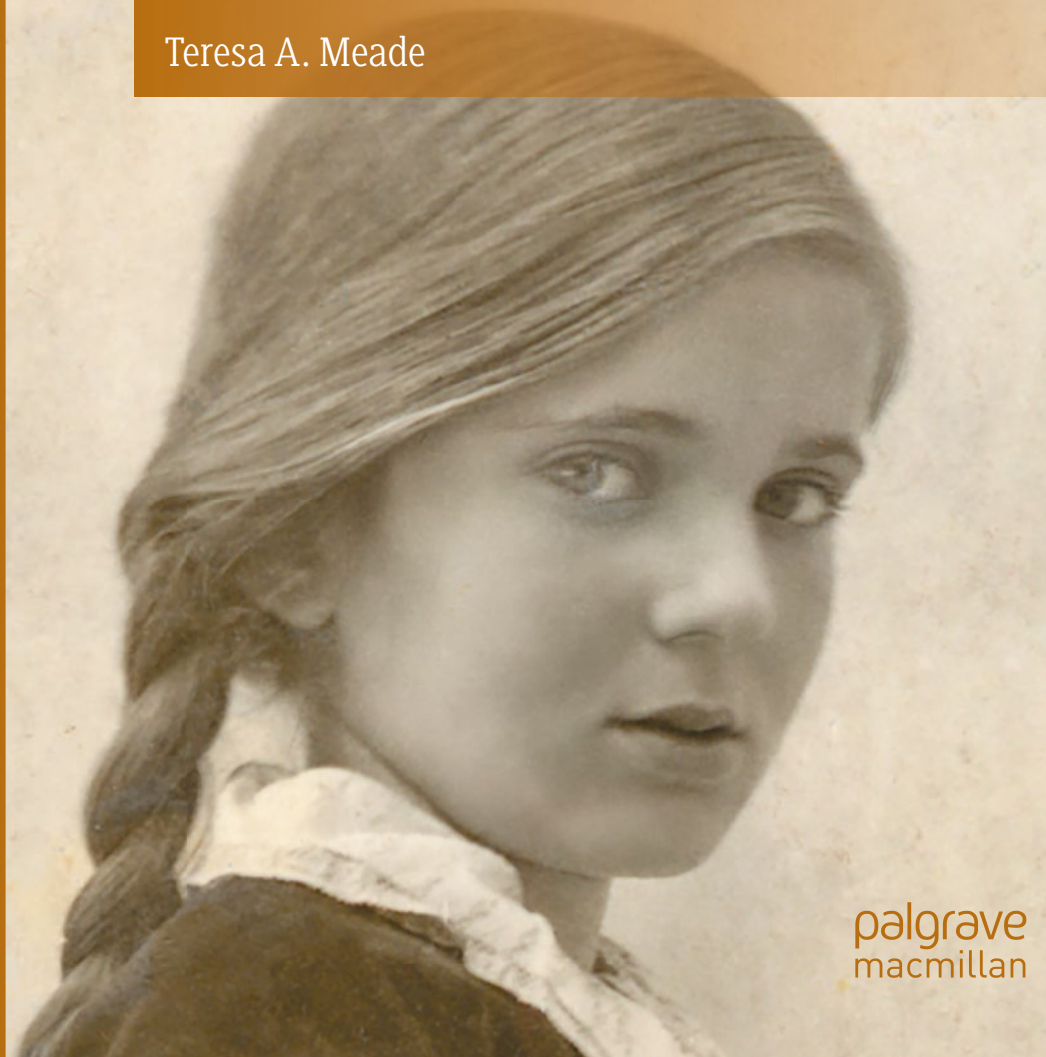
We Don't Become Refugees by Choice

Mia Truskier, Survival, and Activism from Occupied Poland to California, 1920–2014

Teresa A. Meade



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For Andor

Acknowledgments

I first want to thank Peter and Mary Truskier for all their help providing access to documents, sharing with me memories of Mia's life and her family, and for their generous hospitality throughout this project. I have appreciated their factual clarifications and corrections, while leaving me free to develop and express my own interpretation of Mia's life, of her relationship with her family, and of the environment surrounding her. Gretchen Muller allowed me to use her transcribed interviews from 2001 and shared with me her insights from the many hours she spent with Mia. I am only sorry that I did not meet Gretchen until after Mia had died, preventing us from having a wonderful three-way conversation. Mia's relatives Gabriela (Truskier) Sherer and Abraham Lacheta, were forthcoming with interviews and offered corrections and clarifications about the Truskier family. At the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, I learned from Manuel de Paz and most important of all, Sister Maureen Duignan, Mia's longtime working partner and friend. Mia's respect for Sister Maureen shone through in every conversation we had and it was through her that Mia connected with EBSC and the refugee cause. We are all indebted to Sister Maureen and the staff of the EBSC, whose tireless dedication to refugee rights makes the present world a more livable place and provides us hope for a better future.

In the course of writing this book, I have benefitted from many professional and personal friendships. Specialists in Polish and Eastern European history Christopher Browning, Michael Meng, and Steve Berk offered valuable suggestions. I am especially grateful to John Connelly from the University of California, Berkeley, history department for his interest in

the project from the start. He came to Mia's house in Berkeley to talk with her about her experiences, which she enjoyed tremendously, as did he. He read parts of the manuscript and offered valuable corrections, advice, and encouragement. My former colleague at Union College, Bob Sharlet, shared his seemingly boundless store of knowledge about Eastern Europe with me in many conversations and email exchanges before he died. I wish he was here to see the outcome.

I am indebted to many scholars and friends for their feedback on history, theory, and readability, especially Rui Afonso, Ken Aslakson, Harold Berkowitz, Andrea Foroughi, Alicia Frohmann, Linda Gordon, Jim Green, Atina Grossman, Temma Kaplan, Linda Kerber, Melinda Lawson, Judith Lewin, Joyce Madancy, Elena McGrath, Andrew Morris, Brian Peterson, and Barbara Weinstein. Claudia Koonz encouraged this project early on and kept me at it. Claudia, Ron Grele, Danny Walkowitz, and Sarah Dohrmann read chapters and offered helpful, challenging, and supportive critiques. That I finished this book at all is to their credit. The wrong turns and grammatical errors that they probably tried to correct are my fault alone. Special thanks to Bob Mindelzun whose own book about his parents' life in the Soviet work camps inspired me and helped fill in so many gaps. I am grateful to Debbie Rosenberg for introducing me to Bob, and for her years of friendship and hospitality.

Thank you Jonathan Truskier, for scanning documents, Isia Tlusty, for suggestions on family history, and Jay Newman for his help with the family tree. The staff at Union College's Schaffer Library and the Computer Services Help Desk promptly responded to my questions, ordered books, found digital sources that made it possible to carry on despite the worldwide coronavirus pandemic of 2019–2021. They came to my rescue more times than I can count. Library, archival, and computer support is crucial to the research and writing enterprise any time, but was indispensable during the forced isolation of the pandemic. I am grateful to Union College's history department office administrator Jane Earley, student researcher Emma Moger, and the student support staff who were there for help with photocopying, transcribing, and generally taking care of the paperwork that piles up during a long project.

I am indebted to three tremendous Polish–English translators, Viktoryia Baum, Michelina Kulesz, and Emilia Strzalkowska. Emilia worked on this project from its earliest days, translating the correspondence while sitting with Mia, going over wrinkled and faded old letters, deciphering impossibly small script, and piecing together a wartime story. Chris Carlisle

stepped in at the end to translate some key phrases and help with the context of Polish sayings. Thanks to Mia's friend and neighbor Barbara Ehrenberger for her hospitality and good company. My deepest thanks are to the California contingent who appreciated Mia and over the years listened to my stories about her, offered advice, drove me around, and opened their homes for rest, good food and drink, laughs, walks, and conversation, especially Sharon Bohn and George Gmelch, Chris Farmerie, Irene McGinty, Kristi Rasmussen, Brian Tulloch, and Roxanne Dean. I want to thank Steve Turmes for his hospitality during past visits to the Bay Area. We share the pain of losing my sister Martha, who we loved and who delighted in visiting with Mia often before her own untimely death.

Research for this book was supported by the Union College Humanities Faculty Development Fund, Union's travel funds, and the Hadassah Brandeis Institute Research Award. Thank you also to Meagan Simpson, Paul Smith Jesudas, Divya Anish, and the editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan.

Andor Skotnes introduced me to the Truskier family in 1975 and is therefore the most responsible for this book. He was there at my side through it all with countless hours of conversation, and careful reading of the manuscript. His expertise in oral history methodology, technique, and guidance on recording, saving and cataloging the interview files cannot be underestimated. I dedicate this book to him as a small way of saying thank you for this and everything else. My son Darren has always been a crucial assistant to my academic life, driving me to and from airports, advising on travel arrangements, computer problems, and with scanning documents. My daughter Claire and Mia clicked from the first moment the two met, howling with laughter at the "old Polish sayings" that Claire then wrote down for this book and for posterity. Finally, I am thankful to all the Truskiers for their energy, interest, and support. Mia talked about her family lovingly and constantly; they were her anchor and the pieces that made her who she was, namely, Peter, Mary, Jon, Ben, Erin, Vince, Rudy, Alice, Matt, Michelle, Chance, Wemberly, Libby, Orlando, and Kelsey.

Notes on Interviews, Sources, and Formatting

Mia (Tłusty) Truskier is the main narrator of this book. Mia's story was told in her own words to me over many hours in her home in Berkeley, California. From 2010–2013, I lived with Mia at intervals of one to two weeks and recorded over twenty hours of audio interviews, in addition to two hours of video in which she talks about her art, displays newspaper clippings, photographs, and varied memorabilia. Because we interacted on a daily basis, shared meals, and talked about a wide variety of subjects, many of our conversations, and my observation of her day-to-day life and surroundings, were not captured on "tape." On those occasions, I jotted down notes and wrote summaries afterward.

I also interviewed members of Mia's family, her friends, relatives of her deceased husband, Jan, and people she knew through her work in refugee rights. These interviews provide background to the era in which she lived, occasionally add alternative perspectives on historical events, and deepen our understanding of Mia personally and as a political activist. In the text that follows, large portions of my informants' testimonies—again especially Mia's—alternate with my own voice. I have indicated in the text when I draw on the words of Mia and other informants, especially Peter and Mary Truskier, Gabriela (Truskier) Sherer, Abraham Lacheta, Ánh Tran, and Sister Maureen Duignan. If they, or Mia, provided me with written or published comments, I placed the remarks in quotes and provided citations. In a few cases, I have labeled a particular passage with a name to distinguish the comments from Mia's.

Finally, I relied on Gretchen Muller's transcribed interview of Mia, especially regarding the latter's early years in Poland. Throughout the

text, I interspersed Mia's words from the Muller transcription with those from Mia's interviews with me, sometimes noting how she repeated and slightly altered an account that she relayed to both of us. Gretchen Muller interviewed Mia from November 1999 through October 2001 and completed the transcription in December 2001. I began to interview Mia ten years later, when she was in her nineties and had endured more health problems, but was still very alert mentally, if more confined in terms of mobility. My conversations with Mia went beyond in topic and time period the interview with Gretchen and focused on her political activism, work with the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, and views on current political events.

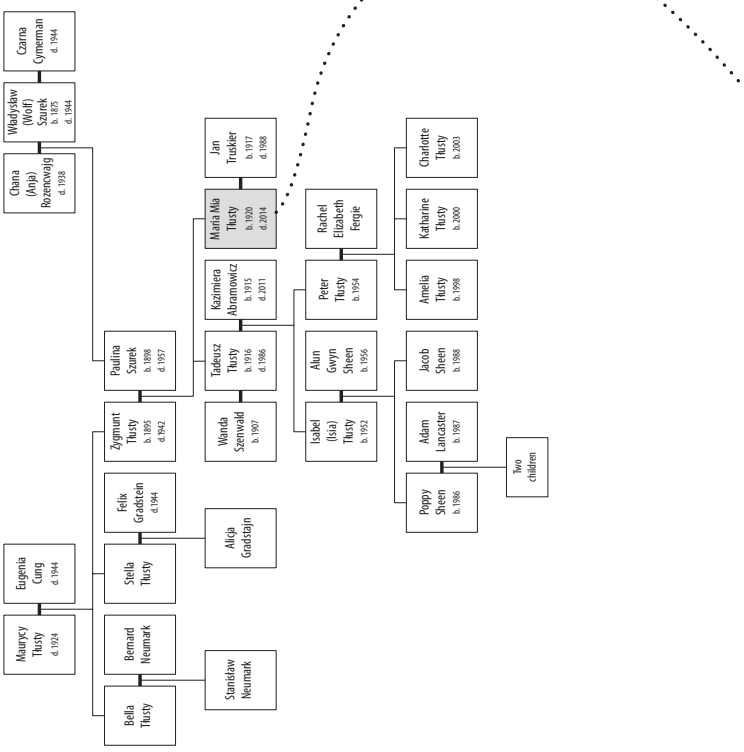
In deciding on the visual presentation of Mia's testimony, I am influenced by the advice of Alessandro Portelli. In his many books and essays on the practice and uses of oral testimony, Portelli emphasizes the importance of placing the interviewee at the center of the narrative. The voice of the interviewer, the person arranging, constructing, and conveying the testimony in a written document—in this case my voice—should, he warns "be used as sparely as possible."[1] Because it is Mia's own life history that interests us, her testimony is primary. Nonetheless, my comments and questions to Mia, my agreements, disagreements, and conclusions, as well as empirical documentation, are indispensable to the presentation of Mia's life. In effect, Mia and I are conversing as historians with the goal of understanding her experiences and the era in which she lived.

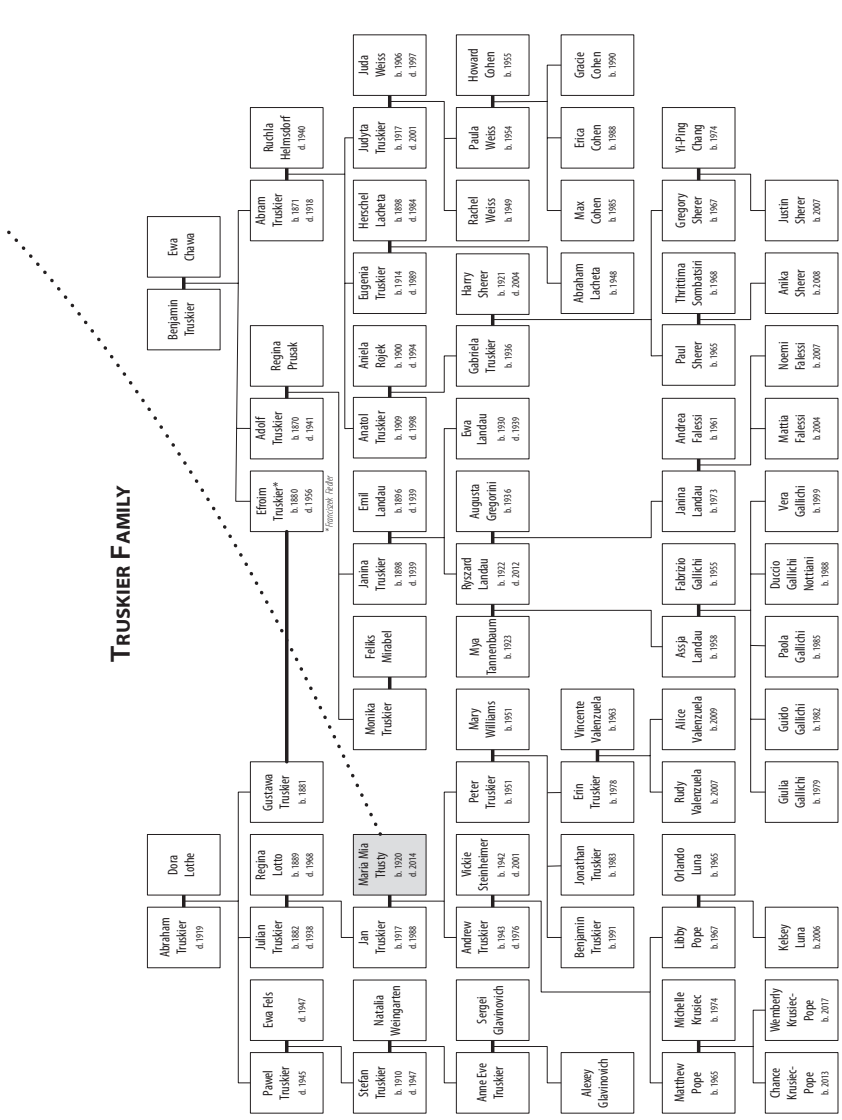
The interviews with Mia have been digitized, loosely indexed, and portions have been transcribed. Copies of these interviews, Gretchen Muller's transcript, and many letters in Polish, are in my possession and in the possession of Mia's son, Peter Truskier. We plan to deposit them in a scholarly archive.

Note

1. Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 68–69.

Tłusty Family




TRUSKIER FAMILY
Abraham Truskier d. 1919
Dora Lothe
Julian Truskier b. 1882 d. 1938
Regina Lotto b. 1889 d. 1968
Jan Truskier b. 1917 d. 1988
Maria Mia Thusty b. 1920 d. 2014
Natalia Weingarten
Ewa Fels d. 1947
Paweł Truskier d. 1945
Stefan Truskier b. 1910 d. 1947
Gustawa Truskier b. 1881
Efroim Truskier* b. 1880 d. 1956
*Ephraim Feller
Benjamin Truskier
Ewa Chawa
Regina Prusak
Adolf Truskier b. 1870 d. 1941
Abram Truskier b. 1871 d. 1918
Ruchla Helmsdorf d. 1940
Janina Truskier b. 1898 d. 1939
Felliks Mirabel
Emil Landau b. 1896 d. 1939
Aniela Rojek b. 1900 d. 1994
Anatol Truskier b. 1909 d. 1998
Eugenia Truskier b. 1914 d. 1989
Herschel Lacheta b. 1898 d. 1984
Judyta Truskier b. 1917 d. 2001
Judа Weiss b. 1906 d. 1997
Monika Truskier
Ryszard Landau b. 1922 d. 2012
Mya Tannenbaum b. 1923
Augusta Gregorini b. 1936
Ewa Landau b. 1930 d. 1939
Gabriela Truskier b. 1936
Harry Sherer b. 1931 d. 2004
Paula Weiss b. 1954
Howard Cohen b. 1955
Mary Williams b. 1951
Peter Truskier b. 1951
Vickie Steinheimer b. 1942 d. 2001
Andrew Truskier b. 1943 d. 1976
Sergei Glavinovich
Anne-Eve Truskier
Vincente Valenzuela b. 1963
Erin Truskier b. 1978
Jonathan Truskier b. 1983
Benjamin Truskier b. 1991
Alexey Glavinovich
Assja Landau b. 1958
Fabrizio Gallichi b. 1955
Janina Landau b. 1973
Andrea Falessi b. 1961
Paul Sherer b. 1965
Thritima Sombatsiri b. 1968
Rachel Weiss b. 1949
Erica Cohen b. 1988
Gracie Cohen b. 1990
Alice Valenzuela b. 2009
Rudy Valenzuela b. 2007
Guido Gallichi b. 1982
Paola Gallichi b. 1985
Duccio Gallichi Nottiani b. 1988
Vera Gallichi b. 1999
Mattia Falessi b. 2004
Noemi Falessi b. 2007
Abraham Lacheta b. 1948
Max Cohen b. 1985
Gregory Sherer b. 1967
Yi-Ping Chang b. 1974
Anika Sherer b. 2008
Justin Sherer b. 2007
Orlando Luna b. 1965
Libby Pope b. 1967
Kelsey Luna b. 2006
Michelle Krusiec b. 1974
Wemberly Krusiec-Pope b. 2017
Matthew Pope b. 1965
Chance Krusiec-Pope b. 2013
Giulia Gallichi b. 1979

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About the Author

Teresa A. Meade is Florence B. Sherwood Professor of History and Culture Emerita at Union College. She has authored and edited books, articles, and journals on Latin America, and gender, sexuality, and women's studies, including *A History of Modern Latin America, 1800-to the Present, "Civilizing" Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889–1920, A Brief History of Brazil, and The Companion to Global Gender History*. She is a member of the *Radical History Review* Editorial Collective, former president of the Board of Trustees of the *Journal of Women's History*, and recipient of grants from the J. William Fulbright and the National Endowment for Humanities Foundations, and the Hadassah Brandeis Institute.

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CHAPTER 1

Mia Truskier: The "Oldest Refugee"

On May 17, 2014 a large group congregated at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California for a memorial service in honor of Mia Truskier. Sister Maureen Duignan, Executive Director of the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC) and Mia's closest friend and collaborator, greeted the congregants: "We are gathered here this morning to bid farewell to our dearly beloved sister Mia Truskier for whom we grieve and whose life spanned ten decades. As we honor Mia today, we celebrate a woman who truly loved her family beyond compare, a woman of peace, who tried to bring harmony in conflict, a woman of hospitality, whose door was wide open to all, especially the immigrant and the refugee."

St. John's Presbyterian may have seemed an odd choice for honoring the life of a secular Jew and spiritual skeptic, but as one of the founding parishes of the Sanctuary Movement in 1982, it was entirely fitting. Along with four other Bay Area churches (University Lutheran, St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, St. Mark's Episcopal, and Trinity Methodist), St. John's joined with Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, to provide sanctuary to thousands of people fleeing torture, imprisonment, and death at the hands of the brutal military-ruled governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. Mia was active in this cause, serving on the EBSC Board of Trustees until her death on February 8, 2014, just short of her ninety-fourth birthday.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_1

As a historian of Latin America, I interviewed Mia about her work while in the first stages of a book on North American activists involved in providing sanctuary for Central American refugees in the United States (US). Our conversations began in 2011 and continued over the next two years. In her nineties, physically frail but mentally sharp as ever, Mia was continuing to offer material and moral support to the EBSC projects and fundraisers, even making it down to the Berkeley office on occasion. When I asked why she devoted so many hours to this work, she responded: "The answer is simple, because I will never forget what it is like to be a refugee."

From Survival to Activism

Often called EBSC's "oldest refugee," Mia along with her husband and other family members had escaped from German-occupied Poland in the spring of 1940, lived semi-clandestinely in Italy through World War II, and immigrated to the US in 1949. Although her journey from Poland to Italy to Nebraska, and eventually California, is a remarkable tale, it is not what drew so many people to her memorial service. Mia's son Peter said it best in his welcoming remarks: "This is the thing that most impresses me when I think back on my mother's life. The fact that her experience during the war made her more, not less, able to embrace the common humanity of all people and that she felt compelled to act on it." Mia had traded in the dangers and disappointments of the war years for a life of responsible activism in aid of refugees facing similar circumstances today. As the many testimonies during the memorial service revealed, Mia's was an activism that crossed racial, ethnic, and national lines.

Mia identified as a refugee but used the rights citizenship accorded her to advocate for new waves of refugees. She recognized that just as doors had slammed shut denying safe harbor to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, people currently escaping violence, abuse and grinding poverty are deserving of our assistance. Since she had been refused asylum in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe in 1940 when she and her family desperately needed it, she was not going to sit by while the same thing happened to millions fleeing from El Salvador, Haiti, Syria, Sudan, Palestine, and many other places.

Most often, refugee narratives focus on dangers overcome, on near-misses with capture and death, and on survivors' arrival to a safe and meaningful present. We discuss the lives of refugees in our book clubs, teach or learn about them in classrooms, and ponder the refugee crisis

Fig. 1.1 Mia selling crafts at the EBSC table at the Berkeley Holiday Craft Fair, ca. 2009. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

from a comfortable distance. The heroic memoirs, biographies, collected oral testimonies, films, and podcasts that chronicle the plight of millions of displaced people inform us of suffering and human deprivation across the globe. Mia's story is different, possibly quite rare. As a former refugee, she worked with others to provide housing, employment and a path to citizenship for all refugees, regardless of their particular backgrounds. In the EBSC newsletter that she edited, Mia explained what motivated her work.

> A few years ago, at one of our EBSC gatherings, I was jokingly introduced as "our oldest refugee." I accepted the title in the way it was intended. I felt amused but also honored. The fact is that I never was a refugee in this country. I came to the U.S. on an immigration visa and have been a citizen for half a century. Still, I do deserve the title of refugee because, during World War II in Europe, I became what today people often refer to as an "illegal alien." I think that, regardless of when, where, or under what circumstances they have to flee their country, all refugees have so much in common that they are entitled to speak on each other's behalf. We don't become refugees by choice.[1]

Mia recognized her status as an immigrant to the US, but tended to speak of herself as a refugee, particularly in her later years. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose family escaped from South Vietnam in 1975, emphatically refers to himself as a refugee, not an immigrant, as a way of legitimizing all refugees. According to Nguyen, "We call ourselves a 'nation of immigrants'; it's part of our mythology that immigrants come here and achieve the American dream. … But refugees are different. Refugees are unwanted where they come from. They're unwanted where they go to." Immigrants, the myth would have it, came here willingly, worked hard, overcame discrimination, beat back hardship and constructed a great land. Refugees, by contrast, are victims with no standing in the creation of national greatness, mythical or otherwise. Nguyen turns the tables by insisting on his identity as a refugee and, similar to Mia, using it as a source of empowerment "to advocate for the new refugees today."[2]

Possibly because she came to America as an adult anxious to embrace the opportunities her new life afforded, Mia saw no benefit in parsing a distinction between refugee and immigrant. Certainly she had not chosen to leave Poland, but she did choose to come to the US for the very specific reason that this was a place where she could participate fully in civic life. When I asked why she and her husband Jan (pronounced "Yon") did not remain in Italy, where many people had assisted them when they really needed it, where they had found work, and where they had made many friends, her response was definite. "We could not become citizens in Italy, at least for a very long time. We had no future there." Ryszard, Jan's cousin who escaped with them from Poland, remained in Italy, married and had children, but was only able to obtain citizenship after twenty-five years. That was not an existence Mia and Jan envisioned for themselves and their family; they sought a place in which they could participate as full-blown citizens. In the wake of the war, destruction, and the Holocaust, neither Poland nor Italy afforded them such rights and, crucially, responsibilities. Despite the fact that the US had not in the past shown any willingness to admit Poles, nor to provide refuge to Jews escaping Nazi oppression, it was a country willing to grant citizenship to refugees.

The crux of Mia's story, as the title to this book implies, was surviving in order to start again in a place where full civic engagement was possible. The hackneyed concept of "starting again" furthers a myth of America as a land of opportunity where immigrants struggled and presumably were able to fulfill their dreams. In reality the masses who poured into the

harbors of New York, Boston, New Orleans, and San Francisco in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often fleeing famine, war, political oppression, and persecution in their homelands. Were they not refugees? Indeed with the exception of indigenous people, who had not invited the settlers to take their land, or Africans enslaved and transported across the ocean, or Mexicans who lost their rights and property in war and treaties, were not all the rest running from the hard times of the old country? Alas, historical context is everything. Thousands of women, men, and children escaping famine in Africa are in today's terminology refugees, but the multitudes who fled famine in Ireland in the nineteenth century were immigrants. At what point does a refugee become an immigrant? When is a victim of oppression no longer a burden pounding at our shores but is instead proof of the American dream? The outcome has rested on the shifting sands of economic prosperity, political realignments, and short-term policies. For the Truskiers, it was the difference between prewar scarcity and the booming economy of the postwar era, the luck of a presidential decree that opened the borders to victims of war who were unable to return to their homelands, and the fortuitous existence of a Truskier uncle in Nebraska who was willing to serve as a sponsor. Others fleeing identical circumstances then and now have faced a closed, often hostile, border. As her son remarked at her memorial, it was Mia's own experience in the war and, I would add, her own good fortune surviving it, that made her more, not less, able to see the common humanity of all refugees.

Who Was Mia Truskier?

In our conversations, Mia told me stories about her happy, comfortable childhood in Warsaw before the outbreak of war. She recounted her escape in 1940 to Italy on a black-market visa, followed by the perilous war years in Rome where she and her husband passed as gentiles, supporting themselves in the gray market of odd jobs available to those without working papers. She was a go-between for Poles confined in Vatican City who were supporting the Polish Government-in-Exile based in London. She and her husband knelt in chapels to receive messages from partisan diplomats in the Vatican intended for members of the underground resistance in Poland. Always she worried about the health and safety of her mother who along with thousands of other "hidden Jews" remained on the Aryan side back in Warsaw, constantly evading the watchful patrols of the Gestapo.[3]

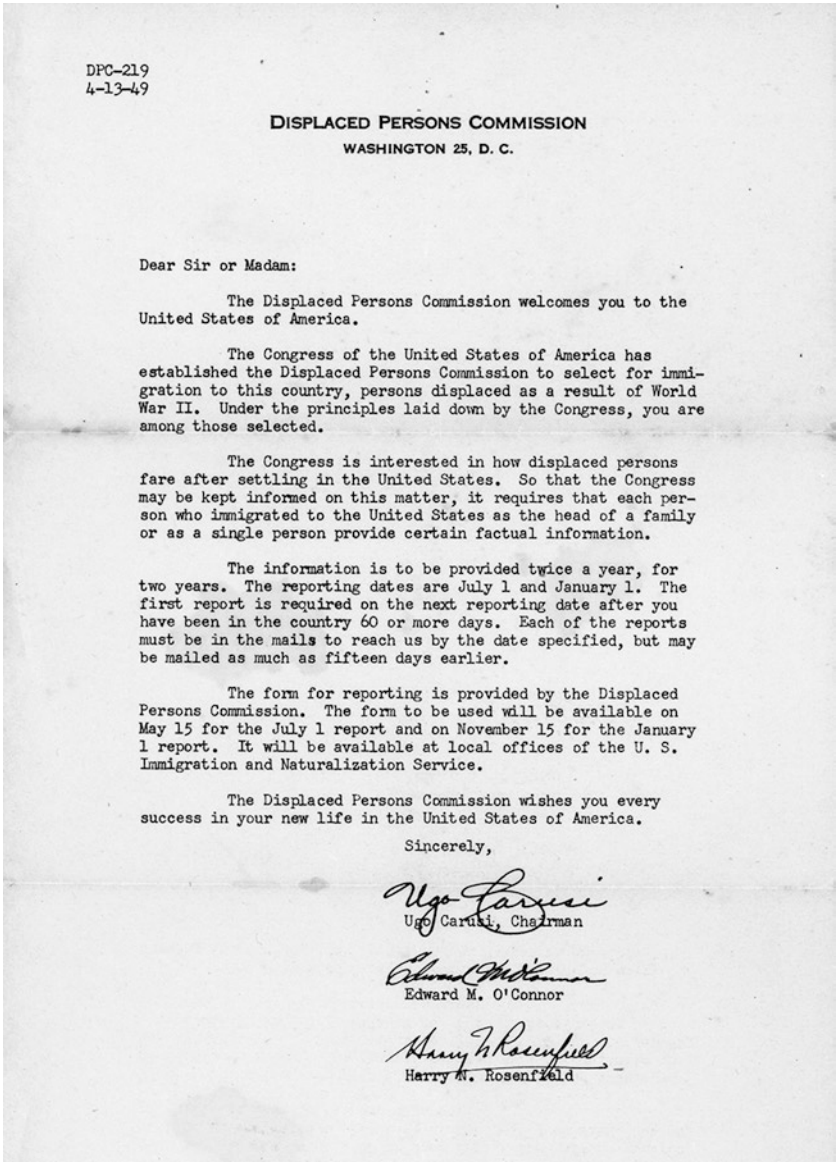
Fig. 1.2 Trees for Haiti poster. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Likewise, she was anxious to know the fates of her father, brother, and sister-in-law, held in a work camp far into the interior of the Soviet Union. The stories that had taken up residence in her mind while living through World War II, and in the years afterward as an immigrant political activist building a new life in the US, now tumbled out into my digital recorder.

Meeting Mia

I first met Mia, and her husband Jan, in 1975 at their home in Long Beach, California. I got to know them through my partner, Andor Skotnes, a friend for years of their son Peter and his wife Mary. Our first meeting made an impression. I recall how they greeted me with such genuine warmth and expectation of maturity that as a twenty-something student I was caught off guard. Then, over the years, our relationship deepened when Andor and I paid visits to Long Beach, and later Oakland, where they moved to be closer to Peter and Mary. I only saw Jan a few times over the years before his death in 1988, but remember him as gracious and

Fig. 1.3 Mia and Andy Truskier International Red Cross Passport for Travel by Stateless Persons, 1949. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)



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DISPLACED PERSONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

Dear Sir or Madam:

The Displaced Persons Commission welcomes you to the United States of America.

The Congress of the United States of America has established the Displaced Persons Commission to select for immigration to this country, persons displaced as a result of World War II. Under the principles laid down by the Congress, you are among those selected.

The Congress is interested in how displaced persons fare after settling in the United States. So that the Congress may be kept informed on this matter, it requires that each person who immigrated to the United States as the head of a family or as a single person provide certain factual information.

The information is to be provided twice a year, for two years. The reporting dates are July 1 and January 1. The first report is required on the next reporting date after you have been in the country 60 or more days. Each of the reports must be in the mails to reach us by the date specified, but may be mailed as much as fifteen days earlier.

The form for reporting is provided by the Displaced Persons Commission. The form to be used will be available on May 15 for the July 1 report and on November 15 for the January 1 report. It will be available at local offices of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The Displaced Persons Commission wishes you every success in your new life in the United States of America.

Sincerely,

Ugo Carusi, Chairman

Edward M. O'Connor

Harry N. Rosenfield

Fig. 1.4 Letter to Truskiers before leaving Italy from Displaced Persons Commission, Washington, D.C., 1949. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

attentive, interested in me not simply as my husband's partner. From Mia I have learned of Jan's commitment to justice and equality, and of his sense of humor. One example I remember well. After long hours of talking when Mia was tired she would sigh, "Jan used to say 'I feel like the last spasms of an expiring oyster,'" (!?) and I knew that it was time to rest. Whether that was from Polish or just something he had made up, I never knew. After Jan died, Andor and I visited Mia at Peter and Mary's Berkeley home, where she had an apartment. It was during one of those visits that she began to tell me about her involvement with the Sanctuary Movement.

Our conversations stretched over years, usually in her dining room, sitting at a long Danish modern table strewn with photographs and clippings. Her home was an astonishing archive of the crisis of the refugee.

Fig. 1.5 Concerned Oakland Neighbors support Cassie Lopez, a Progressive Democrat, for Oakland City Council. Mia, Jan, Peter, Mary, and Erin Truskier with supporters, 1983. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

There were stacks of papers, newsletters, and essays chronicling the hardships of Salvadoran, Honduran, and Haitian refugees; petitions and letters pleading the cases of children escaping from violence and abuse in many countries of the world. Closer scrutiny uncovered closets and bureaus bursting with photographs and mementos from a previous life in Poland and Italy, documents and newspaper clippings, children's books in Polish and Italian, even reels of home movies screening an earlier life, although whose I was never quite sure. I vividly recall her piercing blue eyes, as she shared a tiny photograph of a family member or close friend. Her shoulders drooped at the remembrance of loved ones gone: her father, her mother, her brother, her husband, her oldest son. She stooped intently over the brittle and smudged letters she had brought with her from Europe to America. As I listened and recorded, Mia drew together the joys, dangers, and tragedies of her life into an intricate and remarkably coherent personal testimony.

Marianne Hirsch has contributed a valuable insight to the enduring memory of the Holocaust as experienced in subsequent generations. She uses family photographs as a window into understanding the lives of her parents hiding in Romania during the war. The photos are tools that communicate the emotions of people Hirsch knew intimately but whose harrowing, life-changing experiences she learned of secondhand and found hard to visualize. She calls this interpretive project "postmemory" and demarcates two roles for an interpreter: familial and affiliative. Mia and I each fit a part of that duality. Reacting as she did to her family's photographs and letters as a survivor, Mia's postmemory was both experiential and familial. She, her husband, and their families endured the same traumatic period from different locales, levels of danger, degrees of pain and suffering. In the end some of the family survived and others did not. I, on the other hand, reacted affiliatively, as one who "feels a connection to the people or events affected by them," but not as a member of the family.[4] Hirsch's definitions point to a critical difference between Mia and me. I am too young to have experienced the war, have lived for the most part far from the places and events in Mia's photos, and I am not Jewish. Nonetheless, what Mia told me of the people in the photos moved me deeply, because of my affection and admiration for her, as well as my knowledge of the lives and tragic events behind the images. Since the Holocaust was a defining moment for Mia's family because they were Jewish our fates would have played out differently. If I had been there I could have been targeted for my actions and choices, but not for my

ethnic/religious identity. The debates over accusations of "genocide" versus "crimes against humanity" in the postwar trials at Nuremburg and elsewhere interrogated this distinction.[5]

From Memory to Storyworld

Mia constructed for me what the media-studies scholar David Herman calls a "Storyworld," the remembrances of life fashioned into a cohesive narrative and illustrated with more than words. I had many pieces with which to work, including remembrances from her family members, coworkers at EBSC, and artifacts. I benefited from an extensive transcription of an interview Gretchen Muller conducted in December 2001 and marveled at how closely Mia reproduced identical anecdotes in re-telling her story to me a decade later. She added layers, slightly varying the words or changing the details around the edges, but never altering the contours of her narrative thread.[6] What changed in her stories, even quite dramatically, were the asides: descriptions of a person or place, memories of her work with refugee groups, occasionally a lingering anger and frustration when recounting long-ago slights directed at her as a woman, as a Jew, or as a heavily accented Polish immigrant.

According to Herman, a Storyworld is built from text, but also from material culture such as photographs, newspaper clippings, souvenirs, memorabilia, letters, and so forth that people collect and hold onto so as to make sense of their lives. I found Herman's concept useful in explaining how I interpreted this singular oral history. Mia's recorded memories related what Herman sees as "the mental models of the situations and events being recounted of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner."[7] While her own words comprise the hub of the Storyworld, the photographs, letters, documents, clippings, and flyers displaying her work as a designer and artist, and the objects themselves—puppets and paper constructions—form the spokes radiating from the axis. Mia's reminiscences while holding an object or viewing a photo could evoke a tale of good or bad fortune, spin off into a lengthy account of a calamitous adventure, occasionally bring tears to her eyes, or end abruptly in a lament or a lecture about the times in which she lived and how we might draw on that past to improve our world today. Through the combination of memorabilia and recollections, the pieces of her life came into focus. Although many characters and narrations enter this book, the Storyworld is Mia's, which she created in conversation with me as she

described one or another of many visual props. She was an artist, after all, whose life history drew from a rich material culture comprised of photographs, drawings, news clippings, puppets, centerpieces, even wigs and costumes, she had brought from Europe or made in this country to illustrate her own story.

Anecdotes from Mia's last months in Poland to her years in Italy are interspersed with declarations such as: "People were so kind," or "They helped us find a place to live," or "After they introduced us to that person such-and-such improved." Not only did she remember vividly what it was like to be a refugee, she never discounted the helping hands that got them through risky, occasionally terrifying, times. As we discussed her life in Europe, it became apparent that her devotion to refugee rights at EBSC was a way to turn her own difficult past into a generous and responsible present devoted to assisting those fleeing from war, violence, and hardship. For over twenty years she directed most of the EBSC's art work and publicity, an indispensable role at one of the foremost refugee sanctuaries in the country.[8] Clearly, Mia's identification with "those who suffer," and her activism in support of refugee rights in particular, grew out of her own circumstances. In her 1995 essay, entitled "The Gift from an Unknown Donor," we get a sense of her philosophy of life.

> The gift of life is mysterious: it comes without printed instructions on how to put it together, or directions on what it is for. It is like a mosaic, and each one of us has some pieces of it to put together and to create a design. It is not a "paint by numbers" composition; we have to make our own sense of it. As we work on it, we discover that somehow some of us did not get as large a number of pieces as some others, that some of the pieces are not as beautiful as others, that some got chipped or broken. Since we cannot find an answer to why that is, it becomes our task, as we work together, to make up for it ourselves, to share what we have, to help put the broken pieces together.
>
> Sometimes we get discouraged and wish we had been given some tools to put the mosaic together, but if we know where to look, we discover that we are equipped with a multi-purpose tool: love of life and of all living things; a love that brings forth the capacity to identify with those who suffer and a sense of human solidarity; a love that becomes an imperative to take a stand against cruelty and injustice; a love that becomes a yearning for courage to take that stand.[9]

In 1939, the dramatic transformation of her homeland caught nineteen-year-old Mia by surprise, interrupting her holiday in Brittany on the French coast. She admits that her youth and social status had made her more than a little blind to the catastrophe awaiting the Jews of Europe. When the German army marched into Poland in September 1939 and began to impose restrictions on Jews, Mia, her mother and other family members ignored the Reich's most egregious order to don the identifying Star of David. Speaking accent-less Polish, bearing the confidence of their class and educational background, they hid in plain sight. As months progressed and the repression directed against Jews increased, the family became aware that their situation was daily growing more dangerous. Eventually Mia, her 22-year-old husband, Jan Truskier, her mother-in-law, Regina (Lotto) Truskier, in her early fifties, and Jan's teenage cousin, Ryszard Landau, two years younger than Mia, managed to escape from Poland in April of 1940. Traveling through a bureaucratic maze armed with Bulgarian visas purchased from an honorary consul on the Warsaw black market and invalid for entry anywhere (especially Bulgaria!), the foursome got into Italy on the basis of a twenty-four hour transit visa. There they lived out World War II lost in the throngs of European refugees, Italian civilian and military officials, and no small number of German army officers. The journey from Warsaw to Rome, from there to the US was scattered with danger, subterfuge, occasional comical near-misses, and a considerable measure of luck.

A World of Refugees

What happened to Mia and her family can be read as a template upon which the broader refugee phenomenon is drawn. Her life spanned two major moments in the history of human displacement: the years during and after World War II and the contemporary era, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century. By the end of World War II, it became apparent to the international community that the task of processing millions of displaced persons was too much for local and national private and public agencies. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) convened in 1944 to communicate and begin to unite the extensive, disparate, and remote organizations under a single umbrella. In 1950, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) took its place and began to consolidate aid for the fifty million internal and external refugees in Europe and Asia, a mass of stateless

people that exceeded anything the world had ever before faced. Today, however, the number of displaced people has climbed far past that total to reach a staggering eighty million. Yearly the number skyrockets as human misery piles on top of political stalemate, while the world's citizens wring their hands in despair, turn a blind eye, offer a modicum of refuge, or even hostilely disparage and sometimes violently attack the growing collectivity of uprooted persons. Ominously, the International Organization for Migration has now projected that as many as 1.5 billion people may be forced to leave their homelands by 2050, owing to climate change alone.[10]

In the historical record as well as the contemporary media, refugees are an anonymous, desperate, ragged, tired, moving mass of humanity, over half of whom are women and children, and half of the total under the age of eighteen. Their plight is captured in photographs, headlines, newspaper accounts, the occasional memoir, and tallies of mind-numbing, unfathomable numbers. According to most documentation, people were expelled or fled from lands as soon as the earliest polities were formed—even before the known touchstone of 740 BCE when ten of the twelve tribes were expelled from ancient Israel and dispersed throughout the known world. In modern history we mark the internal and external displacement of millions during and after World War I as the beginning of the crisis, which was then followed by the expulsion and genocide between 1915 and 1923 of over a million Armenians killed or driven out in the wake of the Turkish seizure of the Ottoman Empire.

Apart from World War II, probably the most dramatic mid-twentieth century migration stemmed from the breakup of the British Empire in the Asian subcontinent in 1947 when an estimated twenty million Hindus and Muslims crossed the borders of India and Pakistan during Partition. The wars in Asia, especially the former Indochina, forced millions from their homelands both during and after the conflict into the complicated diasporas.[11] Currently, the majority of displaced persons are in Turkey, including six and a half million Syrians who have fled the war in their homeland. Countless more have left and still flood out of Afghanistan into Pakistan. The wars in Africa have created a major refugee crisis, with nearly three million escaping the fighting and persecution in South Sudan for the comparably unsafe lands of Uganda, Kenya, and Sudan. Around 500,000 North Africans have fled to Southern Europe in boats so rickety that passengers drown in the process.

News headlines and xenophobic outcries in the US are directed against migrants traveling from El Salvador and Honduras, pouring into

Guatemala and from there crossing into Mexico destined for the US–Mexico frontier. However, the Central American migrants are not the largest uprooted group from Latin America. That distinction goes to Colombia, where the UNHCR estimates that almost seven million people, or ten percent of the population, were forced from their homes during the decades of the US-led "War on Drugs" that ripped through the country beginning in the 1970s. Although up until a few years ago Venezuela was hosting hundreds of thousands of Colombian refugees, the situation now has reversed. The UNHCR in February 2021 reported that Colombia has become one of the top host countries in the world, having accepted 1.7 million Venezuelans on a ten-year long protection status. Notably, UNHCR also calculates that there are 7,671,124 Colombian refugees, the majority internally displaced, giving that nation the "unique" distinction of having the most refugees internally and second (to Turkey) in the number accepted from outside its borders.

The refugee crisis on the southern US border jumped off the pages of newspapers in 2014 when thousands of unaccompanied minors, mainly from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, were detained or managed to cross from Mexico into the Border States. At the end of 2014, the number topped 90,000 for that year alone. Two years later under the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017), deportations from the US to Mexico and Central America had shattered all previous records. The migrants included many children who had traveled without relatives in coyote-led groups across the desert and into the inhospitable arms of the Border Security Police. Beginning in 2017 with the Trump administration's draconian deportation and border restrictions, officials from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) turned "stop and frisk" into a national campaign, raiding places of work and harassing nonwhite immigrants, many in possession of valid work visas. These actions brought the condition of migrants detained in camps, sometimes in holding cells and cages, to the attention of international monitors of human rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic further sickened and killed large numbers of immigrant workers in meat-packing and food-processing plants, toiling in agricultural fields, as well as millions of migrants forced to take jobs in precarious, dangerous, and unsanitary production and distribution centers in the US and across the globe. The particularly barbaric conditions in which thousands of children have been sickened with the virus and other illnesses while locked in cages along the US–Mexico border awaiting deportation, stands as one of the crimes against humanity for which the

US government should be held accountable. By mid-2020, ICE revealed that it detained nearly 600 children after deporting their parents and admitted to having no idea where the adults were sent, nor any plan for reuniting the families. Donald Trump's presidency ended in 2021. Whether subsequent administrations, under Joseph Biden and later, will manage to resolve this crisis is impossible to say.

The Work of Rescue and Asylum

Until her death, Mia worked with Sister Maureen Duignan, a Catholic nun who came to head the EBSC after several years working in El Salvador, frequently one step ahead of right-wing death squads who terrorized the refugee camps on the Honduras–El Salvador border. Together with many other advocates for refugee-rights, lawyers, and activists, Mia and Sister Maureen spent long hours securing a safe haven or residency for destitute people fleeing war, violence, dictatorship, gender, ethnic, and economic hardship. Each individual story is echoed over and over, filling the file cabinets and computer drives in the cramped offices of the East Bay Sanctuary in Berkeley. One of the largest agencies assisting refugees and asylum-seekers in the country, EBSC yearly provides legal services for more than 2000 of the vulnerable immigrant population, including unaccompanied children as young as three. Over the last ten years it has won asylum for over 3000 applicants from all over the world. Mia volunteered at EBSC as do many others, but there are never enough workers, volunteers, or funds.

Americans like to point to the words of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty as representative of our better nature: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door." In recent years, critics have decried the expressions of ugly racism and xenophobia against refugees, asylum-seekers, and the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," coming from sectors of the US population. While distressingly visible today in the era of social media, radio and television commentators responsible to no one but themselves, a robust nativist culture and hostility toward outsiders have been features of American culture since the early republic.

In the 1930s, many in the US knew that anti-Semitism was a part of official Nazi policy and that German law in 1938 banned Jews from participating in education, politics, industry, and many parts of society. They

knew Jews were indiscriminately targeted, jailed, even killed by police officials and renegade street gangs operating with impunity. Nonetheless, in January 1939 over sixty percent of Americans opposed a proposal to allow 10,000 homeless refugee children from Germany—most of them Jews—to enter the US for placement with waiting families. In 2015, nearly forty-four percent of Americans thought the US should do more to settle Middle Eastern, especially Syrian, refugees, but not necessarily in the US. Many people, politicians in particular, like to quote Emma Lazarus, but making a place for the persecuted, homeless, and tempest-tossed? Not so much.

Polishness and Jewishness

Whereas Mia's dedication to the cause of refugees dominated the later years of her life, her anger at the unfairness of forcing people from their homelands grew from what she saw as not only the anti-Semitism that forced her to embark on a refugee life, but also the unjust treatment of her own country. She was a Polish patriot, incensed at the centuries of Russian and German domination of her country, and quick to remind anyone who would listen that the Warsaw she knew as a child was a cosmopolitan and dynamic European capital. The German occupation during World War II and the postwar Soviet authority wreaked havoc on the entire Polish nation and erased with it the history of a vibrant capital that developed during Poland's brief period of self-government from 1918 to 1939. It especially obliterated the transformations occurring among Poland's urban Jews.

In the popular imaginary, if less so among scholars, Polish Jews have been seen as a people conversant only in Yiddish and isolated from the intellectual and cultural life of mainstream Poland. Antony Polonsky, one of the leading scholars of the history and culture of Polish Jews, argues that in reality by the end of the 1930s many Jews not only spoke Polish in their everyday discourse, but it was the language of their emotions.[12] According to Marci Shore, the Jews of Warsaw were an integral part of the cosmopolitan intellectual strata. "Many of them 'non-Jewish Jews,' in their friend, Deutscher's words, very much felt themselves to be Poles; their Jewish identity was fluid and often subtle."[13] In her memoir, Janina Bauman, who escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto, describes an upbringing analogous to Mia's: "Except for my great-grandfather, who died before I was born, no one in my large family spoke Yiddish, wore beards, skullcaps

or traditional Jewish gaberdines. Nobody was religious. We were all Polish, born on Polish soil, brought up in the Polish tradition, permeated with the spirit of Polish history and literature. Yet conscious of being Jewish, every minute of our lives."[14]

The two sides of this identity, Polishness and Jewishness, tore through the Tłusty family in the days following the 1939 German invasion. Mia's father, Zygmunt, and twenty-two-year-old brother, Tadeusz, dutifully joined the short-lived Polish army to repel the German invaders, a choice they did not make easily. Mia remembered that her father agonized over the decision to obey the government mandate, knowing that it meant leaving his wife and daughter alone and endangered in Warsaw. Nonetheless, as Mia explained, "he was a patriotic Polish citizen so he felt it was his duty to obey the orders of the Polish government." Her father and brother never returned and were instead shipped off to a Soviet work camp on the shores of the White Sea where they toiled for two years. Zygmunt died of typhus in 1942 and Tadeusz survived the work camp and the war, eventually settling and raising a family in England where he practiced medicine until he died in 1986.

When Mia left Warsaw in 1940, her mother, Paulina, did not join her, instead insisting on staying behind in case her husband and son returned from the army, which, of course, did not happen. As the occupation intensified, Paulina lost any opportunity to escape. Passing as Aryan, she never went to the ghetto, instead she remained in Warsaw throughout the war working with her widowered brother-in-law and contacts from Holy Cross Catholic Church, forging and distributing false identity papers for Jews and others seeking to escape from the ghetto and the city. Other Tłusty and Truskier family members who remained in Poland died in the ghettos and death camps with millions of others. Paulina walked out of Warsaw in late 1944 just as the Soviet army took the city. Traveling on foot, with all she still owned in a tiny backpack, she joined throngs of refugees on the roads of Eastern Europe, making her way to join her daughter in Rome. After the war she moved to England and lived with her son and his family until her death in 1957 before her sixtieth birthday.

The Memories and Identities of Mia's Storyworld

In all its far-flung episodes, these family members provide the human face of a much larger story about a place the historian Timothy Snyder calls "the bloodlands," where the civilian populations endured tremendous

suffering and violence.[15] Mia's testimony, letters, and documents from this period provide an important window into that world. I was drawn to her life history because it encapsulates dramatic events, while her actions demonstrate courage and resourcefulness. Nonetheless, her personal history, and the way she related it with illustrations from her own artwork, documents, and letters, exemplified Alessandro Portelli's claim that "memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meaning." It is a way of making sense of the past, of giving form and meaning to one's life, and setting both "the interview and the narrative in their historical context."[16] If instructive for me, and for the Polish translator who helped to refresh Mia's memory as we explored her mother's coded letters, these three-way conversations were also exhilarating. I was not only recording the facts of her life, but viewing, and even participating in, the construction of meaning she had drawn from her experiences: the creation of her Storyworld. Letters and other documents supplement, interpret, and even occasionally contradict Mia's telling, but in the end, this book largely presents her life as she recounted it. And yet, oddly enough, Mia's interpretations presented me with problems.

In the process of writing this book, two lessons in particular emerged. The first is that understanding a life involves grasping the many sides of recollections. As an oral history, this book rests on the events, opinions, and interpretations Mia relayed to me about her life, all of which she viewed and remembered from many angles. The second lesson is the importance of understanding the contradictory identities Mia constructed for herself and the people around her, and the constructions that others made of her. The first involved the testimony of Mia's life as she told it to me and my role in selecting and presenting its essential features, as well as verifying the history that surrounded it. The second required comprehending Mia according to her accepted identity as a Polish-American woman from a comfortable secular Jewish family. The latter was not only different from what I expected to find when I began the interviews, but much more complicated, nuanced, and even unsettling, than I had originally thought.

From the very beginning, I was taken aback by the reactions of friends and colleagues when I talked about Mia, discussed the events of her life, explained how she viewed herself, and, ultimately, why I chose to write this book. Responses varied depending on the subjects we were discussing, but also on the particular background of the person hearing about Mia for the first time. Most found Mia's life fascinating, even if they ventured

doubts about my interpretation, while others wondered if Mia herself was misrepresenting her past. Some of my acquaintances were disbelieving when I talked of Mia's pride in Poland, of her happy, affluent childhood, and of her rare mention of the appurtenances of Judaism, such as food, holidays, traditions, and rituals. Instead, Christmas was for her a happy childhood celebration. A few friends were incredulous, either of Mia as a reliable informant, of me as an interviewer, or of both of us as sufficiently aware of anti-Semitism. I remember a close friend asking, "But are you sure about this? She's talking about Warsaw like it was an ideal place to grow up. Don't you know that the Poles were incredibly anti-Semitic?"

After presenting my work at a scholarly luncheon, one of the attendees remarked that in a million years his Jewish father would never refer to himself as "Polish," despite having been born and raised there. To his father, who had moved to the US, the Poles were Christian haters-of-Jews and if he ever met one that was not an anti-Semite, it was such an exception as not to warrant mention. Commonly, people questioned my discussion of prewar Warsaw as a cosmopolitan city with a large Polish-speaking, educated, Jewish population that was integrated into the high culture of urban society. Wondering if I was misled by the deluded memories of an old woman, they argued, sometimes quite emphatically, that Mia might have had such a childhood in Berlin or Vienna, but not in Warsaw!

Historians Erica Lehrer and Michael Meng discuss what they see as the divergent images of prewar Poland "familiar to North American readers: Poland as an historically blighted land of pogroms, anti-Semitism, Jewish exclusion, persecution, and murder," for which the majority population refuses to take responsibility, even for their complacency with the genocide of millions at the hands of the Germans during the war.[17] The essays in the volume they edited dispute, complicate, and discredit such blanket characterizations. According to the editors, Poland today has a vibrant and growing number of historians, public intellectuals, and activists who oppose anti-Semitism and are engaged in looking honestly into the past. That this new generation of scholars has met with a fierce backlash is to be expected and even indicative of their success in seeking to correct stereotypes. The progress of this newer generation notwithstanding, Poland's current reactionary government is intent on rewriting the wartime narrative, claiming that only the invading Nazis were anti-Semitic, not the Christian Poles, and going so far as to outlaw mention that *any* Poles collaborated with the Holocaust.

From the opposite angle, Mia's recollections chip away at the "familiar North American" image. She took pride in her Polish heritage, as did thousands of others who lived as she did. Her Jewish ancestry did not negate her Polish present since if she was not Polish, what was she?[18] John Connelly captures the essence of Mia's predicament in a discussion of the background of Jan Gross, the Polish historian known for uncovering the 1941 Polish gentile massacre of Jews in Jebwabne, Poland.[19] While Gross's wide publication of this and other murders of Jews set the tone for a reappraisal of the role of Polish anti-Semitism during the war, Gross himself was well aware of a less polarized prewar Poland. The son of a Jewish barrister father and gentile mother who was a member of the underground, Gross remembered an "older, romantic sense of Polishness, largely forgotten in mostly mono-ethnic postwar Poland—a Polishness that had included Jews, Lithuanians and Ukrainians." And as with some of Mia's relatives, Jan Gross's family did not leave Poland until the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968.[20]

Postwar Poland in the Shadow of the Holocaust

These conversations forced me to look deeper into the issue of Jewish identity and Polish nationalism. For myself, prior to delving into this project, I had only a vague understanding of Polish–Jewish relations. My view of the attempted extermination of the Jews of Poland was drawn from Claude Landzman's nine-hour-long documentary, *Shoah* (the Hebrew word for catastrophe), especially the interviews with peasants who lived or worked near the concentration camps and admitted knowing that people were being killed there. Based on Lanzman's and other documentaries, on novels, movies, and general history, my impression of Polish history when I began this book was that Jews were religious, ghettoized, persecuted, and murdered; some were secular, communist, and socialist resisters, but in the end they were all defeated. The non-Jews in the main, apart from the left and socialists, I tended to think were steeped in prejudice and had either collaborated with the Nazis or had been prone to ignore the Holocaust unfolding around them. There was something incongruous, therefore, in hearing Mia's descriptions of her happy childhood and observing her pride in being Polish.

For my critics the two were irreconcilable. Polish nationalism was Christian and anti-Semitic, therefore by implication, no self-respecting Jew took pride in Poland, its language, history, and culture. Daniel

Walkowitz confronts this polarity in his study of Jewish heritage tourism in Poland, embedded within the broader picture of his search for his grandmother's past in the early socialist labor Bund of Lódz.[21] Encountering responses akin to what I had when he discussed his work with friends and colleagues, Walkowitz concluded, "I understood the hostility many Jews brought—and still bring—to places they dismiss as historically and unremittingly anti-Semitic."[22] In addition, the "Sovietization" of Polish history from 1945 to 1989 attempted to erase the record of the Poles' daring and effective resistance to Nazi occupation, both from Jews and non-Jews alike.

After the fall of communism in the early 1990s, a de-Stalinized, nationalist analysis began to replace the previous history with a revised, fully formed story of proud Poles building a new nation on a slate wiped clean of past foreign domination. For example, the Soviet version of the "liberation" of Warsaw is of a powerful Red Army marching in to save the vanquished Poles from the clutches of German tyranny. By contrast, the Poles' version is of 200,000 of the city's residents fighting bravely against the powerful German war machine in full view of the Soviet military forces waiting on the other side of the river for the "troublesome" Poles to exhaust themselves in defeat.

Competing popular memories of Poland's wartime and postwar histories can be gleaned from historical commemorations and museums. The bravery of the Polish combatants in August through September 1944 is memorialized in the Museum of the Warsaw Rising, inaugurated in 1994 to herald the resistance of the civilian population and to draw attention to the deceit of Stalin's army that refused to lend a hand. It was, indeed, one of the events of World War II that Mia recounted bitterly and used as proof that the duplicitous Russians, even as communists, had changed little from when Tsarist imperialists ruled Poland before 1918, forced her parents and grandparents to speak Russian, and replaced the teaching of Polish history with a grand narrative of Russian greatness. As much as the Museum boasts of the role of the Warsaw combatants, it locates them in a line of Polish patriots who have been fighting off powerful invaders for a millennium.

On the other hand, the Museum's signage makes little mention of the 1943 Jewish Ghetto Uprising. Visiting the Museum in 2014, I noticed that the timeline of German occupation failed to mark the dates the Jews were sent to the ghetto and when they were sealed inside. While the Jewish presence in the Warsaw resistance is accorded almost no notice at all, the

most egregious concern is scant mention of anti-Semitism, German or Polish. The displays leave out accounts of the oppression of the Jews before and during the war and the centrality of the Holocaust. It reminded me of histories of the US Civil War that fail to see slavery as the cause. This is hardly an oversight that just slipped the curators' minds or for which they had no room. Walkowitz asks whether "a nationalist and anti-Russian-tinged narrative that decenters Nazism (as genocide) and centers on Stalinism (as colonialism) in fact undermines the significance of the Holocaust?"[23] Not only does this eliminate the role of Jews in their own history but, diabolically enough, it excludes from memory what the Nazis attempted to do in reality.

Looking Beyond a Moment to the Full History of a People

The recently inaugurated POLIN Museum of Polish Jews, built on the site of the 1943 Warsaw Jewish Uprising, offers an alternate view, tracing the history of Poland over a thousand years, demonstrating that Jews are as much a part of the creation of Poland as are non-Jews. More importantly, the POLIN makes the controversial argument that the Holocaust is an event in that history, not an endpoint. The two museums, one of the Warsaw Uprising that all but excludes Jews and the other of the long history of Jewish life in Poland, contrast the complicated interpretation of this fraught national identity. Recalling her life in Warsaw at the end of the war, Janina Bauman writes, "It was hard for the Poles, I think, to see Jewish survivors as just their compatriots. They reminded them of something they would have rather forgotten. Sometimes—maybe—of a guilty conscience."[24] After the war the memories remained on both sides, but the history of the genocide of the Jews inalterably revised the national landscape.

These questions mirror controversies about the marginalization, or pigeonholing, of the role of African-descendants in the history of the Americas. Since people from Africa built the nations they now inhabit, along with indigenous people and those from other countries and continents, and since they have been a part of the Americas as long as Europeans, one could hardly refer to people of African descent in North, South, and Middle America as "assimilated." Scholars have long pointed to the contribution of African life and culture that enslaved people have brought to

the hemisphere: language, politics, music, literature, food, and economies, not to mention the inestimable value of labor.[25] Nonetheless, many Black scholars, commentators, and activists have chafed at a historiography that has tended to tie their place in history solely to enslavement, discrimination, and violence. People of African descent are full-fledged participants in the history of the lands in which they live, not merely survivors of slavery, of Jim Crow in the US, of racist laws, practices, and ideologies across the continents. Slavery as a system is a moment in the history of the Americas—a long and important one with crucial ramifications and a legacy of structural racism—but a component of that history nonetheless. When one turns to the history of Latin America, especially Brazil and the Caribbean, the role of enslavement in national development, and its legacy in everyday affairs, especially the "Africanization" of national culture, befuddles observers and scholars from the US.[26]

The Black experience in the US likewise has its own refugee story in the twentieth-century Great Migration of six million people from the south to the north, Midwest, and west. Isabel Wilkerson compiled a stunning chronicle of the migration's effects on several families who, along with nearly every Black family of the US south from 1915 to 1970, saw members leave for better opportunities and a chance to live a life away from legal segregation. The Great Migration, comparable to the movement of Europeans to the Americas, indelibly transformed the urban landscape of the country, as it did the rural south that the migrants left behind.[27] As for Latin America and the Caribbean, the encounter of Africans, indigenous people, Europeans, and Asians stands as a seldom disputed core of the history of every country of the continent. One day the US may read its history comparably, and even understand that African presence dates back to 1492, not 1619.[28]

Remembering the Jews of Poland

The Museum of Polish Jews situates the Holocaust as a moment in the long history of the country, when invaders from Germany marked one part of the citizenry for destruction, with or without the complicity of their compatriots. Regrettably, the rise of Jewish heritage tourism in the decades since the fall of communism has been marketed outside Poland as "Holocaust tourism," leaving the impression that the history of Jews begins and ends with the attempt to exterminate them. Just as African-American history is more than enslavement, Polish-Jewish history is more

than the Holocaust. Jews who returned to Poland after World War II (including several Truskiers as we will discuss later) saw themselves returning to their homeland. They emigrated at several intervals over the subsequent postwar years, as did thousands of non-Jews anxious to leave a devastated country. But Jews were leaving a country that was relegating them to the status of foreigners, in a way they had not been before the war. After the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt, the Polish government withdrew diplomatic ties with Israel and ushered in a state-sponsored discrimination and virulent anti-Semitism that made life for Jews in Poland all but impossible. Since there is only a smattering of Jews in Poland today, Jewish culture and religion have been constructed in the Diaspora and reintroduced in the form of folk festivals and tourism, or what Ruth Ellen Gruber has dubbed "a virtual Jewish World."[29]

It is always difficult to reconstruct and memorialize the past, but in Poland since the war and subsequent communist period destroyed so many of the sites where millions of Jews lived for centuries, the enterprise is more difficult but hardly impossible. We need heed the words of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano: "History refuses to shut its mouth. Despite deafness and ignorance the time that was continues to tick inside the time that is."[30] Mia could not change her Polishness, even if she wanted to; however, the Holocaust and the events of World War II forced her to confront her Jewishness, even if she rarely mentioned it. Chris Carlisle spoke at the memorial service of meeting Mia at a Berkeley pancake breakfast while a university student just back from two years in Poland as a Peace Corps volunteer. "We became partners, she was my Polish conversation partner and then honorary *babcia* (grandmother in Polish) and she became a dear friend for the last twenty years." When I asked Chris about how Mia portrayed her life growing up in Poland, he admitted that he never knew she was Jewish. It had never come up, despite the fact that Chris is part Polish-Jewish himself.

In Mia's Storyworld, a sense of Jewishness arose sporadically and unevenly in terms of her self-identity. She knew no Yiddish and, apart from her grandfather, did not think other relatives spoke anything but Polish or sometimes Russian, the latter having been required in Polish schools before 1918. Her answers to my queries about Jewish life in prewar Poland seemed contradictory. When I asked if she had been bullied or victimized by anti-Semitism when she was growing up, she said "no." When I asked if there was a lot of anti-Semitism, she said, "Of course! It was everywhere! You heard it; you knew the priests said awful things about

the Jews. You knew Jews had to sit in the back rows in university classrooms, and lots of things like that. Anti-Semitism was so common that it was practically in the water!" She encountered its ugly face when she was denied entrance into the Faculty of Architecture of the Warsaw University of Technology because of the unwritten quota on Jews, despite having graduated at the top of her high school class. Describing the rejection to me, Mia erupted in anger and disgust: "The unfairness! The fact that they could just do that! All my hard work and then the university just said no and we all knew it was because of the quota." I could not help but think that her reaction, more than seventy years later, was an unhealed wound in her identity, both as a Pole and a Jew. At the time it happened in 1937 it must have been a terrible blow, forcing her to confront the fact that the prejudice all around could affect her personally.

I would venture that her reaction as a seventeen-year-old ambitious student and the lingering resentment that the memory calls up even decades later is not unusual. To have one's expectations dashed after having "played by the rules" can sting more than the rejections one expects. The knowledge of an unwritten double standard is shocking especially when one expects acceptance, even the privileges, appropriate to one's class and rank. It reminded me of the embrace of the #MeToo movement beginning in 2017 among professional, high-achieving women who found that despite their education, hard work, and competence they could be subjected to sexual harassment, lower wages, and inequality at the workplace.[31] Being rejected from the career path Mia knew she deserved, because of a prejudicial unwritten rule, still infuriated her more than a half century later.

The Memories War Creates

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's discussion of the memory of the Vietnam War, he states, "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."[32] The US lost the battle for Vietnam, he argues, but it won the industry of war and thereby has shaped how it is remembered through films, books, monuments, songs, and symbols, almost none of which feature Vietnamese as equals, if they appear at all. For its chroniclers in the US, the Vietnam War is a triumph of valor or a terrible mistake, innocent or corrupt, instructive or apologetic, but it is always American. Similarly, Mia's Storyworld is made up of wartime memories though not from battlefields. It is about life in the interstices of Europe's

two great wars, of refuge in Italy, of loss from the Holocaust and the fighting of World War II, of postwar rebuilding as an immigrant in the US, and, eventually, of dedication to helping those whose lives continue to be torn apart by war, violence, poverty, and displacement. My audiences have seemed more comfortable when I tell Mia's story according to the standard refugee trope of great suffering, danger, sorrow, and ultimate redemption as a welcomed immigrant who carved a meaningful life in a new land. But when I relay her story, as she conveyed it to me, harkening back to contented youth in Warsaw, *interrupted* by war, by flight, by loss, and healed through resistance and safety in a new land, her story did not sit easily. Why, they asked, was she filled with nostalgia for her life growing up in Poland? Sorrow over her losses, yes, but nostalgia for that land of anti-Semites? Impossible.

The battlefield of memory has painted the Poles as victims of outside aggression, but one in which Christians used the opportunity to victimize their Jewish compatriots even more. It is a narrative with no place for resistance, despite the obvious record of intense fighting on the part of the civilian population, Jew and non-Jew. Without a doubt the long history of racism and anti-Semitism disrupted the solidarity of the resisters and cast doubt on the motives of all Polish fighters. Looking at the history of the conflict in his own native land, Nguyen argues that war creates a distorted memory, writing back into the narrative a clear demarcation between right and wrong, good and evil. Hirsch would say it lives in postmemory, like a memory with a post-it on top. Without changing the history below, the post-it adds reinterpretations.

The truth is that any honest account of war includes stories of bravery, of fear, of cowardice, of savagery, and great sacrifice. The comfortable memory, or what Tony Judt has called the "serviceable myth" coming out of World War II, is that the ultimate genocide against the Jews, and others the Reich and their collaborators deemed disposable, was the logical triumph of centuries of intense anti-Semitism.[33] By contrast, Mia argued that the events that forced her and her young husband and other relatives to leave Poland were unexpected moments in a life that had been for the most part comfortable and happy, despite anti-Semitism. In retelling her life story, the notable exception to an otherwise happy upbringing was being denied a place in the university owing to the unspoken quota on Jews. It was a significant setback, but alone it would not have forced her to abandon her country for the remainder of her life. She planned to return from Switzerland after completing her studies at the Federal

University and to take up a profession in Poland as did a number of women of her class and background.

Life as an Immigrant in America

Two characteristics set Mia apart from her peers after she arrived in Nebraska and later in California: She never wavered from her plans to follow a career and, as she matured, she transformed from a progressive thinker to a social activist. While the postwar era in the US saw many middle-class women who might have worked outside the home during the war, or for a while after college, take up life as mothers and homemakers, willingly or not, Mia never considered it. Shortly after settling in Lincoln, Nebraska, she found a job creating window displays for one of Lincoln's largest department stores, eventually redesigning the interior of the entire store. Even after her second child, Peter, was born in 1951, and with her eight-year-old son Andy in elementary school, Mia returned to work part time, or as seemed often to be the case, part time at the store while bringing the rest home where it added to her other tasks. After moving to California in 1955, Mia was employed as a draftsman (now called a "drafter") and eventually as a skilled designer in engineering firms both in Long Beach and in the Bay Area.

If Mia's ambitions led her to a career as a designer, her commitment to justice led her to social activism. Few refugees dedicate themselves to helping those who come after, and even fewer devote their efforts to people who are not of "their own kind."[34] To Mia, however, refugees are a universal category. She saw the refugee, the asylum-seeker, the displaced and the stateless as human beings in need of assistance. One of her best-known images, which hangs in the Oakland Museum of California, is a poster entitled "Trees for Haiti." Mia created the image for an EBSC fundraiser after the January 2010 earthquake centered in Port-au-Prince that left a half million Haitians dead, injured, and homeless, and laid waste to the already precarious infrastructure of the Caribbean nation. According to Mia, the mango-laden tree in the center of the poster framed in blazing red and gold was a bright splash of hope amidst the rubble. Designed to publicize a campaign to reseed vegetation and rescue the Haitian countryside, the poster has been featured in calendars and adorned bulletin boards around the Bay Area and beyond.

Mia's Storyworld spanned the gamut of memories from happy and contented to anxious, sorrowful, and sometimes resentful. As with any world,

Fig. 1.6 Mia and Sister Maureen Duignan with "Trees for Haiti" poster in front of the EBSC mural honoring martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

there were regrets. She was nineteen when her father joined the Polish army and never returned and just twenty when she left her mother in Warsaw. Mia saw little of her mother, Paulina, after the war and more than once indicated that she regretted having left her behind in England when she came to America with her young family. I occasionally wondered if the rosy picture of her youth had been polished up a bit to compensate for the pain of the postwar years. If so, it would not be unusual; it is a universal tendency. In his foundational text on the practice of oral history, Ronald Grele delineates the value of oral testimony in revealing the past from the complications personal accounts introduce. "Unlike diaries, letters and personal papers that were themselves responses to the event or period being studied, interviews are created after the fact and reflect the participants' self-conscious attempts to preserve what they remember for the future." Oral testimony always reflects the history "back then" intersected

with the history "now."[35] Getting to the truth, while accounting for the distortions of memory, is the task of the historian, and of histories such as this.

The Scope and Sequence of Events in this Book

This book examines the life of Mia Truskier from survival to activism, from its beginning in Poland to the end in California. Along the way we learn the fates of her family and friends who perished and endured in every theater of a war that swept through their European homeland from 1939 to 1945. Members of the Tłusty and Truskier families who remained in Poland died in ghettos and in death camps, others survived to leave both formal and informal statements of life under German occupation. Mia's father died of typhus after his time in a Soviet work camp; her brother, Tadeusz, outlasted the work camp and went on to serve as a doctor in General Władysław Anders' Polish Second Corps; Mia's mother lived out the war hiding on the Aryan side in Warsaw; and Mia, Jan, Ryszard, and Regina lived semi-clandestinely in Italy. Wanda Szenwald, Tadeusz' first wife who survived with him in the Soviet work camp, then left and joined up with the Red Cross. After their divorce (Mia did not know the circumstances), Wanda met and married another Polish man and returned to Warsaw but maintained some contact with Tadeusz, who settled in England.

Mia's recorded testimonies and correspondence with her family during the war form the hub of a wartime Storyworld. Her surviving son, Peter, and his partner Mary, along with their own children and grandchildren filled in the postmemory, bits and pieces of the narrative from the hundreds of anecdotes that Mia and Jan brought up in day-to-day interactions over the years. Mia's Storyworld also builds from accounts from Jan's cousins, Eugenia (Lacheta) and Judyta (Weiss) Truskier, who were arrested in late 1940 in Warsaw from their hideout on the Aryan side, sent to the ghetto, and lived to write up their own stories. Eugenia and Judyta emigrated from postwar Poland to the US with their families in 1949; their older brother Anatol and his family came in the late 1960s. I learned from Mia that these Truskiers were settled in Albany, New York, by pure chance a few miles from where I live, having been sponsored by individuals unknown to the Truskiers from the local Jewish community. I met and recorded interviews with Gabriela (Truskier) Sherer, the daughter of Anatol and Aniela Truskier, and with Abraham Lacheta, Eugenia's son

who was born in a Displaced Persons' (DP) camp in Germany and came to America with his parents as an infant. Like Mia, the members of these families were admitted under the loosened immigration policies the Truman administration instituted in 1946 to accommodate the thousands of people left stateless following the war.

The first chapters of this book describe Mia's life in prewar Poland and in Switzerland, including the transformation from a relatively trouble-free youth to the desperation of leaving Warsaw after the 1939 German invasion. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 each take up the wartime story of different branches of the Truskier and Tłusty families in Italy, in the Soviet work camps on the edge of Siberia, and in Warsaw. Chapter 7 is an overview of the branches of the family as they prepare to leave a Europe that is largely in shambles. The final two chapters examine Mia's life as an immigrant, spouse, and mother in Nebraska and California, pursuing a career as a designer and engineer's assistant while beginning to engage in political struggle.

Mia grew from her first steps in open political activism in Long Beach in the fight for fair housing, through years in support of peace and equality, to the last decades of her life as one of the most dedicated and creative volunteers in the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant. An artist, writer, designer of puppets, and decision-maker, Mia joined with the communities where she lived (Long Beach, Oakland, and Berkeley) to promote a just and equitable society. Her relationship with Sister Maureen at the EBSC epitomized the combination of likeminded personal working relationships in dedication to a progressive and humanitarian agenda.

Mia managed, even manipulated, the hurdles of her own life following an old Polish saying her father used to coax her and her older brother out of bed and off to school on cold Warsaw mornings: "*Równo, sztywno, z bukietem w ręk*," which roughly translates as "Straight ahead, shoulders back, with a bouquet of flowers in your hand." I cannot begin to count the number of times she repeated this saying, along with a host of others delivered alternately with sarcasm and honest fervor. Mia had "an old Polish saying" to explain, justify, ridicule, or simply withstand just about anything. From Poland to Italy to America, life had dealt her a mixed hand, ranging from fulfillment to disappointment, from safety to fear, from the depths of despair to satisfaction and accomplishment. She valued family, but she lost her father, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends in the war and Holocaust and lived far from her mother and brother in the years after. Her son Andrew, born while they were living in Rome, died of

leukemia when he was thirty-two and her husband Jan died suddenly in their home of a ruptured aorta when he was only seventy-one. Then again, Mia lived a long time, much of it with a man she dearly loved who supported and loved her in return, surrounded by children and grandchildren she adored, pursuing enjoyable and meaningful work, and devoted to making the world a just, peaceful, more livable place. This is her story.

Notes

1. Mia Truskier, "From Once Upon a Time to Here and Now," *East Bay Sanctuary Covenant Newsletter* (undated). One oddity is that Mia entered the US on an "International Red Cross Passport for Travel by Stateless Persons," which would indicate that she was classified as a refugee, despite having a sponsor and an entry visa.
2. "'Call Me a Refugee, Not an Immigrant': Viet Thanh Nguyen," an interview by Jon Wiener, *The Nation* (June 11, 2018). Nguyen's works, all published by Grove Press in New York, include the 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Sympathizer*, its sequel, *The Committed* (2021) and short story collection, *The Refugees* (2017), as well as many essays and monographs.
3. Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
4. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29:1 (2008). Available online: https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019.
5. The debate is the subject of Phillippe Sands' book, *East West Street: On the Origins of "Genocide" and "Crimes Against Humanity"* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).
6. Gretchen Muller, "Mia's Story," Unpublished Interview Transcript, December 2001. Berkeley and Davis, CA. Used with author's permission.
7. David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2009), 106.
8. EBSC has brought two of the most important cases against the Trump Administration: *EBSC v. Trump* (November 2018) and *EBSC v. Barr* (July 2019). Both cases successfully suspended the US government's rule to deny asylum rights to anyone who has been able to reach a point of entry. In September 2019, the Supreme Court removed the protection for asylum petitioners if they passed through a third country before the US. The EBSC spearheads legal strategies in cooperation with the ACLU and other

immigrant rights organizations to get around the worst of the Court's rulings. See the EBSC website: https://eastbaysanctuary.org/.

9. Mia Truskier, "The Gift from an Unknown Donor," Transcript of Personal Sharing, Mount Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church, Walnut Creek, CA, May 28, 1995. Shared with author.
10. Abrahm Lustgarten, "Refugees from the Earth," *The Climate Issue, The New York Times Magazine* (July 26, 2020), 8–23, 43. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees is one of the best sources for up-to-date information on the refugee crisis. https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/.
11. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (Grove Press, 2015) and *The Committed* (Grove Press, 2021).
12. Quoted in David Auerbach, "Patriotism and Antisemitism: The Crisis of Polish Jewish Identity between the Wars," *Social and Cultural Boundaries in Pre-Modern Poland*, A. Teller, M. Teter, A. Polonsky, eds. (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 22:377.
13. Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 5. Deutscher's essay can be found in many volumes, including his writings brought together by Tamara Deutscher, ed., *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Verso, 2017).
14. Janina Bauman, *Beyond These Walls: Escaping the Warsaw Ghetto, a Young Girl's Story* (London: Virago Press, 2006), 2. See also Joanna Olczak-Ronikier's memoir for a comparable account of the lives of secular Jews in prewar Warsaw, *In the Garden of Memory: A Family Memoir* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004).
15. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).
16. Alessandro Portelli, "What makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 69.
17. Erica T. Leherer and Michael Meng, eds., *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 1.
18. In February 2018 the ruling right-wing Law and Justice Party introduced a bill criminalizing any accusations of Polish participation in the Holocaust. Although President Andrzej Duda did not sign it, the "Holocaust Law" passed both houses of government and is popular with a considerable sector of the Polish population. The law, dropped largely because of an international outcry, would penalize with jail terms and fines any admission of the historical fact that individual Poles did collaborate with the Nazis, even if there was no collaborationist government as in France, Greece, Norway, and other occupied countries, "Poland Digs Itself a Memory Hole," by Marci Shore, *New York Times* February 4, 2018.

19. Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
20. This article is a succinct and insightful discussion of the paradox of postwar Polish history torn between images of "a country of heroes and a country of collaborators." Connelly's discussion of Halik Kochanski's book, *The Eagle Unbowed*, is a valuable contribution, especially to the non-specialist, of the divided memory of Poland in World War II, "The Noble and the Base: Poland and the Holocaust," *The Nation*, November 14, 2012.
21. Daniel J. Walkowitz, *The Remembered and Forgotten Jewish World: Jewish Heritage in Europe and the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 219.
22. Daniel Walkowitz, 3.
23. Bund is the abbreviation of a longer title in both Yiddish and Polish for a political, cultural, and social labor organization. In English it is "General Jewish Workers Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia." It is generally referred to in English as the Bund, Walkowitz, 3.
24. Janina Bauman, *A Dream of Belonging: My Years in Postwar Poland* (London: Virago Press, Ltd., 1988), 14; See also Erica T. Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) for a discussion of the ways that post-communist tourism confronts the extreme views of Poland's past as either virulent anti-Semitism or Christian Polish victimhood.
25. Jake Silverstein, "Why We Published the 1619 Project," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 20, 2019.
26. An excellent set of stories on the place of race, religion, ethnicity, and social hierarchy in the lives of ordinary early Americans can be found in *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America*, David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
27. Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Sons: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House Inc., 2010), 9–11.
28. The 1619 Project perpetuates the error that today's descendants of enslaved Africans trace their origins, and contributions to US development, to the British colonies. In so doing, the Project reinforces the very oversight it is intended to redress. Since much of what constitutes the US today was once Spanish territory, the people of African descent can claim roots back to 1509 in Puerto Rico, to 1526 in Florida (*La Florida*) and South Carolina (*San Miguel de Gualdape*). From 1542 until 1821 African slavery was legal in New Spain, much of which was taken from Mexico after 1848. People of African descent are listed in the founding documents of the pueblos of California, New Mexico, Texas, and most areas of the Southwest. More importantly, the well-establish Atlantic slave trade and use of enslaved Africans on plantations of the Carolinas began *because* the

system was already well-established in the British, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and other European colonies, whose African descendants populate the US today. No matter if the border crossed them or they crossed the border, Africans have contributed to a diverse, complex, and long-standing history of the Americas. See Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), or any book in colonial Latin American history, the Atlantic slave trade, and the history of Africans in the Americas.

29. Daniel Walkowitz, 31. See also Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
30. Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).
31. Tarana Burke, an African-American woman from the Bronx coined the term to build solidarity among victims of sexual abuse in poorer communities. The term became a viral hash tag as #MeToo in 2017 during the trial of movie producer Harvey Weinstein, when professional, middle-class, and wealthy white women appropriated the hashtag and spread it through social media. Owing to racist blind spots, few proponents of the movement even know the term's origins with a Black social activist working with marginalized girls and women.
32. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.
33. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 135.
34. See Viet Thanh Nguyen's chapter, "On Remembering One's Own," 23–46.
35. Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, Inc., 1975), 5.

CHAPTER 2

The Making of Mia's World: Warsaw and Zurich, 1890–1939

Maria Mia Tłusty grew up in Warsaw living with her father, Zygmunt, mother, Paulina, and brother, Tadeusz, at Nowogrodzka 17 in an apartment building her parents owned. She attended private and public schools and graduated a year early at the top of her class from one of the best secondary schools for girls in the city. Mia remembered her childhood fondly, recalling the warmth and comfort of the extended family in which she was raised surrounded by generations of relatives, including aunts, uncles, grandparents, and great-grandparents, from both of her parents' lineages.

We lived in Warsaw forever. I was born there. My earliest memories are of being very happy, very content. I don't know how little children can really remember, because sometimes they say, "Do you really remember that or do you think you remember because somebody was talking about it?" But this is so vivid in my memory that I think I really remember it even though I must have been very, very little. It's sitting in this very tall grass, and the grass seemed so tall it was like being in a forest so I was very little. And I know where it was. That was a place in Warsaw where we had this beautiful botanical garden. My brother and I when we were little, we had what they called a *niania* in our language, it's like nanny. But it wasn't a real nanny, like here. These were women from the country, women who were uneducated. I don't think that our *niania* ever learned to read or write, but she made her living taking care of children for different families.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_2

She would stay a few years until the children were big enough and then she would leave.

Her name was Bronia. The word comes from Bronisława, and it has to do with being known as a protector or defender. She was such a wonderful woman. She was there after my brother was born, and then when I was born. We were only three and a half years apart. She was there until, I think, I was about three or four years old. She would take us for this walk to the botanical garden. I remember that my brother would sit kind of at my feet. She was pushing me in a stroller. It was not a stroller for two as they have now. He could sit there and we would go to this botanical garden and sit in the grass. And I was so excited. It felt so wonderful. I can see it, even now, this green, very tall grass.

But also there was an element of preoccupation and fear, because really people were not allowed to sit in this grass. They had caretakers who took care of the park. They would come and tell you to get off. I know that there was this real pleasure of being there, and also being a little afraid. That gave it an element of excitement. I remember, later in my life, somebody said to me, "You know, you are kind of a timid revolutionary." (Laughs). I think maybe there was some truth in that. So that, I think, is about the first thing I can consciously remember of being little.

My mother's name was Paulina, and her maiden name was Szurek. My father's name was Zygmunt, like Sigmund Freud, except it's spelled with a "t." It was a very popular name in Poland. And his last name was Tłusty, except it was pronounced "Twusty"; in Polish there is this letter "ł" with a bar on top which makes it like our "w." It was really "Twoosti." They were married very, very young. My mother was 17, and my father was 19. He used to laugh when they were telling us as we were growing up when they got married [on October 21, 1915]. My father would say, "You know, the two of us put together were less than 40 years old." And then my brother Tadzio[1] was born about a year later, on October 4, 1916, when my mother was only 18 and my father was just 20. They were so in love, and they were so happily married for, well for almost 25 years, which was when the war started and then they were separated and never saw each other again. My father died. He was in the part of Poland that was occupied by the Soviet Union. I will talk about that later.

Mia's Father: The Tłusty Family Line

My father, Zygmunt Tłusty, was born on December 15, 1895 in Warsaw. At that time that part of Poland was a part of the Russian Tsarist Empire. I remember my father telling me that the family's name was originally Fettman, "fat man" in German. Which was later Polonized into Tłusty. Tłusty in Polish means fat. (Laughs)

If given the opportunity to change their name, I asked, why did they not select something else? To which Mia responded firmly, if bordering on irately, "Well, Tłusty was a Polish name!" It was the first of my many lessons in Mia's defense of Poland.

They probably changed the name when my father's ancestors moved from a predominantly German-speaking region of the country to Warsaw and the family gradually assimilated into Polish society. You see, my father's family lived under the Russian Tsarist occupation. Poland started losing its independence in 1772, when the first partition of the country took place. Its powerful neighbors, Russia, Prussia, and Austria annexed almost one-third of Polish territory and divided the occupied land among themselves. In 1773, they took more Polish lands and then finally in 1795 Poland ceased to exist as an independent country. This lasted until 1918—the end of World War I. Growing up under the Russian occupation was very difficult. The Tsarist regime did everything in its power to suppress Polish identity. Children were not allowed to speak Polish in school, they were not allowed to bring Polish books, and they could be expelled for even that. There were like these books—you know they talk about the "Sovietization" of Poland [post–World War II] but in the early years of the century, Poland was subjected to, what would you call it?—the "Russification" of Poland. They were trying to make these Poles into Russians.

The two sides of Mia's family—the Tlustys on her father's side, and the Szureks on her mother's, represent the characteristics of Jewish Polish prosperity. While the Tlustys could trace their heritage back through a line of secular, landed wealth, her mother's family, the Szureks, were representative of the new wealth of the interwar period. Mia's description of her father's upbringing, including carefree summers at his grandparents' estate, indicates a long-standing prosperity that predated the beginnings of Polish independence following World War I.

My father came from a well-educated Jewish family that was assimilated into the Polish gentile culture. His mother was born Eugenia [Cung], but

we called her Genia, *Babcia* (Grandma) Genia. Grandma Genia was a very educated woman who spoke fluent French. She always paid a lot of attention to her looks; and continued until she was old to wear a tight corset and high heeled boots that came almost to her knees. They were made out of a fine velvety fabric and they were called *prunelki*. I only vaguely remember Grandpa Mauryzy [Tłusty], I think, I was only four when he died. I know that he used to own a stock exchange business.

The Tłustys were Jewish, but they were secular. My father said that when he was a little boy his family celebrated Christmas and had a traditional Christmas tree. His mother, my Grandmother Genia, kept up this tradition after her husband Mauryzy's death. I remember as a little girl the excitement of visiting her at Christmas and gathering around a huge tree decorated with candles and all kinds of beautiful glass ornaments and cookies baked in different shapes and candies.

A Jewish Country Squire

As a child my father used to spend his summers with Grandma Genia's father, his Grandfather Cung, at his country estate in Siedlce near Warsaw. My father adored his grandparents and loved to spend his time there with a lot of trees to climb, horses, dogs, cats, geese, chickens, and other animals. You know Grandfather Cung was like a Jewish squire. When they were in the country, no one paid a lot of attention to what the children were doing. I remember our father telling us that his sisters were not very nice to him. They were much older than him and their names were Bella and Stella, which I always found a little amusing, especially when the names were mentioned together. One day they stuffed a dried pea in his nostrils and the doctor had to be called to remove it. Another time, they caught him smoking a cigar; they promised not to tell his father if he promised not to do it again. He promised and they promptly ran to their father and told on him. My father smoked for the rest of his life. I think all his life he was much nicer to his sisters than they were to him.

But then his sisters weren't there most of the time. When my father was staying with his grandparents, his parents were traveling abroad with his older sisters. From what I understand, the idea in those years was to expose the daughters to potential husbands. I don't know exactly where they traveled, but it was all in the region that used to be Poland and then was divided, among Russia, Prussia, etc. So it might be that they traveled around there. I also remember that both of them wanted to have careers,

which would not have been unusual in those years in Poland. There were quite a few [women] doctors, dentists, and lawyers. But Grandma Genia was opposed to those ideas, and both Bella and Stella got married at very young ages to wealthy men much older than they.

I asked Mia if the girls were supposed to marry men from Poland or if a suitor from another country was acceptable. She said she did not think it mattered, and was not even sure if the girls had to marry Jews, although they did. What was indisputable was that the girls had to marry.

Bella married Bernard Neumark, a very rich businessman from Warsaw, and for a few years lived very happily with him and their little son, Stasio [Stanisław], in a beautiful apartment with a few servants. They even owned a horse carriage. That's like today having an expensive car. I don't know what Bernard did, but he had a lot of money. Unfortunately, he developed a heart problem and died when Stasio was about nine years old. His long illness consumed a lot of their money and later Bella, who did not have any experience in business matters, listened to some bad advice and ended up with very little money, alone with her, rather spoiled, little boy. Eventually she and Stasio, by then a law student, moved into an apartment, rent free, at Nowogradska 17, the building that belonged to my parents and in which we lived. The other sister, Stella, ended up marrying a widower with two sons. His name was Feliks Gradstein. They had a daughter, Alicja, nicknamed Lilka, who was a few months younger than me. Feliks owned a movie theater.

Polish Patriotism

At a very young age my father became a patriot and he resented foreign oppression. When he was only nine-years old, he was caught throwing an ink pot at a portrait of the Tsar hanging in his classroom. This was considered an unforgiveable act and he was expelled from school. In the Russian school system this is something that can be translated into getting a "wolf's ticket" or a *wilczy bilet*. I don't know where they got that phrase, but it meant that he would not be able to attend any school in the Russian empire ever.[2] The consequences for such an act were dire since prohibiting a student from entry into any school in the Russian Empire essentially terminated their formal education. The only recourse was for the child to be sent to a school outside the country, and that was an option only open to very rich parents, otherwise the future was dead. Somehow my Grandma Genia went to the school to the principal and begged him not to expel her

son and somehow was able to obtain his pardon. I remember how proud I was of my father when I first heard that story.

From the time when he was a young man my father was always a patriot and very vigilant for Polish independence. When Poland got its independence after World War I, it still had to fight off the Bolsheviks in 1918. My father was active in the "Student's League" or something. I can't remember the exact title, but that was when the Poles defeated the Soviets at the Battle of the Vistula. This was a very famous battle and my father, and lots of Polish people, were very proud of that victory.

After finishing high school, my father was able to get into medical school in Warsaw. He did exceptionally well in his studies and he was looking forward to his dream, which was becoming a physician. It was during that time that he met my mother, Paulina Szurek. That was the beginning of the happiest chapter of their lives.

I was curious as to whether Mia's father faced any discrimination when he applied to medical school, and if so, how it was that university officials were aware of a student's religion or ethnicity? Was it his name?

Oh, no. Tłusty was a perfect Polish name. No it wasn't his name. Jews were identified in the census. When students entered school they had to present their birth certificates, which carried a permanent record of their ethnicity, even if the family was not religiously observant. But anti-Semitic admissions policies varied and when my father began his medical training in 1914 there were few, if any, limits on Jews entering medical school. I'm not sure there was that much of a quota. The Tsarist government was anti-Polish, but it wasn't like after World War I. I mean in Poland there was always a lot of anti-Semitism, but I don't think my father had problems getting into medical school. But he didn't finish. He almost finished, but then he married my mother, and there were some problems with my grandfather Szurek's health and my father had to drop out and help with his father-in-law's business. You see a lot of the members of the family relied on my grandfather's financial support.

Mia's Mother: The Szurek Family Line

Mia's mother's side of the family were observant Jews from the rural area of Kalisz, spoke Yiddish primarily, with Polish as a second language, and followed more traditional, patriarchal, customs.

My maternal grandparents were *Dziadzio* (Grandpa) Władzio, which would be like Władyslaw, because everybody had this Polonized name.

His original name was Wołf Szurek, and she was *Babcia* (Grandma) Anja (Ana), her real name was Chana, but she went by Anja Rozencwajg (or Rozenzweig), and we called her Anja. They both came from large families in the provinces. My grandfather was from the province of Kalisz and his family spoke Yiddish at home. He always had an accent in Polish. He was the oldest son and then Sala Mizkowska was the youngest of the children, from the same mother. Sala was Ewa's mother, Ewa was my cousin near my own age and she later married in Italy, and lived in Italy for most of her life.

Grandpa Władzio was a really rich man, kind of a self-made man. He built up his business all by himself. My mother, Paulina, was an only child but there were lots of Szurek relatives, both in Warsaw and still in the country. My grandfather's father, my Great Grandfather Szurek, was still alive when Tadzio and I were little. He lived in an upper floor apartment in the same building on Wilcza 59 when our parents lived there with Grandparents Szurek. We used to call the great grandfather, "Grandpa from Upstairs." The Grandpa from Upstairs remarried after the death of his first wife, and had more children from that marriage. I also remember walking behind his hearse at his funeral.

Although Mia's parents met when her father was in medical school, he never finished his degree. Mia explained that in an indirect way it was her father's marriage to her mother that led to the premature sidelining of his medical career.

You know, it was kind of sad because my father was a medical student when they were married. He was in his last year of medical school, and already a resident in hospitals. And then when the Depression came and I remember I kept hearing this word "dollar" "dollar" and I didn't know what it was. But the Depression was very strongly felt in Poland and everybody was upset and I knew something was terribly wrong, and my grandfather lost most of his fortune.

And then a lot of bad things began to happen. I remember my mother, not that she ever cared about possessions, but I remember they had to sell a lot of things like diamonds, and I remember my mother crying often and not because she missed her diamonds, but because of this terrible situation. But before that Władzio's business was worth like half a million Swiss francs [ca. $100,000].[3] He had this wholesale import business of fabrics, silks, laces, and stuff like that from Switzerland. He had this huge store on Nalewki Street in the Jewish section of Warsaw and provided work for many relatives and some of his siblings and other relatives. He gave them

all work. There were rumors in the family that some were stealing from him and taking advantage, but I don't think that's what broke down the business.[4]

And then in the middle of that, my grandfather developed a tumor on his tongue. He had surgery and in those years they didn't know as much, but he survived that with a slight speech impediment. But in the meantime when he got sick he wanted my father to take over the business for him; he had this huge business. And my father did, and he always regretted it, because by the time my grandfather got better and my father wanted to go back to medical school, he couldn't because in those years, even though he was still such a young man, he was considered too old. By our standards he was still very young, but in those years somebody who was in his late twenties or thirty was considered not so young. It was just impossible, there were these silent quotas. You couldn't get into school, even if you were extremely bright and everything. I think that my father always had great regrets, because he would have been a wonderful doctor; he was really so good at it. It was too bad that this happened. And well you see some of the problems stem from the fact that the family came from a Jewish background, and that played a great role in a person's life.

This is one of the rare times when Mia, in the testimony on her early life, refers to a "Jewish background" or the significance of Jewish culture. She alluded to the fact that Jewish families had to rely on each other, that Wolf was a part of not just a family but the leading member of a clan that included the extended family and members of a close community. Anti-Semitism forced families inward and dependent on each other in a world where discrimination could pull the rug out from under a comfortable life. Zygmunt's father-in-law was responsible for many people and very well may have feared the dire consequences the collapse of his business would have had on the family and community.

An Unfaithful and Domineering Grandfather Władzio

As for the relationship between her father and the charismatic, but controlling, Grandpa Wolf, Mia remarked:

They didn't have a very good relationship. My grandfather was a very domineering kind. He was a very handsome man with bright blue eyes that many in my family have inherited. He was not an easy man to get

along with because of his domineering character. I'll never forget how he used to talk about my father and when they first met. He would say, "When I met this young man, I knew right away he was going to be my son-in-law. I hated him from the first moment." They never got along. But in those years my relatives all lived near us and it was very difficult to go against someone as important as Grandpa. And, by the way, he did recover from that tongue surgery, with a slight speech impediment after that.

Until I was about five or six years old, we all lived in the same building on Wiłcza Street, but we had the whole front floor. These were big apartment buildings in Warsaw, many stories and usually a courtyard in the middle, and the better apartments were in the front of the building. The cheaper apartments were in the back, looking on the courtyard. We had the entire front of the building. On the whole floor there were two apartments that were constructed so that the doors could be opened or closed to connect one apartment with another. My parents didn't like this arrangement so much because the grandparents would open the doors and come into their apartment, or you could sometimes hear what was going on in the neighboring rooms. We lived there until I was five, probably, and then we moved to another apartment by ourselves on Nowogrodska Street where we lived until the end, I mean until the war.

Mia's grandfather had an overwhelming, and frequently intrusive, influence over Paulina and Zygmunt, and the entire extended family. Although not so funny at the time, Mia often laughed when she recounted stories of the overbearing Wolf and his unwanted meddling in day-to-day family matters.

Dziadzio (Grandpa) Wolf would tell everyone what to do and how to do it. He had a way of ending a conversation when he didn't want to do something by saying, "Now, let's take it off the table." (Laughs) That was the signal to move on to something else, because he didn't want to talk about it anymore. Whenever we were getting ready to go on a trip he would come to make sure that we knew how to pack our suitcases the right way. He'd come barging through the door right into our bedrooms to oversee us packing our suitcases. But what really took the cake was his idea one summer, when we were on vacation, he took it upon himself to redecorate one of our rooms. When we came back we found one of our little study rooms wallpapered in red with a jungle motif with palm trees. He came in while we were gone and he had someone do this for him. That was a surprise! I'll never forget that horrendous gaudy wallpaper.

And he was a lady's man and as it turned out an unfaithful husband. He probably had a lot of affairs with some of the young women who worked in his house. I told you about the *niania* that took care of Tadeusz and me when we were children? There were always a lot of foreigners in Poland when I was young and it was common for families like ours to have a seamstress who would come to the house at regular intervals to make clothes for women and kids, do repairs and alterations. Many of these women were Russian immigrants, or people who already lived in Poland because that part of Poland, Warsaw, was under the Tsarist regime for a hundred years before World War I. Either they were Russians who lived in Poland and stayed there after Poland regained independence or they were people who escaped from the Russian Revolution. Anyway, you had your own sewing machine at home and then one of these seamstresses would come and do your sewing, you know, for the children, and do all kinds of repairs and alterations. She would stay for a few days. You feed her and she stays there for the meal and all that, and does a lot of work. So there were seamstresses, and also manicurists, who would come to your house then charge one *zloty* [Polish currency then and now] per person and go around to everyone in the family. Everybody got their manicure, even the children. I remember one of them when I was maybe 11, 12, or 13, her name was Xenia. She came once a week and gave manicures to everybody.

Well I remember one of the women who came into the house was a young, attractive dark-haired woman named Filomena. I always wondered why Władzio, who never kissed ladies' hands, even though it was considered the proper way of expressing respect, and simply good manners, in our society, always used to kiss Filomena's hand. It was not until much later that we found out that he actually had a mistress and made *Babcia* Anja's life miserable for years. And when she confronted him about his infidelities, he would threaten to throw himself out the window. Finally, one day she said, "Fine! At least I would be a widow instead of a betrayed wife!" (Mia chuckles) Actually, I think that she still loved him, and so did we because he was our grandpa and we knew that he loved us too.

Babcia Anja Szurek

Babcia (Grandma) Anja [Mia's mother's mother] also came from a large family. She had a number of sisters. I only remember a few of them. One of her nieces lived across the street after we moved from Wiłcza Street to Nowogrodzka Street 17, which was a big apartment building that my

parents' owned. Tadzio and I used to play with her son, Janik, and everyone in the family seemed to know, as we found out later, that Janik was not his father's son, but his mother's lover's son. So there were things like that going on, even in my own family.

Grandma Anja was very beautiful and she had the sweetest personality. Even as children we knew for many years that Anja lost a baby boy who would have been my mother's younger brother. We also didn't know for many years that my mother also had an older sister who died as a young girl. It was too painful for Anja to talk about and it was the source of terrible problems. I remember when I was very little that Anja used to suffer attacks of extreme emotional stress that would manifest themselves in high-pitched sounds as though birds were in her throat. Eventually those attacks stopped.

She was always very actively involved in the family business. I remember hearing a story that illustrated her bravery. One day she was on her way to the bank to deposit some money, a lot actually, from the store, since in those years many transactions were made in cash. Well, some thieves started following her and what they attempted was not armed robbery, but they started spitting on her, hoping that she would try to clean herself up and let the bag of money slip from under her arm. But she paid no attention and kept walking briskly until she reached safety. This also tells you a lot about how crime has evolved since. I mean to spit on someone! (Laughs)[5]

I also know about her strength firsthand because I remember the very presence of mind our Grandma Anja had. One summer Tadzio and I and my mother and grandmother went to my parents' summer place in Józefów, in the province of Warsaw. In those years, all the houses were equipped with heavy wooden shutters and doors that were barred on the inside as protection against any possible intruders. But one of the outside doors in our house had a glass window above it. I think that was left open for ventilation. One night some thieves tried to break the window to get into the house with a ladder. Grandma Anja heard them and started yelling, "Zygmunt!" "Tom and Dick and Harry!" [Mia extrapolates] as if the house was filled with men, "Come quickly there is someone trying to get into the house!" She was yelling as though they were there, but my father wasn't really there. Not then. Usually he would be. Some men commuted only on the weekends, but my father usually came every evening. There was a little train from Warsaw to all these little houses. Anyway Grandma

Anja was screaming as if the house was filled with men. The robbers ran away and even left their ladder.

Robbers aside, Mia spoke fondly of her family's country home in Józefów, where she would often spend weekends with her brother, mother, and grandmother, especially as the weather turned warm. When school ended, the family moved to their home in Józefów for the entire summer.

With the exception of her father's frustration at having to drop out of medical school, something Mia seemed to have perceived from a young age, and the intermittent intrusions of her domineering grandfather Władzio Szurek, Mia remembered her childhood fondly. She always spoke of growing up with her parents and grandparents in Warsaw, and at the summer house in Józefów, as surrounded by love and comfort. Not surprisingly, some of Mia's happiest memories revolved around celebrations and dinners with her relatives on both of her parents' sides of the family. Mia's memory of her

Fig. 2.1 Tlusty family, Zygmunt, Paulina, Mia, and Tadeusz, in the country, ca. 1926. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

grandmother's honey cake that she prepared during the Christmas holidays stands as a hallmark of a secular family life.

Babcia Anja was a great cook. One of my favorite things that she used to bake was a honey cake. It had a lot of honey and eggs in it with almonds on the top. When it came out of the oven, you could see the almonds sunken into the dough, like buttons in a leather chair. How I wish I had that recipe. To this day when I bake my own honey cake I think of my Grandma Anja. She died in 1938 when I was in school in Switzerland. After she died, my grandpa married his mistress [Czarna Cymerman] and everybody in the family was upset about it. He did not wait very long. I never met her and don't know much about her, but I know that she was with him when they had to go to the ghetto during the war and heard that she took very good care of him. We heard much later that when the Nazis came to get him to send him to an extermination camp, and what happened at that moment was probably the greatest tribute to *Dziadzio*. He just said "no!" When the Gestapo came to take him away, he sat in his chair and died of a heart attack. We always knew what a strong will he had, but we didn't know that he was strong enough to give himself a heart attack![6]

Wiping tears from her eyes, Mia retold the story of the last minutes in the life of a begrudged and beloved patriarch who had sought to intrude into every decision the family made. In the end, he reportedly turned that will on himself. Whatever bitterness and shame the family felt toward their philandering grandfather's treatment of their grandmother, and the misery he undoubtedly inflicted on the vulnerable women and girls employed in their household, was swept away in the tumultuous events of the war.

The Carefree Life of a Teenager

Mia's childhood and teenage years were filled with all the contentment available in a comfortable and sheltered household. Her fondest, and most oft recalled, memories were of sitting at their large dining room table with her parents, brother, and friends.

You know, in those years there was a light above the table that came quite low. It gave this nice cozy light in the room. We just sat around the table and did our homework, drank tea, and talked. Our house was really an open door house. I don't remember our family ever sitting down to dinner in the evening without somebody being there. People would just drop in, and we'd say "pull up a chair, sit down and have something."

Dinner, in Warsaw at that time, was not a large meal. The large meal was in the middle of the day when people came home from the office, or children came from school, with soup and meat and potatoes and everything. Later in the afternoon there was something that we called *podwieczorek*, which means "before evening." The only word I can think of in another language was in Italian. They had something that they called *merenda*, which was like a snack in the late afternoon. For *podwieczorek* my brother often would walk to this best pastry shop in Warsaw around four o'clock and come home with a box full of these wonderful pastries. There was one pastry that was called "The Potato." It was like a *fluffy* kind of a sponge cake in a little ball. But in the bottom there were some fruit preserves, and then it was sprinkled with cocoa powder and it had little pignoli (pine nuts) on it. It was one of our favorites, and there were some others.

What would happen in those years was that at 4:30 or 5:00 kids did their homework. We had a lot of homework. You just came from school and sat down and did your homework. So then you could take a nice break and have this *podwieczorek* with pastries, and tea, of course. People really ate a lot in Poland. And then, around eight o'clock or so, people had a lighter supper. We always had people over, kind of unexpected. Anybody who came in, we always seemed to have enough food. It was simple. The evening meal was just maybe one hot dish, like some hot vegetable, or some cold cuts or fish or whatever. Herrings were very popular. I still love herrings but I hardly ever eat them. We went to bed late. I guess it was in our genes that we were all night people. My brother was like that too. And I still go to bed quite late, even now.

Thinking back on those times, it seems like our family really attracted a lot of people of all ages and all different backgrounds. My brother had a lot of friends who would come over. His friends were also close to my father. My father was the kind of person who would help kids and listen to them. Sometimes kids who didn't have a very good relationship with their own fathers felt close to my father. And he was so young. My parents were really so young compared to other parents, that they felt more like a big brother. My father used to tutor my brother's friends. He would be sitting here in one room helping somebody with Latin, and here he would help somebody with their math.

This picture of extraordinary conviviality stayed with Mia her entire life, as it also left an enduring image on the young people who frequented her childhood home. Mia recalled getting a letter in 1987 after her brother's death from a man whose sister was Mia's close friend.

He was eight years older, which in those years was like a different world. He wouldn't even look at me. He used to come to our house a lot. He was already a medical student when the war started. And he started writing to me. He said that he really liked my brother. My brother was a few years younger than he was, and also a medical student. But he said, "Mostly what pulled me toward your house was your father," because he had some trouble with his own father. He said that my father would always find time and talk to him. So that was one kind of friend. He survived the war and ended up in Canada. He contacted me after my brother's death in 1987. We had a very nice correspondence. And then he died himself. I really miss him because he told me so many things.

Somehow, I guess maybe because my parents were so happy together, they projected, or kind of radiated, this peace. There was such a nice atmosphere. And then I had a lot of friends, girlfriends, and boys. A lot of people came to our house all the time. When I got older, then some of my brother's friends became a little more interested in me than when I was little. But I didn't have any serious relationships.

Well, there was one boy, or I should say young man, who was quite a little bit older than I was and I don't think my parents were very happy about that. I met him at the swimming club. That was another rendezvous of the elegant world for kids, at that time in summer. It was called *Legia* in Polish, which means "The Legion." And that was the swimming club. They had this pool that was open to everybody, but you could become a member of the club and have more privileges. I remember I met this young man, and I think I fell in love with his swimming suit. It was a white jersey, a white kind of silky knit. Nobody had a swimming suit like that! He was older. That was when I was just finishing high school that summer—I was already out of high school then. And so we used to go to that swimming pool. He was a very good swimmer. He was on the team of that club. That seemed like a very romantic situation, but somehow, I think that it was more because at that age I was kind of ready and waiting to fall in love, and he just happened to be there. [Mia would have been around16] Then I realized that it was more my idea, that I liked the *idea* of myself being in love. Anyway, he was about to leave. He was like 23 or 24, and he was ready to leave to go to a school in ltaly, a shipbuilding school or something like that. I don't know what happened to him after the war. I kind of lost track.

A few times, such as this description of her attraction to the young man in his swimsuit, Mia hinted at the development of an adolescent sexual

awareness, but she did not talk about dating or pairing off with boys. For the most part Mia's remembrances drew me into a comfortable, but protected, bourgeois life, in a warm family atmosphere. That Zygmunt's medical career had been thwarted was no doubt a profound disappointment to him, and to his wife, Paulina, who understood his frustration. Also, that his disappointment stemmed from the intrusive actions of her own father, must have weighed on Paulina. Nevertheless, it was not so troubling as to disrupt the pleasant life in Warsaw that Mia and her brother enjoyed during this very short era of peace and independence.

High School and Preparing for a Career

Mia began her education in a private school, the Liceum of Painey, run by Zofia Kurmanowa, a Polish woman of Russian extraction and, from what Mia described, of formal Tsarist-like customs.[7]

Fig. 2.2 Mia and her brother Tadeusz at their country house in Józefów near Warsaw, ca 1930. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

We had to kiss Mrs. Kurmanowa's hand every time we saw her, and curtsy. I left that school [in 1933] when I was thirteen for the Municipal School for Girls, Jan Kochanowski, named for a famous Polish poet. In Warsaw, we didn't have coeducational schools. There was only one school, *Lycee Francais,* where boys and girls went together. Otherwise, all the schools were for boys and girls separately, whether they were public or private. Mine was a wonderful school, really. A lot of schools were private schools, and then there were a few state schools and a few municipal schools that were maintained by the City of Warsaw. The interesting thing about it was that there were altogether maybe seven municipal schools, but only one of them was for girls: Jan Kochanowski. I transferred from a private school to that school. It was a gorgeous school, modern, and people came from all over Europe to visit, to see this model school. We had a beautiful auditorium with a permanent stage, and we had special classrooms for history, geography, physics, and chemistry. We had a wonderful gym, and you were not allowed to walk into the gym without special shoes. When you came to school, you had to change shoes. You didn't just come in with street shoes.

Because it was a municipal school, it was also more democratic. The private schools were for mostly children from just the middle and upper classes with not that many differences. But in municipal schools there were children whose fathers were streetcar conductors or worked for the city in different capacities; some were at an administrative level, but some were just workers, blue collar workers.

We had some really great teachers. I still remember some of them that I was very fond of. My favorite teacher was our Latin and Polish language teacher, and she was what they called our "educator." Here we would call it, I'm not sure, I guess the closest would be "homeroom teacher." But there it was a much closer relationship. The fact that she was called our *educator*, she was kind of more responsible for us. She was a wonderful woman. Sometimes I really like to talk about her. I even wrote a little story, if I can find it, you know, it was like a contrast. I wrote about her and another teacher who everybody hated. It was at a different time, but those were the two teachers that always stuck in my mind.

It's amazing how teachers can affect the child. The one whom we hated [Mrs. Tazbir] taught chemistry. I mean, we were so scared of her. And the other one [Jadwiga Loria] was such a role model and a wonderful person. I had a socialist history teacher [Pawlowski] that I liked, and Mr. Janik

who taught math, who was a terrible person. I think we girls made him nervous.

In the middle of the academic year, lessons broke for a three-week mandatory co-ed camp experience. Mia hated it.

It was not optional. You had to go because it was in the middle of the school year, and we had classes there, so everybody had to go. It was very unpleasant. The camp facilities and the program of events were designed for boys and there were no concessions to the needs of girls. Since there were six municipal schools for boys and only one school for girls, the camp experience was just tacked on. This school camp was very militaristic. It was like a boot camp. We all slept in a dormitory. There was a morning reveille. You had to get up and do strenuous exercises right away. The food was awful. The whole place was surrounded by barbed wire. They counted us when we left the camp to go anywhere, and they counted us when we came back. It was pretty terrible. That was my only experience when I was away from my family for any length of time. It was only three weeks or so.

What struck me when we discussed this sleep away adventure was that Mia was most incensed at the lack of accommodations for girls in the way of bathroom facilities, as well as the rigidity of the exercise routine. Since Mia was a gymnast and enjoyed other physical activities—swimming, ice skating, playing outside with her brother at the summer house in Józefów—her distaste for the fitness requirements of the school's camp, seemed out of character. However, a three-week-long camp with a strict schedule and less than optimal lodgings must have been rough for a young woman who was very close with her family. Mia was undoubtedly homesick, as well as unhappy with the camp.

Zionism and Judaism

This "tacking on" of activities for girls in Mia's view was similar to how her public school carried out the order to provide religious education. The required yearly camp experience and weekly religious instruction were actually the only parts of her education that Mia seemed to dislike.

Well, you know in Poland everyone was required to study religion in school, no matter what type of school. Most of the students, like everyone in Poland, were Catholic, so we had prayers every day, and we non-Catholics were supposed to bow our heads and pray just like the Catholics. Well, that was okay. But then once a week we had special classes for religious instruction. The Catholic girls had catechism and the rest of us had

classes with a Jewish rabbi. I don't know what the Protestant students did, but there weren't very many of them so maybe they just went to the catechism class. But we had this rabbi and he kept telling us that we had to go to Palestine and live on the land and have lots of babies. He would say, "You go there, raise the children of Zion!" and all kinds of stuff like that. We thought he was crazy! Why would we want to go off and work on a farm in the country on a *kibbutz* or something and raise lots of children?

Mia neither liked the instruction in Jewish texts nor the rabbi. Similar to the "boot camp" experience, although supposedly intended "for her own good," Mia alternately ridiculed and dismissed both experiences as useless to her personally. In answer to my questions, Mia discussed her views toward religion. She had no religious upbringing but she was aware of the Zionist movement in Poland.

Well, you know I certainly can relate to the idea that the Jews wanted a country. But it is really strange because Jews, well, are from all over the world. You know, like in Poland, you identified yourself as Polish and you know they would say it was a 'mosaic' religion, but you know they didn't have that. As I told you we had to take classes in school from this rabbi and you know nobody could relate to that. So you know, you were born in Poland, you considered yourself Polish. And in so many other countries, like when we were in Switzerland and there were students from all different countries and it was very similar. I don't think I remember anybody from my friends being a Zionist, you know. I later heard that one of the girls from the school went to Palestine. And there were, I think I told you, two boys who were friends and whose families were Zionists, but that was all I know.

Oddly, the rabbi engaged to instruct the young women at Warsaw's most prestigious municipal high school that admitted girls, was from one of the most traditional Zionist tendencies in the city. It would have been possible to enlist a rabbi to instruct the students in less radical or socialist Zionism, or an ideological current that matched the students' secular Jewish tendencies, but the school for some reason did not. Mia mainly rejected the rabbi's view of the proper future for all Jewish girls—to marry and raise children.

Mia never spoke of having any particular politics, in contrast to her life later when she was intensely interested in human rights and refugees. Nor did she express even the slightest interest in religion, Judaism or Christianity, with the single exception of enjoying Christmas, but that was devoid of Christian religious meaning. As opposed to synagogue, Mia attended school on Saturdays,

a fact she remembered fondly and used as an example of the combination of academics and a rich social life with her friends.

We even had school on Saturday, I think until one o'clock, and we had fun. But after school, usually everybody who was anybody went for a walk.[8] There was this beautiful street that was lined with trees. You walk back and forth and you see everybody; people talk and socialize a lot. Other days of the week school usually was out, like two or three o'clock or so. Then everybody would go to what was called *Aleja*. It was just like a promenade. It was the name of the street because there was a palace there where the last king of Poland lived. And then there was also the place where the famous *Marszalek* [Marshal] Pilsudski lived when he was the head of the Polish government. There was also the monument to [the composer] Chopin that you walked by, and some beautiful parks and a lake. It was a nice street and it had elegant homes. Everybody would just congregate there, the kids from all different schools would come and they'd just walk back and forth and have fun.

Then, in the winter, we used to go skating. In our family only my father and I ice skated. So he and I used to go to a park with a frozen lake, and it was so beautiful. You could see the trees all covered with snow. It was just gorgeous. But, when I got to a certain age, then that was not the place to go anymore. The place to go was this ugly courtyard surrounded by apartment buildings. That was the place to be, everybody, well all my friends anyway, went skating there. There was a little room where everybody came to be around the heater, mostly teenagers, kind of dating and having fun together.

Anti-Semitism

Socializing with her friends and family combined with academics, at which Mia excelled along with gymnastics, ice skating, and swimming, provided a cache of happy memories of life in prewar Warsaw. Surprisingly, Mia mentioned that only her Grandfather Władzio—he of the many mistresses—knew Yiddish from his early days in the country, but he communicated in Polish, albeit with a decided accent. Day-to-day anti-Semitism was another matter.

There were a lot of suspicions of religious Jews, but mostly things were very different in Poland at that time as far as my family and I were concerned. People who came from middle-class and well-educated backgrounds were so assimilated into the Polish culture and there was no identification with anything else. There was no language; there was no

Fig. 2.3 Mia in a costume for a school play, made for her by their seamstress, Filomena. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

religion. There was nothing that would make you feel that you were different from anybody else, except that there was this really strong anti-Semitism. It was not only that you would feel it in your relations with people, but it was institutionalized even though not officially. I remember one time I went with my mother to buy something at a store, I think they were selling pastries or something like that, and my mother asked the shopkeeper about something, and he responded, obviously unaware that we were Jews: "Oh, this is very good. It's not some kind of a Jewish stuff." He said it just like that!

The patina of equality in cosmopolitan Warsaw began to crack and eventually crumbled in the mid-1930s, even before the Nazi invasion at the end of the decade. Years of deficits, ineffective tax policies, unchecked urban scarcity, and lack of relief to impoverished peasants, nurtured the rise of ultranationalists centered in the right-wing Endek Party. Although Mia had been sheltered from the authoritarian turn happening around her, her contentment came to a crashing halt in 1937 when she was refused admission to the

School of Architecture of the Warsaw Technical University. The rejection, she knew, came about because of the unspoken quota on Jews, but it was a shock, nonetheless.

I think I was about thirteen years old when I decided that I wanted to be an architect. I read somewhere about a woman architect, and that really appealed to me, and I said "that's what I want to do." I was seventeen and younger than most of my classmates, but I applied to the School of Architecture. In Warsaw they called it *Politechnika*. It was like an Institute of Technology, like MIT. I applied, and there were difficult entrance exams, mostly a lot of drawing, also math and all kinds of things. I was not accepted. Well, it was terrible. Disappointment is a very inadequate word. I was hurt and I felt that it was so unjust. I felt victimized, for a good reason. Until then, I never experienced that kind of discrimination. In school I was always successful. It was very painful…. I was hurt, and I felt that it was so unjust. Everybody knew that it was based on religious discrimination. You have all straight A's, perfect assimilation into Polish culture, and still they reject you and they don't have to justify it. I wasn't the only one. People tried sometimes two, three, four times. Sometimes they just gave up.

As Mia told me this story over a half-century later while sitting in her house in California, it was as though she still could not believe it, like there had been some mistake that had intervened to disrupt her perfectly well-ordered youth. She balled her fist and, now in her frail nineties, pounded the table, reliving that moment in 1937. Clearly, the rejection was an abrupt and cruel reality-check to a young woman who assumed that her hard work and excellent grades at one of Warsaw's most rigorous high schools would ensure her admission to the Politechnika. She had naively assumed that for her and her secular family, the quota did not apply. She hints that the depth of the shock was not simply the rejection, but the recognition of the limitations Judaism conferred. In reality, the quota meant that some Jews—Mia's brother for one—did manage to get into the universities, although fewer and fewer as the Polish nationalist regime consolidated in the late 1930s.

My brother got into medical school because he had a lot of connections. He had a high school teacher who really had a great influence on that. The process was not entirely based on qualifications but on connections, the particular competition in any given year, the accident of luck, or something else meant that some Jews got in, and some got in after a while, but most just gave up and looked for places to go outside the country.

Determined to obtain her degree, Mia looked into studying abroad. At first glance this might have seemed a radical course of action, but young Poles, especially women and Jews, but also those in some career paths, had been forced to study abroad for a variety of reasons for many years, hence Mia was not unfamiliar with that possibility.

Switzerland and the Federal Institute of Technology

At first I was really depressed, but then I kind of got excited about going somewhere else. Still it was not an easy decision, since for me, or any girl, to travel alone to a distant country to attend a university where I knew next to no one was complicated, extremely expensive, and in those times even dangerous. My father was cautious. He said, "If you go, I want to be sure that we are sending you to a place that will be safe." Some of our friends were going to Vienna, but with Hitler already in power, and there were all these stories that you heard about things that were happening. People went to different schools abroad and then had trouble, because they had to keep one step ahead of Hitler and sometimes, unfortunately, they were behind. And it was really a good thing that I went to Switzerland, because I had friends who went to Vienna, and then Hitler came and then they had to leave. Some of them came to Zurich from Vienna. Some people went to Prague to study, and that turned out not to be so good. I think that my father's fears were not unfounded that he wanted me to be in a safe place.

Also the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich was very prestigious. I was accepted even though I was young, because normally they didn't accept students who were younger than eighteen, and I was still seventeen. Because of my good grades, they accepted me. Even so, you had to pass a very difficult entrance exam. That was because Swiss high schools were on a much higher level than schools in Poland. For example, the Swiss high schools had calculus; they had descriptive geometry, which I had never even heard about in my life! Students [from abroad] who enrolled lacking the rigorous background of the Swiss students, were required to audit classes during the first semester, and then pass a very difficult entrance exam. While catching up and preparing for the exam, you still had to complete all of the work of the standard first semester. If you passed the exam you went into the second semester as a

regular student. I left for Zurich not really knowing if I would pass that exam and be able to stay after the first semester. But I went.

It was like going to the end of the world. It was a twenty-some hours' train trip, but I remember when I went to the railroad station and all my family and some friends came to say goodbye at the last moment I wanted to say, "No. I don t want to go. I want to stay!" I wanted to jump off the train. The train trip was scary and exciting at the same time. All of a sudden I had to stop speaking Polish and start speaking German. I had studied German for a few years but kind of lightheartedly. I had a very nice teacher, private lessons. Nonetheless, I remember talking to people on the train in German and doing okay.

When I got to Zurich I only knew one person, and that was a friend of my brother's. His name was also Tadeusz, Tadeusz Sznejberg. They went to school together and then he went off to study in Switzerland. He was the one who told my parents and me how wonderful it was to study in Switzerland. That's what convinced my parents that this would be a good place. Unfortunately, this boy told everybody that I was his girlfriend, before I arrived there. Of course I didn't know about it, because I was not his girlfriend. So it was kind of unpleasant when I arrived and then everybody greeted me as his girlfriend. They were telling him, "You have a nice girlfriend." But anyway I met Jan right away because we were staying in the same *pensione*. I'll talk about that in a while.

I remember when I got to the university I was a little late, because it all happened so quickly. I found out that I was not accepted in Poland, then I applied there and my parents had to get permission from a special governmental institution that would approve it. Poland did not allow its citizens to keep any money abroad, so if parents wanted to send a child to school in some foreign country, they had to have a special permission to send that much money every month. It was all very complicated. So I got there a month or more late. When I went to register at the main office, the secretary told me how much it was, and it was quite expensive. She looked at me, and I was not only young, but I also looked very young, and she said, "Are you sure that you want to do this?" She knew that a lot of students didn't make it and I think she was wondering if I had come all this way for nothing.

Fortunately I made it, but I don't remember ever working as hard in my life. A lot of the time I wasn't sure I would make it. You come and have to use a new language to study all these subjects that you never even heard of, and you have to learn them in a foreign language, which really didn't

matter because I never heard of them before anyway! At that time the high schools in Switzerland, next to the French high schools, were considered the best in Europe, making it difficult for many of the students from other countries.

Although Mia explained the complicated process of applying and being accepted to the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) and referred to its celebrated reputation, she, rather typically, stressed its rigor and minimized its prestige. Her accomplishment was remarkable. Founded in 1854 by the Swiss Confederation in Zurich, the ETH was considered the top university in Europe, and remains today among the top five universities on the continent, and among the top ten best universities of the world. While Albert Einstein is its most famous alumnus, the university has produced a long line of Nobel Prize winners in various fields of sciences. Mia's admission to the School of Architecture was a major achievement for any applicant, and given the prejudice against women, and one so young, it was a singular accomplishment. Once in, the course of study was daunting and the curricular routine extremely challenging, as Mia explained.

Another complication was that, in Switzerland, or at least at this school, there were some professors that were French-Swiss and some that were German-Swiss and every professor had the right to teach in his own language. We had for instance a Descriptive Geometry class and the professor was a French-Swiss and he had two teaching assistants. One was French-speaking, and the other one was German-speaking. When the assistants took over the class, which was very often, they would teach in their own language. If it was the German-speaking assistant, the class was in German, and if it was the French-speaking assistant, you had to do it in French. You learned it in both languages. It would never have occurred to the French-speakers to speak German, or the other way around, leaving it up to the students to adjust to whoever showed up.

It was in the pensione where Mia lived that she made most of her friends, and they were for the most part foreign students like her from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

This *pensione* was a very interesting place. It was run by a couple. She was from Poland, he was from Russia, and they were kind of leftist people. There was a cross section of population. There were quite a few students, mostly from other countries and quite a few students from Poland. I remember there were retired Swiss people, and there were some young Swiss people who were working and had jobs. We would get our meals there, and walk to school from there. I mean, everybody had to walk.

There was one student at this school who was from Holland. He had a red car and a wife, and he was the living legend of our school, because nobody had a wife and nobody had a car! I still remember his face and the red car. I never met the wife I guess.

There was only one girl who I knew before from Warsaw and she went originally to Vienna, and then when Hitler annexed Austria, she moved to Zurich. And then there were some other students from Poland in different departments, besides architecture. Although the architecture program was not large, just twenty students, there were only four females. One was Swiss, one from Germany—she was a Jewish girl from Germany—and there was another girl, but I don't remember much about her, she dropped out.

For me, Switzerland, the *pensione*, my classes, everything, was a wonderful experience. I was independent for the first time in my life. I felt very grown up being on my own, while the exposure to a different culture, languages, and people was really thrilling. Everything was new and exciting. I felt like I had wings on my back. Zurich is beautiful, you know, with a lot of greenery, which is so different from Warsaw that hardly has any trees. I remember going through the streets of the city; I was very happy. Oh, I missed my parents and my brother, and the school work was hard but I really loved my two years there.

Meeting Jan Truskier

For all the excitement and challenge Mia found in the Swiss university, her most life-changing event was meeting her future husband, Jan Truskier.

I met Jan at the *pensione* and got to know him at the School of Architecture. Our romance began over geometry. I was having a lot of difficulty in my math class learning descriptive geometry so one of my professors recommended that I get help from a student who was two years ahead of me in the program, and also from Poland. You know with descriptive geometry you have a shape, like a donut, and then you have two planes, and one vertical and a horizontal plane, and you have this object here, and you're supposed to slice it at different angles. If you slice it horizontally, you just get another circle. If you cut it across, straight across you get two circles, and if you cut it at an angle, you get two ellipses. When you project these points from these planes you come out with the shape that scientifically in geometry was known as a torus. It was quite difficult, quite fascinating. That was really the beginning of the romance between

my husband and me. We met over descriptive geometry. Later on, descriptive geometry helped me a lot with my designs and drawings, developing costumes, paper sculptures and puppets that I have been making my whole life. And then meeting Jan was of course one of the most important events of my life.

Mia revealed that as much as she cherished her time in Zurich and found the German Swiss cordial and accommodating, she did not make many close friends.

We were friendly with a lot of people, but I had only one good friend who was a Swiss girl, and Jan had only one good Swiss friend. The Swiss, basically, didn't have a very friendly attitude toward foreigners. They had this expression, *Hebe Ausländer*, using a derogatory term for Jew (*Hebe*) in the Swiss dialect, combined with foreigner (*Ausländer*). I'm not sure why they used it. Did they see Jews as foreigners or foreigners as Jews? But it was definitely an insult. On the other hand, I met some awfully nice people, including a girlfriend whose hometown was on the border of French and German-speaking Switzerland. I kept in contact with her for years, even after she and her family came to the US after the war. We wrote letters and exchanged Christmas cards, that sort of thing.

Although the international situation was daily worsening, Mia did not recall worrying too much about the impending war.

We did hear that the situation was getting worse, especially for Jews, and there were some students at the university in Switzerland from Germany who already had experienced problems at home. We would hear about their families being sent into some relocation camps, and things like that, but we weren't paying very close attention, I'm afraid. We thought, oh well, probably nothing will happen. It will kind of fizzle out. For us life was still pretty carefree. (Shaking her head)

Mia and Jan had never met in Warsaw because Jan's family, also Jewish, was from a higher social status than the Tłustys. Jan did not attend the same high school as Mia's brother, or else he might have been drawn to the comfortable hospitality of the Tłusty family dining room with so many other of Tadeusz's friends.

The Truskier Family

The Truskiers were a rich and prominent family in Warsaw. They used to travel abroad a lot and Jan would go with them to stay with relatives and friends at their houses in other parts of Europe. He didn't spend time in

the city at the same swimming pools and gathering places like my brother and I did. Jan was an only child so his parents always wanted him to travel with them. But my parents knew his Aunt Gustawa; she was called "Gitla." She was a pediatrician, and she was my brother's and my doctor. Not only that, but she was also very good friends with my parents, but somehow Jan and I never met when we went to school. The Truskier family was not large, and the name is uncommon, so I would have remembered it, but until we met in Switzerland, I never even saw him in my life. I guess we were living in different circles. His father and uncles were very wealthy entrepreneurs and real estate developers, things like that, and some of them were important in politics.

Jan came to Switzerland because his mother grew up there and his grandmother lived there even after the rest of the family went back to Poland. By the time I met him, the grandmother was already dead. He came to Switzerland before I did and it wasn't because he was rejected from the Polish university under the quota system. I think he just came because the Federal University in Zurich was very good and his mother had relatives there. His family's name in Switzerland was Lothe but they changed it to Lotto in Poland.[9] I don't know exactly why but I guess it was for business purposes.

The family had a lot of wealth in real estate and other businesses. His mother was kind of a snob and she wasn't really happy about Jan and me. When I came back to Warsaw that first summer [1938] after meeting Jan, I met his parents. His family had a beautiful apartment in a wonderful location because there was open space in front of it with horseracing tracks and all this open space and then the airport after that. I remember the first time I went there was to meet Jan's mother, Regina. It didn't go very well. She told me what time to get there, and I did, and then I had to wait in the hallway for an hour before she would meet me. It was like I was coming for a job or something!

It was then that Mia made clear to me that her relationship with Regina, and Jan's own relationship with his mother, was always tense. Ironically, Regina did not come from a wealthy family herself. Her father was a photographer and there's no record of her mother having a career, but Regina adapted quickly to the prestige of the Truskiers. When I asked if Regina died in Poland or in Italy, I was met with one of Mia's few outbursts. She actually yelled, which was rare. "She lived with us until she died in 1968!"

Fig. 2.4 Regina Truskier in Warsaw before the War. She was often photographed with one of the family cars. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Summer of 1938 and the End of Innocence

Except for the less than welcoming encounter with Jan's mother, Mia would later look back on the months in Poland before her second year at the university in Switzerland as the twilight of innocent youth.

Well, at that time there was no worry about the war, yet. That came later, because in 1938 there was still no talk of war. Unfortunately, the Polish government at that time was kind of fascist. They were friendly with the Germans and they were sending people there to learn from the Germans how to do this or that, and how to run schools. Before the war, when I was in high school still in Poland, all of a sudden they introduced uniforms. Every school had a number, and you had to wear a little shape with the number of your school on your coat wherever you went. If they caught you without it, you could be punished for it. It was very unpleasant and we were pretty unhappy about it. By contrast, at that time in Switzerland life was still pretty carefree.

If Mia was oblivious to the impending war, many in Europe were not. On March 12, the Germans had marched into Austria, which did not trouble many Aryan Austrians, but certainly alarmed Jews and members of the left-wing parties. Then during the summer of 1938, Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia return the Sudetenland to German control. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain acceded to Hitler's demands, much to the distress of many Europeans, especially antifascists and Jews. Britain and France appeased Czechoslovakia and other endangered countries with the promise to defend Poland, should the Germans invade or try to annex it.[10] *Although from September 1938 until the next year, much of the world was beginning to think that war in Europe was only a matter of time, others, like Mia and her friends, thought the crises would blow over.*

At the end of the next summer, Warsaw was on the verge of war and the lovely expanse in front of the Truskier apartment was the airport from which the German planes took off and landed during their bombing missions over the city. In fact, one of the first casualties of the war was Jan's apartment building. War changed everything.

Notes

1. Mia often refers to her brother as "Tadzio," a nickname for Tadeusz. Other spellings crop up in some of the letters written by friends and relatives, and I have left them in the original. Tadeusz would be Theodore in English, a name that also has many nicknames of varied spellings (Teddy, Ted, Ned, Theo, etc.) It is possible that Mia's brother's friends referred to him with other nicknames.
2. In Polish *wilcyz bilet* is a metaphor for a ticket that is not of use to anyone in an entourage or specific situation. As practiced during the communist era, it "was used to repress free-thinkers, by preventing them from studies (almost all higher universities then were governmental) … or for a one way passport to leave Poland, but not to come back." TomaszBorek c2.com/wiki/remodel/?WolfTicket Mia indicates that the practice was in place during the Russian occupation that ended in 1918. The term "wolf ticket" is also used in African-American slang for a meaningless put down, sometimes referred to as "talking trash." en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AWolf_ticket.
3. About $1.6 million today, according to the Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator.
4. Vladka Meed in her memoir of the Polish resistance describes Nalewki Street. "Before the war, this had been the main commercial and retail thor-

oughfare in Jewish Warsaw, the center of the textile trade, its streets crowded with merchants and wagons and cars from every part of Poland." *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Israel: Ghetto Fighters' House, 1972), 265.

5. In reading this account later, I wished I had asked Mia if spitting on a Jew would not have been a form of harrassment, even if the thieves objective was to get the money from her grandmother? If Mia made that connection, she did not say.
6. This story is a constant in Truskier family lore and Mia retold it to me on several occasions.
7. Alicja Kaczynska wrote a history of the Zofia Kurmanowa School (*Szkola Zofii Kurmanowej*) that in English would be *The Books and Golden Pen*, or the history of Zofia Kurmanowa's school in Warsaw in 1903–1944. (Warsaw: Museum Almanac 7, 2013). There does not seem to be a translation in English, but the explanation can be read online using the translate function at: domynalinii.wordpress.com.
8. One of Mia's few remarks that could be taken as snobbery. It's hard to know who she considered "everybody who was anybody," but as a young girl she seemed to enjoy being in the popular set.
9. A search of family surnames in the Polish and Polish-Jewish database turned up many Lothes, and listed as "derivatives" the names Lotto, Lotte, and Lotta, indicating that these may have been branches of the same family.
10. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 314.

CHAPTER 3

Fleeing Poland, 1939–1940

Mia's description of the tumultuous final days of the summer of 1939 stitch together the pieces of her life from the exciting first years at the university in Zurich and new romance with Jan Truskier, to the catastrophic German invasion. The onset of war permanently ended her study of architecture.

I didn't finish my university studies in Zurich. I still had two years to go, and Jan graduated just before the war. Jan's father had died on August 4, 1938, thus his mother came alone to Switzerland to visit family members and to attend Jan's university graduation in the summer of 1939. Jan and his mother were planning to spend the summer on the coast of Brittany in France as the guests of Jan's uncle, Efroim Truskier [hereafter referred to by his Communist Party name, Franciszek Fiedler], and aunt, Gustawa Truskier, who coincidentally was my pediatrician in Warsaw and a friend of my parents.[1] Gustawa and Franciszek were living in Paris. He was a famous Communist and Gustawa moved to Paris because of his politics. When they were in Poland he spent a lot of time in jail. And then they moved away and lived in different places, and eventually ended up in Paris. Anyway, we, Jan, his mother, and I, went to visit them, and that was at the end of July 1939. We went with them to the seashore in Brittany. And it was beautiful there, but everybody already knew that the war was coming. There were a lot of people there from England and everybody was talking about the possibility of war.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_3

Jan's Uncle Franciszek was imprisoned frequently for his political activities, including his role in the 1918 founding of the Polish Communist Workers Party (KPP) and the subsequent support the KPP provided to the Soviet Union in the Polish-Bolshevik war following Polish independence. After his release from prison, Franciszek was sent on Comintern business to Moscow and then to Berlin, where he worked until Hitler's seizure of power in 1933.[2] *Gustawa seems to have joined him in Berlin and from there the couple moved to Brussels where Franciszek represented the KPP Central Committee at the Comintern. They would leave for the south of France after the outbreak of war, but in the summer of 1939 he and Gustawa were in Brittany. It was there that they entertained their very bourgeois, but fairly apolitical, sister-in-law, Regina Truskier, their nephew, Jan, and his fiancée, Mia Tlusty. Mia remembers their blissful time at the villa on the coast of Brittany, despite the fact that the talk of war was everywhere.*

At first glance, the close relationship between Jan's family and that of his committed communist aunt and uncle might have seemed unusual. After all, Regina Truskier had never exhibited much concern for the betterment of the workers of the world. Mia contended that her mother-in-law was actually mostly preoccupied with her own comfort and outward displays of wealth, a characteristic she retained her entire life. Peter remembered with amusement growing up in Southern California and hearing his grandmother, decades away from the prosperity of her life in Poland, warning his parents that his older brother Andy's girlfriends were only interested in "our money and our name!" The rest of the family shook their heads in disbelief, knowing that in 1960s Long Beach the family's wealth was long gone and no one would have thought of their surname as anything more than strange, foreign, and hard-to-pronounce. Moreover, Andy Truskier probably could not have counted his heavily accented Polish grandmother as an asset in the suburban high school dating scene.

Indisputably, the Europe of 1939 was for the Truskiers a world apart from where they would end up years later. Mia did not recall any apprehension on the part of her mother-in-law toward the communist relatives—even though it was not a politics she shared—nor did their leftist affiliations influence Regina's decision to bring her son and his fiancée with her to spend the summer at their villa on the Brittany coast. Socialist ideas infused Warsaw's prosperous intellectual milieu, allowing Regina to overlook any profound differences between her own worldview and that of her leftist in-laws.

Summer 1939: Europe on the Brink of War

The main wrinkle in Mia and Jan's enjoyment of the summer of 1939 was the international situation, which intruded like an uninvited guest at every vacationer's dinner table. From Brittany, Mia and the Truskiers went to Paris with Franciszek and Gustawa, all the while anxiously monitoring the impending political disaster unfolding on the Polish-German border. By late August, as signs of German aggression increased, Mia, Jan, and Regina decided to return to Poland. Mia explained their return trip:

Later it seemed like such a crazy thing, but we felt if there is a war, then we have to get back, quickly. We cannot be cut off from our country if there is a war. And so we went home from France, from Paris. We got home on the last train that crossed the German territory without broken windows because there was such a tremendous propaganda in Germany against Poland. They were trying to justify taking over. So there was all this propaganda. They even did things like they [the Germans] produced some propaganda films that were made in their own concentration camps. Then they claimed that these were taken in concentration camps in Poland where they [Poles] kept national Germans, which was a complete fabrication. There was nothing like that.

So anyway we arrived home, I think, on August 20, 1939. And ten days later, you know we were in war. One morning we woke up and there were air alarms and bombs started falling without any warning. There was no declaration of war. There was nothing. They just started bombing. Some people didn't believe that this was real war. They thought it was some kind of maneuvers. It took them awhile. But immediately things started to happen. It was terrible. I mean there were deaths and damage. It was a real war, and nobody ever expected that, especially since the Polish government was so buddy-buddy with the Nazis at that time.

Hitler had tried before the outbreak of World War II to convince the far-right Polish government to join with the Germans in a war of aggression against the Soviet Union, to win territory for the growing German empire, and to turn Poland into a satellite state of the expanding Reich.[3] *When that failed, Hitler moved to neutralize the Soviet Union, and on August 23, 1939, Germany and the USSR signed the secret Treaty of Nonaggression, known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, dividing Poland and the Baltic States between them, leaving Poland wide open to being swallowed once again by powerful neighbors on either side. The treaty remained in effect until June*

22, 1941 when Germany launched an attack on Soviet positions in Eastern Poland.[4]

With the benefit of hindsight, Mia shook her head in disbelief as she told of their desperation to leave the relative safety of France, at least at the time, and get back to Warsaw. They were not alone among Europeans who discounted the dangers that lay ahead for Poland and its Jewish citizens in particular. Joseph Hollander, a Jewish travel agent in Krakow, began in 1939 to reach out to contacts in the Polish Interior Ministry to wrangle exit visas for wealthy clients to travel to the Americas or Australia. He later marveled that many of his friends and clients refused his help and failed to see the imminent danger rising about them. "With all that was happening, the Jews in Poland didn't realize the gravity of the situation and continued hoping it would stop. How blind we all were. The easy life blinded us."[5] *Mia remarked that it was not so much the comfort of their lives, although that certainly played a part for well-off, secular Jews such as her own and Jan's families, but the fact that the long history of anti-Semitism had inured them to the possibility of greater danger. Throughout Polish history there had been anti-Semitic attacks, which periodically exploded into violence against students in the universities, brutal harassment of religious Jews in provincial towns, and the complicity of the police with anti-Semitic mobs who terrorized urban Jewish neighborhoods. It was not, therefore, illogical for Jews to dismiss the warnings that this new violence was something different and more sinister from all those in the past. So many decades later, Mia still vividly recalled her disbelief at the suddenness of the onslaught.*

Poland was completely unprepared. There was nothing. Within six days they had our Warsaw airport in their hands and they were bombing Warsaw from our own airport. Jan's family had this beautiful apartment that was considered such a wonderful location because there was open space in front of it. And the open space was the airport. There were horseracing tracks across the way and the airport after that, so there was all this open space. The place where they lived was immediately hit. Jan had this gorgeous, beautiful bedroom, and immediately there was this huge hole in the wall.

What the Germans did was, during the day they were bombing from the air, and the weather was beautiful that September. Normally, it's not in Poland. But it was a beautiful September, no clouds, nothing. So they bombed all day. Then at night they bombed with the artillery. They were already so close. They were on the outskirts of Warsaw.

Then on September 6th the Polish government issued this order over the radio to all the citizens. They ordered all the able-bodied men to leave the city, because Warsaw was not going to be defended and they didn't want these men to fall into the hands of the Nazis. They claimed that they would then be incorporated in the Army, you know. They said to walk toward the east where they were supposedly going to join a regrouped Polish army in the eastern part of Poland.

I remember my father and mother talking a lot about whether Tadeusz and he should leave me and my mother alone in Warsaw, especially amidst all the bombing and everything. And also my brother was just about finished with medical school, and then, of course, no one knew what was going to happen to any of us. But my father was a patriotic Polish citizen so he felt it was his duty to obey the orders of the Polish government. You know, he was always very proud of Poland's independence. You remember that I told you how as far back as 1918, when he was a student, he joined demonstrations and participated with the local militia to resist the Red Army's invasion of Poland. That was known as the "Miracle of the Vistula." So he didn't want to see the work of over twenty years of establishing a nation once again turned back, but still it was an extremely difficult decision. My father was very conflicted, but ultimately he and my brother opted to stand with the Polish army.

On that morning they were to report to duty, my mother and I walked over the bridge to the other side of the river. I'll never forget that morning. The streets were filled with all kinds of people walking. There were very few cars in Poland at that time, but even if you had a Cadillac you would trade it in for a bicycle because there was no gas, so people were on foot. There were all these people walking. Because some men didn't want to leave their wives, you know, and they took their families with them. And all of them were on foot because they had no other means of transportation. The government told these recruits to walk toward the east and it claimed that these men would be incorporated into the Army, but I don't think they ever really had a plan. And then the Germans came, you know, and massacred them from the air. You could see it! I mean there were dead people, horses. It was horrible! It was horrible, horrible! I never saw my father again, and I didn't see my brother for many, many years.

With tears in her eyes, Mia spoke bitterly of the call-up, claiming the men of Warsaw were sacrificed in a futile effort to fight off the German army before it reached the city. The official line differs from Mia's opinion, or at least in so far as the government having a plan. On September 14, the

commander of the Polish army, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły, ordered all Polish troops east of the Vistula River to retreat to Lwów, then a part of Poland and today in Ukraine, where they would wait for the French to open a front in the West. That did not happen. Despite British and French declarations of war on Germany on September 3, neither country moved to assist Poland, an action referred to as the phony war, or Sitzkrieg. The German forces overran Poland, attacking from three sides: Germany, East Prussia and the occupied Czech territory. For Poland, the German invasion was then compounded when the rest of the secret plan was carried out and the Soviet Union invaded from the east on September 17.[6]

Although completely unprepared, the Polish forces managed to fight against far superior armies for nearly a month. The resistance is all the more noteworthy since many individual soldiers, such as Zygmunt and Tadeusz, never found their army units and were left completely on their own. Not until after the war did many in Poland know that hundreds of Polish recruits were left without a command to report to, instead opting for safety in Romania, Sweden, or if they could manage it, even further west to England. The Truskier men survived and eventually made it to Lwów, but it was many months before Mia and Paulina knew of their whereabouts.

So we didn't know for a long time what happened to them, if they even survived. Well. Jan didn't leave, you know. For one thing his mother just was adamant about it. You know, his father had died only a short time before, and he was the only son. And then, well she just didn't want him to go. Who knows, maybe it was better that he didn't go.

I found this a strange conclusion, given what Mia learned years later of the fate of her brother and father, confined in a Soviet work camp on the edge of Siberia, enduring work that weakened them and probably contributed to the death of her father in 1942. Nonetheless, the only significant number of Polish Jews who survived the war were those who ended up on the eastern side of the Molotov–Ribbentrop line. As Christopher Browning wrote to me, "ironically, being deported by Stalin proved to be the single most effective Holocaust 'rescue' operation of the war, though it was certainly not intended as such!"[7] *It is only with the benefit of hindsight that we know Jan lived out the war as a refugee in Italy.*

Fig. 3.1 Map of Poland under Soviet and German occupation, 1939–1941. (Credit: Peter Truskier)

Warsaw: The First Months of Bombing and Occupation

Anyway, in Warsaw we had bombings for many weeks just day and night, day and night. And you never knew whether you were still going to be alive in the next five minutes, because there were no defenses. After my father and my brother left, my mother and I were left in Warsaw to take

care of things. My grandmother on my father's side was there. She lived with us at the time, and there was also Aunt Bella. My parents owned the building where we lived and my father had given his oldest sister, Bella Neumark, an apartment in it. She was a widow with a son, Stanislaw, who we always called Stasio. So there were these relatives. And then a lot of people came from around the city because they felt that they would be safer being with lots of other people, so there were people sitting on the staircases, all these refugees from the provinces. They had no place to go. It was terrible. We had people coming and staying with us. You did what you could. If you had some food you shared with whoever was there.

Because the building belonged to my parents, it became my mother's responsibility to see about safety, but you really couldn't do much to make it safe. Some of these bombs were small firebombs. They were extremely dangerous because they could fall on the roof and penetrate the roof, fall in the attic spaces and you didn't even know it, and before you know, the whole building is on fire. I was scared to death but I didn't want my mother to go there alone, and so I would just follow her. We would go up to the attic spaces to check. We had in our building four or five of these little firebombs. When we found one, we would throw a blanket over it and smother it. Then once we had an artillery bomb that hit above the floor where we were. And that was so scary we thought we really were all dead. Completely dark in the middle of the day in the attic, and all this plaster started falling. We were just terrified! But somehow nobody was injured in that bombing.

That lasted for about a month, and then Warsaw surrendered. The Germans walked in. Then the real nightmare started. I will never forget the night after it was announced that Warsaw had surrendered and that the Germans were coming. All night I had dreams about fires and bombings. What happened later was worse than the bombings. It was just all of a sudden you have no rights, and every German soldier could decide who dies and who lives and nothing would happen to him. They could shoot you just because you were walking. At that time they didn't even care. You know, it was not strictly against the Jews. If they didn't like your face they could shoot you on the spot. It was hard during the bombings, of course, to get food and to find anything, and then we lost power. There was no electricity. There was no radio. That was the worst, when we lost the radio. All of a sudden we were completely lost; you don't know what's happening. But we survived that. Then there was the occupation.

It was all terrible, but the most frightening part was finding food. We were so scared of going out in the street, like I told you, because the Gestapo was everywhere, so we had to rely on what food we had on hand, and that was being eaten very fast. The person most responsible for getting us food was Feliks.

Feliks Gradstein was married to my father's sister, Stella (Tłusty). He was Stella's widower, because Stella died of tuberculosis before the war. And he and Stella, before she died, and their daughter, Lilka or Alicja, but we called her Lilka, had lived with my paternal grandmother [Eugenia (Cung) Tłusty]. There are some letters from my father in the camp to Feliks, telling him how grateful he is to him. My father had a lot of regrets that he left, terrible regrets. Anyway, Feliks was a lot older. He was older when he married Stella, and she was quite a bit older than my father. Feliks had two grown sons from his first wife, but they were somewhere else, abroad, studying in some schools somewhere. I didn't really know them. I only knew his daughter Lilka. Before the war, Feliks had owned a movie theater that belonged to his father. It was damaged by a bomb during the first assault on the city in September. I think it couldn't be repaired, but it didn't matter. It was impossible for Feliks to show movies, even if he could have repaired it, because Jews were not allowed to keep their businesses. Anyway, this Cinema Fama on Przejazd Street, was pretty well-known and so Feliks had a lot of connections.[8]

He spent a lot of time with my family. He was there all the time. He was the one who brought us food. Feliks was an extremely brave man. We would have starved without him because you know people didn't dare to go out during all these bombings, and there was no food. He would just turn up at all hours of the day and night and begin pulling vegetables or pieces of bread or whatever out of the pockets of his coat. One time he was gone three days and then he came back and he brought the whole head of a calf, not the body, only the head! We were just amazed! We never knew how he got it, but we cooked it and ate it and made soup with the broth. We ate everything that you could find.

The head of a calf! Just imagine it! And we ate it!

Mia laughed as she retold this story, thinking back to the cluster of people hiding out in the besieged apartment building, and here came Feliks lugging the head of a calf! It was the only time she lamented not having a camera, although even seventy years later she remembered vividly the image of the calf and the emotional reception from those hiding in the building.

Deciding to Leave Poland: The Swiss Option

Anyway, we started thinking about how we could get out of Poland. At that time there was a real black market for visas in Warsaw. Whatever you could get to, you would do that. So first we were hoping to go to Switzerland because Jan and I still had valid visas to go back as students. He had graduated, but originally he was planning on doing some post-graduate work, and I was going to finish myself. But the Swiss immediately annulled all the visas, for a reason. Other countries were making these jokes about the Swiss, saying that their national hero was not Wilhelm Tell, but "Wilhelm Hotel." These neutral countries usually came out pretty good. They were saying that they [countries fighting the war] kept other countries like Switzerland neutral because both sides wanted a place where they could keep their money and their spies. I mean, to be fair, the Swiss didn't send anybody away. People, who were already there, they kept them, like students from countries that were involved in the war. They didn't repatriate them. At least they allowed them to stay there. They had some kind of camps for students and they allowed them to finish. But it was not easy. But Jan had family in Switzerland, because his mother was raised in Switzerland. He still had an uncle there. But it seemed impossible to get a Swiss visa, even though his family also had a lot of money in Switzerland.

Based on Mia's description of the Lottos, Regina Truskier's family, I wondered why they would not have qualified for admission into Switzerland? In the first place, although a citizen of Poland by virtue of her birth there, Regina Lotto had grown up in Switzerland, moving back to Poland later in her life. She established her permanent residency in Poland only upon marriage to Julian Truskier. In addition, the Truskiers were very wealthy and had for many years kept a Swiss bank account with quite a lot of money in it. Holding money outside Poland was illegal, but it seemed to be a loosely enforced rule, and given Swiss financial secrecy laws, the account would no doubt have been hard to track had the Polish government even wanted to do so. Since Regina had relatives residing in Switzerland who would have vouched for her and provided the necessary support, she and her family would not have been denied entry because of the burden they would place on the Swiss state. The cost of supporting migrants was, along with the protection of its neutrality, one of the main reasons Switzerland gave for not accepting refugees. Mia explained to me that Regina's Swiss relatives, the Lottos, were not aware of Regina's attempts to make contact with them to gain asylum.

Later we found out that there was another reason. Regina's brother's wife, Jan's aunt, many years later confessed to my mother-in-law that she did not forward some letters to her husband because she really didn't want us to come. She was kind of jealous. To be fair, she was not well. She was kind of mentally deranged, and she eventually ended up in an institution. But we found out that she kind of sabotaged our attempts to go there.

Given the circumstances, Mia's equanimity struck me as overly generous. After all she and her family were fleeing for their lives but were being denied safe haven out of some minor quibble with relatives? But maybe it was simply because the full story only became clear many years later.

Their sponsorship by well-to-do Swiss citizens would probably have made a big difference in the Truskiers' bid for entry, but it would not necessarily have granted them immigrant status, at least for very long. For years since the end of World War II, Switzerland has been dodging accusations about questionable practices in terms of shielding the Reich's money and personal fortunes. Questions abounded in international circles concerning Swiss grants of asylum, especially about who was turned away and why, and the particular role of anti-Semitism in refusing refugees. In 2002, after a five-year-long investigation into private and governmental practices during the war, the Independent Commission of Experts (ICE) issued a 525-page report entitled, "Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War, Final Report." The ICE concluded that all told, from September 1939 until May 1945, Switzerland "offered around 60,000 civilians refuge from persecution by the Nazis for periods ranging from a few weeks to several years. Slightly less than half these people were Jewish."[9] *The investigators admitted, however, that since few records were kept, it was impossible to calculate the number of refugees who were refused entry, to interpret the reasons for the refusals, and to know for sure how many people tried to enter the country but were discouraged before making a formal appeal for entry.*

Although the ICE report does not address the plight of students, Mia states that those who were there were not expelled. Again, this is hard to verify. On October 17, 1939 fearing a "breach of Switzerland's neutral status," the Swiss Federal Council issued a decree requiring immigrants—anyone who had recently arrived—to leave the country as quickly as possible.[10] *Until the 2002 report, the international community had little evidence of how refugees were treated. Many passed through the country in a matter of a few days or weeks; others either stayed in work camps or with the family members who sponsored them, and the majority, such as Mia and her family, were turned*

away. Switzerland did not provide a hospitable environment, but then neither did any other place in Europe and certainly not the US.

An "Emergency Conversion"

Worried at the diminishing possibilities for leaving Poland, Mia and Jan decided to convert to Catholicism, get married, and then to try to apply for a visa as a Christian couple. Mia's mother, Paulina, made the contact that facilitated Mia and Jan's baptism.

One day my mother ran into an old friend on the street, a woman who worked as a secretary for the Holy Cross Catholic Church, and my mother told her about the difficulties we were having getting a visa. This woman, whose name has been lost to me, if I ever knew it, made the arrangements for Jan and me to take catechism classes in preparation for baptism into the Catholic Church. It was not something I had ever thought of doing and a lot of Jews looked down on people who converted to get into the university, for business, or some things like that. There is in Polish a kind of derogatory name for a person who changed his religion to Catholicism … . And they had some jokes. I remember hearing this joke about the Jew who became a Catholic and then in those years you were not supposed to eat meat on Friday. So anyway somehow he really wanted to eat a goose and then (she laughs) and then before he had the goose he kind of baptized it and said, "You were a goose and now you are a fish." (Laughing) So you know there were some jokes and some derogatory things but all in all people didn't discriminate against converts.

This "emergency conversion," as it was known, was not an uncommon strategy. Poland as a whole witnessed a spike in conversions and in Warsaw alone "over 200 Jews converted between November 1939 and March 1940."[11] *Since few people in Mia and Jan's milieu were religious, the conversion did not raise eyebrows as it might have in a religiously observant family. Nonetheless, under the circumstances of 1930s Germany and Eastern Europe these emergency conversions were becoming more widely accepted among religious as well as nonreligious Jews.*[12] *Mia and Jan married on January 29, 1940 in Holy Cross Catholic Church.*

But even with the baptismal papers, we still needed to find a country that would accept us and issue a visa, and nobody would, and time was beginning to run out. It was like doors were slamming shut all over the world and we were getting more and more desperate. There were lots of rumors about the prospects of getting visas that then turned out to be no

more than some wild story or wishful thinking of desperate people. We tried all we could. We knew somebody who was an honorary consul. I don't think it was called the Dominican Republic, but it was San Domingo. I'm not sure what the regime was in the Dominican Republic at that time. They already had a dictator, I think. You even considered places like that at the end of the world. And nobody knew anything about it.

Though the Dominican Republic did not rank high in Mia's desired places of refuge, she was not mistaken that it was a possible destination and she was right that it "already had a dictator." In early 1940, US President Franklin Roosevelt asked for the cooperation of Latin American governments to offer refuge to Jews fleeing Europe, despite the fact that the US, ostensibly for national security reasons, refused to admit into its own territory any persons fleeing Nazi-occupied territories. The Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo, was eager to comply with this part of the "Good Neighbor Policy," as FDR's wartime diplomacy with Latin America was known, and to welcome Jews to the small Caribbean island.

A staunch US ally who owed his position as president of the Dominican Republic to the United States, Trujillo immediately offered asylum. Known for the extreme repression and absolute authoritarianism of his regime, Trujillo was also a white supremacist in a nation made up of Black and mixed race people, including himself. (His mother was Haitian, which he refused to admit.) European Jews facing Nazi genocide as an inferior race in the eyes of Hitler were welcomed in the Dominican Republic as white contributors to Trujillo's Aryanization scheme. Despite the US State Department's public request, it grew so fearful of German sympathizers infiltrating the community of refugee Jews in the Americas that it actually worked to undermine the program. Ultimately, Trujillo's attempt to bring 10,000 Jews to the Dominican Republic was pared down to around 700. By the summer of 1940, Washington was restricting Jewish refugees in any area of the Americas, especially places close to the US mainland such as the Dominican Republic.[13] *In any case, Mia and Jan did not pursue the Dominican Republic option.*

Leaving Poland on a "No Good" Bulgarian Visa

Eventually, we ended up buying a Bulgarian visa. Of course, nobody had any intention of going to Bulgaria. That was like a black market deal, and we had to pay a few thousand *złoty* for each visa, which was a lot.[14] When the consul gave us this visa he made us swear that we wouldn't go there—to Bulgaria—because he didn't even have the right to give out those visas.

He was an honorary consul, and he was not supposed to give out these visas. But that no good Bulgarian visa was good enough to get an Italian transit visa. The Italians, at the embassy in Poland, thought the Bulgarian visa was legitimate, and they gave us a transit visa because we supposedly were traveling through Italy to get to Bulgaria. I don't think I even knew where Bulgaria was, or if we had to go through Italy to get there. But, unfortunately, none of us spoke Italian at that time so we didn't bother to find out what was said in small print. And it said that this was a strictly transit visa, not even good for twenty-four hours! But it was good enough to leave Poland. When you're running from a forest fire, you don't look to see if there's a canyon that drops off at the edge of the forest. You just run! So we left, and that was Jan and me and my mother-in-law, and his cousin who stayed in Italy after the war.

Jan's cousin, Ryszard, was only seventeen-years old. He lost all his family—his father and mother and his nine-year-old little sister—in the very first bombings of Warsaw. They were just buried under the ruins of the big apartment building where they lived. His father, Emil Landau, was Jan's family doctor. He took care of Jan's father, Julian, when he was sick and then died a year before the war. He [Julian] had heart trouble many years. They were very close friends; they were like their best friends, this Ryszard's father and mother. His mother, Janina, was the daughter of Adolf Truskier, the senator and head of the Jewish Merchant's Association.[15] To me, Ryszard, who took the name Riccardo in Italy, was like a brother because he was 17. He didn't even have the high school diploma before we left for Italy. Then he went to school in Rome and he got his high school degree in Rome.

It took a lot of doing and eventually we got our visa. At that time the Germans didn't care, so long as you had a passport. We had passports. That was a big thing, because shortly after we left they closed all the travel agencies. Travel agencies, in those years, would get the passports for you. They closed them and didn't allow anybody to leave any more. At the time when we left that was not a problem. You could leave except you were not allowed to take anything with you, very little. And you had to submit a list of things you wanted to take with you to some German authority in the city of Kraków, because they moved everything from the capital. They established their own capital in Kraków, for one thing maybe because they didn't bomb it. Usually there is a plan, when they bomb cities they leave some intact so they have a place to stay themselves after they occupy.

So anyway, my mother-in-law, who had a lot of beautiful clothes and things, had this almost brand new fur that was extremely expensive, some gray broadtails, or whatever. She didn't know better, so she put it on that list. Then she got a letter back that said everything else was approved, but will you please send this fur to us. And she didn't send it. We went to some flea market, and she bought the cheapest gray fur that she could find and she sent it to the Germans.

I marveled at the risk involved with cheating German officials, a crime that could have resulted in losing the passport, the visa, their right to leave Poland, their freedom, even their lives, but Mia shrugged it off as fairly standard behavior for her mother-in-law. It was, as it turned out, representative of Regina Truskier's refusal to accept the vulnerability of their position. If as Mia said, they were "running from a forest fire," Regina still planned to be wearing her fur coat when they got to the other side.[16]

As mentioned in Mia's testimony above, in the spring of 1940, the German command under the leadership of Hans Frank moved from Warsaw to Kraków after Poland as a whole was divided between the Soviet Union and Germany. The region known as the General Government was centralized in Kraków, a lovely city dating back to the seventh century and the home of Jagiellonian University, one of the oldest universities in the world. In a stroke of cruel irony, in 1939 the Nazis began to construct their most extensive and most notorious concentration and extermination camps thirty miles west of Kraków. Located near the Silesian town of Oświęcim, it was known by the German name, Auschwitz-Birkenau.[17] *The Germans were moving fast to reorganize occupied Poland, making it imperative that Mia's little group leave as soon as they could. They were aware, however, that they would need funds when they got to Italy, or wherever they ended up, preferably in a form they could trade on a foreign exchange.*

Since we couldn't take anything with us officially we had to smuggle some things. Now when I think about it I just shiver at the idea. We took a few diamonds. You put them in sponges, like toilet sponges, kind of wrapped them in cotton and glued them in this sponge, and leave the sponge kind of outside where everybody can see it. Then you could take a jar of face cream, and put it in the bottom and then melt some wax and pour it on top then fill it with face cream. We had things like that. We had this really old hairbrush and the top was made out of wood and it was screwed on for some reason. There was this space. You could take the screws out. So we put some dollars in there, because you were allowed only to take 50 German francs, which was nothing. My mother-in-law had

a number of valuable diamonds which we sewed into the hem of a heavy coat.

If in hindsight Mia shuddered at how they hid these treasures, it worked. After successfully hiding their money and valuables, they prepared to leave with their bogus Bulgarian visas. Much more preoccupied her, however. The most agonizing part of the departure from Poland was leaving her mother behind in Warsaw. "My mother wouldn't think of leaving because she was hoping that my father would come back." *Mia remembered that she and her mother, and really many people, felt that no matter how long the occupation, or the war, they would all return someday to Warsaw. Since the Poles had surrendered, it seemed only logical that the army and the men who had volunteered to serve in it could return home. Moreover, despite the repression of the Jews, the institution of the racial laws, and even the establishment of the ghetto to which Jews were confined, many people argued that so long as the Jews complied with the Nazis' demands, one day the war would end and life would return to its prewar normal. At the time, however, Mia and her mother were very worried about what had happened to Zygmunt and Tadeusz. Years later they learned the whole miserable saga.* "My father and my brother were deported to a labor camp in the Soviet Union, because they found themselves in that part of Poland that was taken over at the very beginning of the war." *(We will come back to the fate of Zygmunt, Tadeusz, and Wanda in Chap. 4.)*

A Chance Encounter on the Train

The one interesting thing that happened on the train was that we met a young American. He was coming home from the winter Olympics. Already Germany was at war but they still had this winter Olympics in Germany that year. And this young American was from the Bay Area. He was from Burlingame. He was the US champion in figure skating. So he came to the winter Olympics and while he was there he met a young woman who was the Norwegian ski champion. They fell in love but then she had to go home and he had to go home. Right at the time we were on the train the news came that the Germans had walked into Norway [April 9, 1940]. He was so worried about his fiancée. He wanted to talk to us. Fortunately, he spoke good German because his mother was Swiss, so we could speak well with him. He wanted to know from us what we knew about the Germans. "What can they do? What would they do?"

Despite the cinematic edge this encounter adds to the saga of the Truskiers' escape, Mia seems to have a few details wrong. The last winter Olympics before World War II was in 1936, not 1940, in a place called Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Bavaria. However, quite possibly the person they met on the train was Eugene Turner (1920–2010), the 1940 US male figure-skating champion. He may have been at the 1936 games, since Mia does not say he competed; only that he was there. Turner lived most of his life in Northern California and was the first nationally recognized figure skater from California.[18] *Skating aside, Mia was amazed at Turner's confidence and worldly knowledge. The advice he offered about checking with the Polish consulate, his accounts of Venice, and his encouragement to them to boldly pursue whatever options they could, proved to be extremely important. It was one of the lucky breaks Mia credits with helping them to maneuver the visa morass.*

What we were really impressed with was that he talked about the American consul as if it was his uncle! He actually talked us into stopping in Venice when we got to Italy, because he was going straight to the American Consulate and ask them to take his fiancée under their protection in Norway. We were so impressed. We never had that kind of experience with any Polish consulate. He was such a nice young man. We really enjoyed him so much. Because of him we decided to stop in Venice, which was a wonderful thing, because Venice was, still is, I think, a very favorite place in the world for me.

But we didn't have any money and we needed to figure out how to get Italian lira, which was a problem for everyone at the border. All of the people coming from under German occupation had not been able to bring cash with them, and the little we had we had used on the train. But the Italians were very enterprising. They devised a scheme where when you arrived at the border, they would take your luggage and they would advance you money to go wherever your destination was in Italy. So then you got a ticket to go where you were going. Once you got there, and hopefully you had some relatives or some ways of getting the money, you would pay them back, probably with some extra fees, and then you could get your luggage. That's what we did. We left our luggage on the border and went on to Venice.

Venice was unbelievable! We were coming from Nazi-occupied Poland that was still kind of in wintertime: cold, dirty snow on the streets and all these Nazis running around. You come to Venice, and Italy wasn't at war yet, so everybody's out in Piazza San Marco; music is playing and people are singing and sitting in cafes, women wearing furs and jewelry, and

nobody trying to take it away from them. We really literally sat there and we laughed and cried at the same time. The beauty of it was just breathtaking! I'll never forget that. But we were there only one night and a few hours during the day, and then we had to proceed.

Italy: An "Informational Pandemonium"

Although closely aligned with Germany and stockpiling money and armaments from Hitler's government, Italy did not formally enter the war until June 10, 1940. In the little more than nine months since the beginning of the war in Europe and Italy's official entrance on the side of the Axis, Mussolini's government took advantage of its ambiguous relationship with German aggression and Nazi racial laws. Having managed to get into Italy with 24-hour transit visas, the Truskiers found themselves in the midst of that ambiguity. They were in a country increasingly flooded with refugees who were in turn running from countries already under the heel of the Wehrmacht. They found themselves among a large number of Polish Jews, Catholics, aristocrats, leftists of every stripe, criminals, con artists, and more. Hardly alone in their efforts to find a country of asylum, Mia described a scene of "informational pandemonium," where a ragtag mass of refugees roamed from consulate to consulate, to travel agencies, to train stations, exchanging news and rumors, asking for advice, trading money and goods, and all the while attempting to sort out fact from fiction. In her description of their time in Venice, Milan, and eventually Rome, Mia's entire narrative becomes a series of events preceded by "and then we heard" or "we ran into a person who said" or "this person seemed to understand the system better" or "we met someone who said he had heard," and on and on.

Aware that time was running out on their flimsy travel documents, they stayed in Venice for a little over a day and planned to move on to Milan. They hoped to connect with one of Mia's relatives in Milan or, following the advice of the young man on the train, get help from the Polish Consulate, which was not yet under German control.

Then we proceeded. I had a cousin, a girl cousin her name was Ewa Wenk, who was living in Milan, married to an Italian. We sent her a telegram from Venice but for some reason she didn't get this telegram, and we arrived in Milan at the station and got off the train, and no Ewa. There was nobody there expecting us. That was kind of scary and we didn't know what to do and we didn't have money. So then my mother-in-law remembered that there was a lady from Poland who was married to an

Italian who lived in Milan. She took the last money we had for a cab to go there. She said she arrived and, again, it was like Venice all over again. Here was this woman dressed in a black formal gown, and she and her husband are getting ready to go to La Scala opera. She loaned Regina some money, I mean the families knew each other. So anyway, we got some money and eventually settled in a little *pensione* in Milan. I even remember the name of the street was Via Napo Torriani. We finally got in touch with my cousin, Ewa. She never received our telegram, and that's why she didn't come to the station. She and her husband came right away to see us, and made us feel much better. But then the next thing, the most important thing, was for us to report to the *Questura*, which is the police.

In Italy, all the concierges in *pensiones* or wherever you lived, whoever was in charge of that building, had a duty to report to the police immediately about who came. Even after they already stayed there, they had to report on where they went, who came to see them. It was all part of the system. So we had to immediately go to the *Questura*. My husband in those years was wearing a little French beret. When we were in Switzerland it was popular to wear them, men wore these berets. When we went to the *Questura* at first they thought that we were Swiss, maybe because of the beret. And then when they found out, when they took a look at our visa they almost had a heart attack, because the visa said not even 24 hours! It was a strictly transit [visa], no stopping at all. So they got really upset, and they told us that we immediately have to go back, go to Venice and take a ship and go to Bulgaria, which our official visa was for. As I mentioned before, the visa was not even for real even though we had to pay a lot of money to get it, as the consul didn't have the right to give out visas. He was an honorary consul.

Suddenly dropping into character, Mia explained their interaction with the Italian border guard. She became demonstrably agitated, leaning forward to the edge of her chair, waving her arms and shaking her finger at me, adopting the loud, high pitched, and scolding voice of the official. I knew immediately that their interaction with the Italian police on this occasion was still, nearly seventy years later, both frightening and indelibly seared in her mind.

So they said, "You go to Venice and get a ship and go to Bulgaria! You go now!" Of course we felt awful about it. But then we were instructed by people who knew, like my cousin. You just go back to the *pensione* and you give a nice *mancia*, which is a bribe, to the concierge she instructed us. You won't have to go immediately to Venice and to Bulgaria and he won't

report you to the *Questura*. So we just did that, and he was very agreeable, and we stayed in the *pensione* for a few days. Then we decided to go to a Polish consulate in Milan. Italy was not at war yet, so there was still the old Polish Consulate. We went there; maybe we could get some advice on what would be the best thing for us to do.

When we went to the Polish Consulate we met a family there. It was a very interesting family. We kind of recognized this man from having seen him in Warsaw in all these different travel offices where we had to go to get the visas, the passports, and all these formalities. We always saw him and one of his daughters there. Then we saw him in the [Milan] Consulate, and we find out they were kind of like "professional refugees." This man was a Polish Jew. He went to Russia during World War I and then he met this woman in Odessa. They were married and they had two children. When the Russian Revolution came, they escaped from the Soviet Union. Then they just went all over Europe. They went to Berlin, they went to Vienna, and they went to Prague. They were just always one step ahead of Hitler. Eventually, just before the war, they were back in Warsaw.

This man, I mean he really by then didn't even have a mother language because he had lived in so many different countries, but he was a survivor, and he knew all the tricks. He somehow always ended up on his feet. He knew what was going on everywhere. He told us that if we go to Rome, the Vatican was helping people like us, refugees from Poland, to get visas to go to Brazil. He said you go there and in three days you can get a visa to go to Brazil. We thought that sounds very good. We left everything in this little *pensione* and we went to Rome. As it turned out there was more than a grain of truth in this story because there was such a thing, really! Through the Vatican you could get a visa to go to Brazil, but it would take much, much longer than three days. So we found a little place in Rome. We didn't know anybody in Rome. We didn't know Rome. We didn't know where to look for a place to stay, so we found a *pensione* in the really old part of Rome and settled there. My husband and his cousin went back to Milan to get our luggage, which wasn't very much but it represented all our belongings, of course. My mother-in-law and I stayed in Rome and waited for them. It took a lot of effort and going back and forth.

A Vatican Visa for Brazil

The Truskiers' decision to try for asylum in Brazil was not uncommon among European Jews at the time. Around 100,000 Jews were settled in Latin America in the years before and during the rise of Hitler, with the majority going to Argentina and Brazil. Jewish emigration was processed through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or Joint) located in Amsterdam until it was forced to close when the Nazis arrived in 1940. The spate of visas from the Vatican was another temporary measure. While many Latin American countries were willing to accept Jewish refugees, provided they had adequate funds for relocation and did not pose a political threat, the effort was most often stymied by the US State Department. The Roosevelt administration's fear of Nazi infiltrators coming in with displaced refugees prevented greater numbers of immigrants.[19]

Eventually we did get visas to go to Brazil. We got ready and we had everything. We had reservations on a boat from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro. But there was no direct connection from Rome to Lisbon, so to get there we had to go through Spain. We were going to fly from Rome to Barcelona and then from Barcelona to Lisbon, and then get on our ship. We were all ready to go and all packed. We even sent all the warm things that we had, like I had a coat that was lined with fur that I brought from Warsaw; we sent all these things to my father and brother and Wanda in Siberia because we thought we wouldn't need them anymore.

Just two days before we were supposed to board that plane, the Spanish government comes out with some new regulations that forbid Polish male citizens between ages sixteen and forty to cross Spanish territory, even in transit. Even though the plane from Rome to Lisbon had to only stop in Barcelona to refuel, at that time it was the way it worked. We wouldn't have even left the plane, but we were crossing Spanish territory. And that, of course, was done because of the Germans. [Francisco] Franco's government was kind of allied with the Nazis and even though they were neutral, they were not at war officially; the Nazis put pressure on the Spanish government. So we found ourselves in a situation. My husband was twenty-two and married. Some people would falsify their papers, but he couldn't have passed for sixteen; and he couldn't have passed for forty-one or whatever it was.

I think that was one of the worst times in our war experiences, because all of a sudden this hope was gone. Here we had hoped there was a country that would accept us as citizens eventually, where we could settle and

have a life. And at the last moment we can't do that. We were stuck, and Italy was getting ready to join the war. We were just stuck and we didn't have any papers. We were what today would be called "illegal aliens." And it just looked very bleak.

It is difficult to fully verify what happened to prevent them from reaching Lisbon, and ultimately Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, since there is no precise documentation of a Spanish government regulation that prevented Polish men between the ages of sixteen and forty passing through Spain. In his book, Os Judeus do Vaticano (The Jews of the Vatican), Avraham Milgram documents the Vatican visas that were issued in 1940. His list shows that on May 22, 1940 visa number104 was issued to "Regina Truskier," number 105 to "Jan Vitoldus Truskier," and number 106 to "Maria Mia Truskier" all in Rome. For some reason, Ryszard did not get his visa with the others. Milgram lists a Vatican visa issued to "Richard Ludwig Landau" in Genoa on June 4, 1940.[20] *Not only is it curious that Ryszard did not get his visa on May 22 with the others, but that his was issued in Genoa, not in Rome. Perhaps because Landau was a minor, that he had a different last name, and was Jan's cousin, not an immediate family member, his visa was issued from a separate consulate. Although Mia never mentioned it, Ryszard might have been able to stop in Spain since he was only seventeen. The visa from Genoa might have been a dispensation, allowing Ryszard to travel another way, something he never considered. The more important point is that Ryszard and the Truskiers planned to take an airplane from Rome to Lisbon, and given air travel at the time, the plane had to stop for refueling in Spain.*

Several scholars familiar with Spanish history during World War II contend that while they do not know of any prohibition against Polish men traveling to or through Spain, there were occasional, short-term restrictions that might have been in place for a while, generally at the behest of the Nazis, and removed later. One such case occurred in 1940 when the [Spanish] Foreign Ministry denied transit visas through Spain to "fifty German 'non-Aryan' Catholics seeking passage to Brazil."[21] *The time and place for this ruling corresponds with the date when the Truskiers' visas were issued—May 1940—but the reference states it pertained to Germans, not Poles. The reference could have been to German or Polish Jews who converted to Catholicism, or to Polish Catholics, all of whom were seen as "non Aryan Catholics." The Truskiers had converted to Catholicism, they were not Aryans, they had visas to travel to Brazil in May 1940 when this temporary prohibition was in effect, and they were denied transit through Spain.*

Jan Truskier seems to have been stopped by this exceptional short-term law. While estimates vary, many Jews and other refugees passed through Spain during the war, including around 20,000 to 35,000 who crossed the Pyrenees Mountains from France and 5000 Sephardic Jews from Eastern European countries, mainly Hungary and Romania. Nearly all were in transit to Portugal and from there to the Americas. After the war the Franco government, in its bid for legitimacy and admission to the United Nations sought to distance itself from the defeated Axis powers. Franco's fascist government denied any coordination with the Axis, clung to an image of wartime neutrality, and insisted that it had never enforced anti-Semitic policies that excluded refugees.

Mia did not explain why they planned to fly from Rome to Lisbon, necessitating a refueling stop in Spain, rather than take a ship, especially since travel by airplane was expensive and quite rare at the time. Although the Spanish law prohibited ships from stopping in their ports, there were other countries on the Mediterranean that were open for refueling. Most of the refugees destined for Portugal from Italy departed from the port of Genoa on ships carrying many more than fifty refugees. I conjecture that, one, they may have opted for the plane because it would get them to Lisbon sooner, and they had tickets for a particular ship. Two, maybe they did not have the "right documents." Portuguese-Canadian scholar Rui Afonso suggested to me that there might have been some complication stemming from their Polish passports, combined with what Mia always referred to as "the no-good Bulgarian visa," that interfered with their passage through Spain. The most obvious reason would seem to be that this small group of people was an exception to the "general" rule. We know that at least fifty people were denied Spanish transit visas in 1940, and Jan Truskier must have been in that number.

The information on the policies of the Spanish and Portuguese governments regarding asylum seekers, transit visas, and the periodic demands from the Nazi government, is revealed in the stories surrounding the Portuguese Consul, Aristides de Sousa Mendes (1885–1954). Often referred to as the "Portuguese Wallenberg,"[22] *Sousa Mendes was the first diplomat to be accorded the honor of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and archive in Jerusalem honoring non-Jews who provided safety and assistance to Jews during World War II. Raoul Wallenberg was the Swedish diplomat who single-handedly saved thousands of Hungarian Jews in 1944.*[23] *Sousa Mendes in November 1939 began issuing transit visas under his authority as Portuguese Consul-General in Bordeaux, with jurisdiction over southwestern France. He continued to do so in violation of the*

Salazar government's Circular 14, ordering all Portuguese consuls in Europe to issue transit visas only to petitioners with clear documentation showing they were welcome in a country other than Portugal and had air or sea tickets to travel to their final destination. In defiance of this order, Sousa Mendes signed thousands of visas and continued to do so despite reprimands from the home office in Lisbon and until he was fired from his position. Rui Afonso, the author of several definitive studies on the life and work of Sousa Mendes, calculates that "during the war between 50,000 and 100,000 refugees passed through Portugal." Moreover, every refugee, "to a greater or lesser degree, owed a debt of gratitude to Aristides de Sousa Mendes."[24]

"Stuck in Italy"

We were stuck, and Italy was getting ready to join the war. And it just looked very bleak. Not only were we illegal aliens in Italy, the outbreak of war meant we were "illegal enemy aliens."

Thinking back to that time in Italy, Mia remembered the desperation they felt when it became clear that immigrating to Brazil was no longer an option. However, their situation, no matter how grim, was probably better than that facing Paulina back in Warsaw as Nazi rule consolidated, or even that of Zygmunt and Tadeusz caught on the Soviet side of the Ribbentrop-Molotov line dividing Poland.

Notes

1. Gustawa Truskier's brother, Julian, was Jan's father. Gustava married her first cousin, Efroim Truskier, whose *nom de guerre* was Franciszek Fiedler. This was the name Mia always used for him. Peter Truskier never heard any relatives refer to him by any other name. Ironically, Efroim stated that he changed his name to avoid tainting his capitalist relatives with his political activity. Truskier was/is not a common name and given the family's wealth and prominence, he would have been easily recognized as a member.
2. The Comintern, or Communist International, was the third of the international organizations that coordinated communist parties throughout the world. It was headquartered in the USSR and lasted from 1919 until 1943. Franciszek's position as a Comintern representative indicated his importance in the KPP.
3. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 113.
4. Timothy Snyder, 116.

5. Christopher R. Browning, Richard S. Hollander, and Nechama Tec, *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.
6. After the fall of Poland, the German army's rapid conquests of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, and the installation of collaborationist governments, essentially derailed the promised assistance to Poland from England and France. The placid response from the rest of Europe led people in Germany to see the period from 1939 to June 1941 as the "peace years." No one was coming to the aid of the Poles in much more than rhetorical denunciations of Soviet and German aggression, Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 257.
7. Christopher Browning, correspondence with author, May 5, 2018.
8. Ron Nowicki discusses the importance of film and the large number of movie theaters in prewar Warsaw. He mentions "Fame," which Mia called "Fama," *Warsaw: The Cabaret Years* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 54.
9. *Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War, Final Report* (Zurich, 2002), 117.
10. The word "emigrants" in the report means those persons who have left their own country to settle in Switzerland. The word is defined as those who "permanently" settle, but that was not an option open to the emigrants, in this case.
11. Most were members of the "liberal professions," who were hoping to avoid the anti-Semitic laws or to leave the country. Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 210.
12. Yad Vashem's policy recognizes converted Jews as Jews and a number of the Catholic priests who baptized were deemed "Righteous Among the Nations." Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), n.6, 252. Presumably, the Catholic priest who instructed, baptized, and married Jan and Mia had to know that two Jews seeking to convert to Catholicism in early 1940 Poland were doing so for reasons other than religious faith.
13. Trujillo offered asylum to socialist and communist Republican refugees of the Spanish Civil War fleeing Francisco Franco's fascist government, while jailing, torturing, and killing any leftists, trade union organizers, and members of his own homegrown opposition. In this case, the Spaniards' whiteness overrode their politics, Allen Wells, *Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR and the Jews of Sosúa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); and Wells, "Playing God: Choosing Central European Jewish Refugees for the Domnican Republic During World War II," in Luis Roniger, James

N. Green and Pablo Yankelevich, eds., *Exile and the Politics of Exclusion in the Americas* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 80–99.

14. If they paid 2000 *złoty* for each visa that was a bit more than $525 in today's exchange.
15. Adam Czerniakow records the tragedy of the Landau family in his diary: "In the morning, hysterics at home. Night—the shelter. Truskier's son-in-law, daughter, and granddaughter buried in debris." *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom*, Raul Hilberg, ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 77.
16. The record is filled with similar events, at many times in history, of people putting themselves in even greater danger to protect frivolous and expendable valuables. In his diary of the Warsaw Ghetto, Adam Czerniakow occasionally despairs of the self-centered refusal of some people to contribute money and valuables so the leaders could purchase life-sustaining necessities for the ghetto population.
17. The original 748 Poles who were taken to Auschwitz were teachers, lawyers, intellectuals, Catholic priests, and members of the Polish resistance, but Jews, resisters or not, were being killed beginning in 1939. After the Wannsee Conference in 1942, the Nazis embarked on the organized genocide of the Jewish population and Auschwitz-Birkenau became one of the largest concentration/extermination centers. For a history of the German's genocidal policies see, Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September1939–March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).
18. After a distinguished record in the US Air Force during the War, Turner went on to appear in several movies as a skater, including as a double for Cary Grant in *The Bishop's Wife* (1948). He died in 2010 at the age of ninety in Yountville, Napa Valley. A Norwegian woman, Laila Schou Nilsen (1919–1998), near the same age as Turner, won the gold medal in alpine skiing at the 1936 Garmisch-Partenkirchen Olympics and she was in Norway when the Germans invaded on April 9, 1940. That is as far as Mia's story can be verified, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_Turner.
19. Allen Welles, "Playing God," 80–99.
20. Avraham Milgram, *Os Judeus do Vaticano* (Rio: Imago, 1994), pp. 35–36. Special thanks to Rui Afonso and Fabio Koifman for this information.
21. Stanley G. Payne, *Franco and Hitler: Spain, Germany, and World War II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 222.
22. Raoul Wallenberg was the Swedish special envoy in Budapest in 1944–1945. He is known to have hidden thousands of Jews who were destined for Auschwitz. In 1945, he disappeared and is reported to have been imprisoned in Moscow and subsequently killed. The Soviets' motive for arresting Wallenberg has never been fully resolved, but he is honored as one of the

most important rescuers of Jews in the territory under German control. Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 389–405.

23. Righteous among the Nations is an ancient Jewish tradition stemming from the story of the efforts of Shifra and Puah, Egyptian midwives who in defiance of Pharaoh's orders to drown the male children of Israel rescued and hid them. In particular it draws from the tale of Pharaoh's daughter, called Batya in the Bible, who found Moses in a basket in the river and raised him as her son. The "nations" refers to the lost tribes of Biblical times. Martin Gilbert, xv–xvi. Regrettably, Gilbert neither mentions Sousa Mendes nor the extensive work of the relief committee of the Lisbon Jewish Community (COMASSIS) that provided an infrastructure for the processing of thousands of Jews out of Europe to other parts of the world. The only reference to Portugal is in the work of the Portuguese Charge d'Affairs, Carlos de Liz-Texeira Branquino, who protected over 800 Hungarian Jews with ties to Brazil, Portugal, or any Portuguese colony in safe houses in Budapest. In addition, Portugal cooperated with the Swiss, Swedish, and Spanish Legations in 1944 on the rescue of over 25,000 Hungarian Jews, largely attributed to the heroic work of Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg.
24. Rui Afonso, *Um homen bom, Aristides de Sousa Mendes* (Alfragide, Portugal: Texto Editores, Lda., 2009), 370.

CHAPTER 4

Hiding in Plain Sight: Italy, 1940–1945

I talked with Mia often about her interaction with her family during the war, sitting with her and Emilia Strzalkowska, a native Polish-speaker who helped to decipher the trove of correspondence that connected the dispersed family members. Mia's surviving son, Peter, and daughter-in-law, Mary, along with their children and grandchildren provided bits and pieces of the narrative from the hundreds of anecdotes that Mia and Jan brought up in day-to-day interactions. This chapter and the following three trace the interconnected lives of the Truskier-Tlusty families: Mia, Jan, Regina, and Ryszard in Rome; Tadeusz, Zygmunt, and Wanda in the Soviet Union; Paulina Tlusty on the Aryan side in Warsaw; Eugenia and Judyta Truskier in the Warsaw Ghetto. We begin with Mia in Rome. I hope the family tree and map of Poland are helpful for keeping track of the assorted family members and their wide-ranging locales.

Building a Life in Rome

For a while we kept trying to find a way to leave Italy for another country, since we only had very temporary visas, really only for twenty-four hours and we were already past that! We were not alone. We were like everyone else—if you heard that you could get a visa, somewhere to go wherever it was, then you would take that visa. For instance, in Italy we got a visa to go to Turkey, because you never knew. If there was no place for you, if

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_4

they should want to send you back to Poland, then you would go to Turkey. You would go anyplace. So, anyway, we each got visas to go to Turkey, which fortunately we didn't have to use.

Despite all our problems, actually we were lucky that we were in Italy because people were wonderful. People in Italy had lived under the fascist regime for two decades already, and you know, they lost their power collectively, but individuals were so amazing. People really put their safety on the line to help other people. Over the years, I have always thought of how lucky we were to get through that period of time. As I look back, I realize that the fact that we were able to survive wasn't just luck or our own resourcefulness, although that did play a part. It was because our call for help found an echo in the hearts of the Italian people. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the Italian word for refugee, *profugo*, carries a positive connotation, of someone running forward, rather than away from. What the majority of the Italian people thought, and how they acted wasn't just dictated by their government's laws or policies. People reacted individually, according to their conscience, even if at times it meant defying the law. They took it upon themselves to redress their government's wrongs. That's what the Italians did, and that's what I think we all should do under such circumstances.

We found out that the place where we were staying was really not very convenient, not very good. So we moved to another *pensione*, and gradually started meeting people, finding out a lot of information from other refugees, where to go, what to do.

Mia and the others took up residence at the Pensione Milton, a place that had once been the headquarters of the Roman Maronite community, located in the fashionable Veneto section of Rome near the Spanish Steps.[1] *To coincide with the upscale neighborhood, the pensione was renamed the Hotel Milton, but Mia and the clientele, mainly foreigners from a wide variety of countries, rarely referred to it as a hotel, only as a pensione. A couple of years later, at the height of the war, the owners changed "Milton" to "Miltoné" as an assertion of Italian nationalism and renunciation of English connections, even if only in language. Eventually, determining that "Miltoné" was still too English, the hotel was renamed the Hotel Bella Vista. Even though she always referred to it as the "Pensione Milton" or the "Hotel Milton," Mia said that Bella Vista was appropriate because the hotel sat high on the side of a hill, overlooking a truly beautiful view of the ancient Roman wall that had once enclosed the city. The front portico opened out onto the rolling green hills of the countryside beyond the wall. The Milton/ Miltoné/Bella Vista was so central*

to their lives that if Mia's time in Rome was made into a play, the drama would be staged in the close quarters of this lodging. It was in this milieu that Mia and Jan began to look for advice on what they needed to do to keep from being deported back to Poland.

In Search of Residency Permits

We were not safe, especially after Mussolini joined Hitler in his war against the Allies. Then we were desperate because it was hard enough to be an illegal alien, now we had become "illegal enemy aliens." Someone at the *pensione* recommended a lawyer who could help us and we paid this lawyer. He was able to get us a permit for a very short period. I think the first time it was one month, maybe, where we were allowed to stay in Italy. But, you see, in Italy in those years, when you had something stamped, a piece of paper with an official stamp, even if it was for one month, then already you have your foot in the door. You had an opening. It was a possibility. You were not a completely unwanted, illegal person. Naturally, we guarded that one-month permit, but we had to figure out how to get it extended or to get a permit for a longer period of time. So we asked around and we started making friends and meeting people.

It happened that in this same *pensione* where we were living there was an old couple. This old man, *Ammiraglio* [Admiral] Milanese, was a retired admiral, and he was kind of a nationalist hero, because he was not only an admiral, but also he was a very well-known writer. He wrote these very popular sea adventure, slightly pornographic, stories, but with a lot of nationalist propaganda that appealed to the fascists. So he was very popular. He was an old man, and he and his wife were really very nice to us. Our rooms were close to each other in this *pensione* and we interacted often with them and they became interested in helping us. The Admiral [what Mia always called him] had a lot of connections, because he belonged to this very prestigious—well, it was like this old boys' club, but was this very ancient organization—"The Military Order of Malta," which went back to the Crusades. A lot of important Italian men belonged there. But the thing was that in order to be a member, you had to prove that you had so many generations of nobility in your family. And it was not easy to get in.

From what Mia and Jan were told, the organization was actually a backdoor into the Italian aristocracy, since, on the one hand, admission required the applicant to submit affidavits verifying his noble ancestry. On the other hand, if one could muster the necessary documentation based on "testimony,"

the ticklish matter of proving royal blood exclusively through written documents might be overlooked. Founded in Jerusalem in 1099, the Order of Malta, also called the Knights of Malta, was an organization dedicated to the establishment of a "New World Order" with the Pope at its head. But in modern Italy, men, and some women, wanted to join purely for status.[2] *Its importance to Mia and Jan came into focus through the intervention of the Admiral, their neighbor in the Pensione Milton.*

It happened that at that time the police inspector, the Chief Inspector, or whatever his title was, but he was a big fish in the police department, was dying to get into the Order of Malta. He couldn't prove any of these noble ancestors, but he was a friend of the Admiral, or in Italian, *Ammiraglio*. The way it was done was so funny. In Italy they did these things. *Ammiraglio* Milanese gave us a letter for the Chief Inspector, and told us to call to make an appointment with the Inspector at his home. On this point the Admiral was adamant: "You must meet the Inspector at his home, not at the police station!" We thought that was kind of peculiar, but the Admiral was insistent and since we had no other option, we did that. We went to the Chief Inspector's house for an appointment in the morning. He came out in a robe or dressing gown or something to meet us. It didn't take more than a few minutes. He gave us a letter with a stamp on it for some appropriate authorities. With that first letter l think at that time, we got a six-month permit to stay. You know, after that it was like a piece of cake. They would just extend it. Eventually, they extended it [the residency permit] kind of open-ended. It was the stamp, the official seal of the Police Inspector that mattered.

Motioning with her hand balled into a fist and imitating a stamping gesture, Mia declared that this imposing-looking seal was what did the trick as far as their residency was concerned. Presumably, the Admiral fulfilled his end of the bargain and the Chief Inspector, despite lacking the requisite royal pedigrees, was admitted to the much coveted Sovereign Military Order of Malta. Mia laughed at this little foray into the shrouded world of ancient secret societies. Here they were facilitating the admission of an Italian police inspector into an exclusive, ancient order of knights whose goal was to make the Catholic Pope the global sovereign. It was an odd accomplishment for a Polish-Jewish couple hiding under the radar in fascist Italy, but they were ready and willing to try almost anything to get legitimacy.

"I mean who cares about these silly secret organizations?"

What the Admiral fully understood about their status, she was unsure, only that he and his wife seemed to have developed a lot of affection for this

affable young Polish couple. The subterfuge of obtaining residency from a police inspector in his bathrobe was in many ways typical of Mia's recollections of their time in Italy: a combination of serious problems being resolved through some serendipitous turn of events, usually involving fairly colorful characters who seemed to reside at, pass through, or have a connection to the Pensione Milton. Their first success with securing a residency permit in this unorthodox way foreshadowed lucky encounters that were to follow.

Nonetheless, even with the renewable residency permit, as undocumented Polish Jews the Truskiers were in peril. They carried baptismal records attesting to their conversion to Catholicism before they left Poland, however, it was unclear how much protection those documents afforded them, or how far the friendly admiral would, or could, go to shield them if he knew they were Jews. Italy was awash with refugees, many of whom carried similar, often dubious, identity papers attesting to their Christian origin or conversion, their nationality or status. Mia reasoned that the multitude of foreigners crowding into Rome allowed their little group to lose themselves in the vast refugee

Fig. 4.1 Temporary Italian residency. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

population fleeing other areas of war and scouring Rome for visas and tickets to get to the Americas, Shanghai, or Persia. When I asked Mia if she feared having her Jewish identity revealed and being turned in to the police by zealous anti-Semites, she shook her head.

Well, who would know? Rome was full of refugees from all over, and a lot from Poland. There were Polish aristocrats, intellectuals, dissidents, all sorts of people. Some of them were probably Jews like us, but it was easier to hide a Jewish identity in Rome among strangers than it had been in Poland where lots of people knew you.

Anti-Semitism and Italian Fascism

Benito Mussolini's (1883–1945) ambiguous embrace of anti-Semitism in the early years of the war had caused refugees from countries in Nazi-dominated Europe to view Italy as a semi-safe refuge, or at least an intermediary on the way to a more secure destination. Italian fascism was founded on a racist, eugenicist hierarchy that held Slavs and Africans as a lower caste, but it had not been founded on racial animus toward Jews as it had in Germany. Instead, the original fascists espoused a philosophy that borrowed aspects of revolutionary socialism, on the one hand, and nostalgia for the return to the greatness of the ancient Roman Empire, on the other hand. This combination, referred to as "The Third Way," flourished in the years before and immediately following World War I. Through the 1920s, the Italian Fascist Party grew in membership and in political zeal, unleashing paramilitary gangs of young men, known as squadristi or Blackshirts, who directly attacked trade unionists, socialists, communists, anarchists, as well as Catholic and Jewish activists who opposed the regime. There were, however, several Jews among the founding members of the party and in 1935 Ettore Ovazza began publishing the Jewish Fascist newspaper, La Nostra Bandiera. Moreover, Mussolini maintained a romantic relationship with Margherita Sarfatti, a major Jewish academic sometimes referred to as "the Jewish Mother of Fascism." Sarfatti was more than a mistress and intellectual companion. She edited the art pages of the Popolo d'Italia, the fascist party newspaper, and served as coeditor of the party's monthly review, Gerachia. For years Sarfatti prided herself on running a salon frequented by the most prominent fascists in the city, and even boasted of improving Mussolini's manners and polishing his public persona.[3]

As the effects of the long war settled in, the government passed the racial laws of 1938 targeting foreign Jews, Slavs, Roma, and others as the cause of

"housing shortages, high rents, high prices, food scarcities, unemployment, low wages, crowded schools, crime, and every other conceivable social and economic ill."[4] *On June 10, 1940, ten months after the German invasion of Poland, Italy entered the war on the side of the Axis powers and stepped up the demonization of undesirable foreigners, conscripting them into forced labor camps and deporting them back to their countries of origin. It was at that time that the Vatican had intervened with the offer of visas to send Jews and other refugees to Brazil, the event that had brought the Truskiers to Rome in the first place. The Brazilian visa arrangement, specifically for non-Aryans, was the papacy's way of ameliorating the government's attack on Jews.*[5]

In June 1941, Mussolini committed 200,000 troops to Operation Barbarossa, the ill-fated German invasion of the Soviet Union, widening Italy's role in a war that was every day more unpopular among the citizenry. Actually Mussolini only promised such extensive reinforcements because after a year of Axis victories in northern Europe, he thought that the Germans would defeat the Soviets before the Italians had a chance to get there! The Italian armed forces had already suffered tremendous losses on several fronts, including the war in Africa, in support of Franco in Spain, and in assisting the German occupation of the rest of Europe. By the end of 1941, the glow of Italy's early victory in North Africa and partnership with the powerful Wehrmacht had faded. For Mia, Jan, Regina, and Ryszard it was increasingly clear that the war was not going to end soon, that they could be in Rome for an extended stay, and that—apart from the threat of growing xenophobia—they needed money to sustain themselves under such precarious circumstances.

We tried to restore some kind of normality to our lives, but we didn't have the right to work. We could stay there but we could not work. That was, of course, not very good. But for one thing, as I mentioned before, Jan's family had this money in Switzerland. So it was a question of getting at least some of the money to where we were. That was a problem. You had to find somebody who would travel to Switzerland. It was not possible to wire funds legally, through the banks or anything like that. But there were people who would make the trip for you for a fee; some Swiss citizen, or somebody. It happened that we ran into a man who was my classmate at the School of Architecture in Switzerland. Suddenly he was in Rome, because, what happened was that he was trying to get his degree in Switzerland, and he was not smart enough to do that. It was very difficult there. The requirements were really very high. He just couldn't cut it. He thought he would come to Rome to the School of Architecture and get

his degree, but even that was too hard, or took more effort than he was willing to put in. And as it turned out, my husband really did his thesis, you know, all his work for him. But he in turn was very helpful because he would travel back and forth between Italy and Switzerland, which was enormously useful and well worth Jan's work on the thesis.

Even with the money from Switzerland, the Truskiers needed a steady source of income and it was unclear how they would be able to earn it. There were widespread shortages, skyrocketing prices on staples, and a plummeting lira (the Italian currency). Factories closed for lack of raw materials, workers went on strike in key industrial sectors as wages fell and work proved unstable.

Christmas Crèches and Paper Creations

Wealthy Romans and aristocratic refugees were less affected by the economic crunch of the wartime economy, and, as in many of the other cities of Europe, continued to eat well, entertain, and, most importantly, buy luxury goods. This worked well for Mia who had developed a particular skill in paper sculpture, a type of art that grew in popularity during World War II because paper was both inexpensive and readily available. Descriptive geometry, the mastery of which had been integral to meeting Jan in Zurich, was central to the conceptualization of paper sculpture and, therefore, to Mia's skill in crafting three-dimensional paper figures. She drew her ideas from perusing the window displays in the most elegant stores in the Veneto, returning to her makeshift "drawing board" in their limited quarters at the pensione and there fashioning artistic crafts that would appeal to the wealthy customers. By going store to store, showing her wares and procuring orders, she began to attract a following. Her creations were popular since, as Mia readily acknowledged, she did not see much that she could not reproduce, or do even better. Circumstances demanded, however, that she sell as much as she could at a minimal mark up. During their first winter in Rome, Mia developed a reputation for making very creative paper sculptures of Christmas trees and nativity crèches that imitated those she saw in shop windows.

I started out selling on consignment through an individual shopkeeper whose name was Tereza Massetti. She agreed to display the items in her store, Myricae, which was on a street very near the Spanish Steps. People would stop by and ask, "Who did that?" and then the store owner would contact me for more. The trees and crèches began to sell like hotcakes!

I asked Mia if she found it odd that a Polish Jew, living and working clandestinely in a city that was increasingly restricting the freedom of Jews, was

Fig. 4.2 Mia looking at a display of her Christmas tree paper sculptures in the Myricae shop in Rome. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

making a name for herself from the sale of Christmas decorations? Somewhat dismissively she responded, "Well, it was just Christmas. We had Christmas in Poland. We didn't have nativity crèches, but we had Christmas trees." I remembered her description of how she loved spending time at her grandmother's house in Warsaw at Christmas, admiring the tree with its candles and sweets. For Mia's family, and that of other secular Jews, Christmas was a Polish holiday, and not necessarily a religious one. From nativity crèches and Christmas trees, she branched out into an array of decorative items, including lamp shades, costumes, wigs, and centerpieces.

There was a lady [whose name was not recorded] who we also met in this *pensione* who was the manager of a lighting fixtures store. I think she was a friend of the Admiral's, the man who helped us get the temporary work permit, and his wife. This friend of theirs was visiting them and I had constructed a display of a boat in the hotel lobby, a little antique boat. It was made all out of paper, kind of three-dimensional. The water, the sea, was painted and the sky. Then there were the ladders, everything was very

intricate, very meticulously put together. She saw that and she fell in love with it. At her store they were making these standing floor lamps, using a material that was very new at the time. It was called *Rodovetro*, which was some kind of an acrylic, a plastic material that was either clear, or kind of translucent, but not transparent.[6]

She said, "How about if I give you this lampshade," and it was huge, it was this big thing. It had two layers. There was a layer underneath that was translucent plastic, then there was space in between. On top there was a clear plastic covering. "What about if you make a big ship like that on this round lampshade, and it will be between these two pieces?" I figured, sure, I can do that. I would paint the landscape, the seascape on the layer that was underneath, and then work on this ship. It was much larger than the one I did first.

And I tell you, these things started selling like hot cakes! [One of Mia's favorite phrases.] They were especially popular among some movie stars that fell in love with these things. One would show it off then another person would come and want one. She didn't pay me that much. I'm sure she made a lot of money. She was terrible to work for. She was really a very nasty lady. Anyway, I did that for some time. And everything was fine.

Mia thought the lampshades were "atrocious." Apart from this lamp-making venture and her work with the "very nasty lady" whose name I did not get, Mia sold most of her creations at Myricae. She tapped into a market for costumes and through word of mouth her masks, dresses, and headdresses for elegant parties were in demand. Amidst the memorabilia Mia brought to the US was a drawing of a particularly elaborate headdress in the style of the eighteenth-century French court. Mia had been commissioned to construct it for a wealthy woman who planned to attend a costume ball decked out as Marie Antoinette. Showing me the sketch, Mia belied her disdain for her own creation, remarking, "Can you imagine? She wanted to be Marie Antoinette for a costume party and this was when we were in the middle of a war all around us?! That costume was weird, but if she wanted it, I made it."

Mia developed a strong personal and working relationship with Tereza Massetti, the owner of Myricae. For Mia the opportunity to sell her designs at a nearby store on the Via Frattini, one of the main streets that fanned off from the Spanish Steps and within walking distance to the Pensione Milton, was extremely fortunate. The shop drew a wealthy clientele that Mia would have been hard pressed to find on her own. As she explained:

> That was a wonderful store and the woman who was running it was a socialist. She was just amazing and we became such good friends. She kept writing to me after we came to this country. But I made good money working for her. But all of that work was kind of under the table, and it was not easy. You had to be very careful.

Mia kept drawings of all her creations, always adding to her portfolio, which she would use to show to potential clients. One particularly striking piece was a paper sculpture of a life-size angel made for a movie set where she worked for a short while helping with set designs. Other sculptures included an intricate medieval trumpeter, no more than six inches high, that was a part of a larger table setting for a banquet; decorative favors used as placeholders for a wedding party, including exquisite paper figures of a beautiful girl with a mirror, another of a Venetian gondola, one of a pirate, other medieval-looking jesters and musicians, and even at Christmas, a St. Nicholas statue with a parcel of toys. A particular favorite for birthday parties was a small paper figure of a dwarf sitting on a mushroom, which Mia continued to make as party favors when she came to the US. Paper for her work was plentiful, despite the wartime shortages of almost everything else, and she molded it with remarkable facility. Even in her later years when arthritis twisted her fingers she could cut and mold paper into ingenious designs. It was, she explained, "just plain paper. You score paper, and then you bend it. You have to kind of learn what the paper wants to do. But you see, the paper will tell you what to do." Or at least it told Mia. At the end of the war her skill even reached the Allied occupation army who commissioned pieces for various ceremonies. One she made for them was a statue of a mermaid with a shield and sword: the symbol of the city of Warsaw.

Jan managed to find a few temporary drafting assignments, but for the most part it was Mia who provided their income.

Jan had already graduated just before the war and he had an architecture degree from one of Europe's most prestigious technical universities, but finding employment was nearly impossible. He didn't have working papers and he was a man of age eligible for conscription into the army or a work detail. And, you know, he couldn't do anything that would require having a physical exam, or the doctors would find out that he was Jewish since Italian Christian men weren't circumcised.

I wanted to continue my studies and I was accepted at the School of Architecture at the University of Rome. I didn't try to apply as a regular student, to avoid having to produce proof of being of the "Aryan race,"

but without getting any credit. I tried auditing some classes but that could be risky too. There were often demonstrations and protests against the war around the university, and the police would be called and they would check identity papers. And then shortly after Italy joined the war, the school started to fall apart. Many of the professors, as well as the students were being drafted and there were simply not enough instructors to teach the classes. Only a few smaller universities and institutes continued, but with a reduced curriculum. One of the institutes was the film school, Cinecittá, where I sat in on some classes for a short while. When the classes ended, a number of students organized informal study groups and took up sketching, painting, and doing what they could on their own.

We learned that some students had gotten permission to go into the Vatican to sketch and paint. You see, not only did the Vatican have an enormous amount of paintings and sculptures and all kinds of art, but the Vatican City state was neutral. Normally, people from Rome could go to the Vatican museums, because it was open but you needed special permission to be allowed to make any sketches or drawings.

Art and Diplomacy in the Vatican

Once again, Ammiraglio Milanese, their good friend from the Pensione Milton, made the necessary accommodations. Mia was never sure how he did it, only that the Admiral had many connections and that he was willing to use them to help Mia and Jan gain access to the Vatican galleries.

So he, the Admiral, got us special ID cards so that we could go to the Vatican museums and be able to sketch. I needed to keep up my technique of measuring and reproducing new designs because I used them in creating the paper sculptures. Also at that time I was doing costumes and I was very interested in the history of costumes. Well, my husband and I would go to the Vatican museums with our sketching pads and we had this ID card that allowed us to do that. I still have drawings taken from the great masters from all those pictures. Plus, you know, we made some contacts.

You see, the Vatican City was a neutral country during the war. So what happened was that when all the diplomats [who opposed the Axis] had to leave Rome, there was also diplomatic representation at the Vatican City and they stayed. They didn't have to leave because it was a neutral territory. There was the Polish embassy in Vatican City, and all the people there stayed. Then there were all these other embassies, the English, the Americans. I mean, the US joined the war but before that they were

neutral. Anyway, all these people stayed in the Vatican, and they were all moved to one building that used to be a convent. They put them all on different floors, so there were the Polish embassy people on this floor, then the English, the French, all these people kind of on top of each other, like a layer cake.

Hidden, and not so hidden, were a large number of spies both inside the Vatican's walls and nearby. This was a natural outgrowth of the Church's neutrality and the refuge the Holy See provided. The Pope presided over the largest religion in the world, with a vast bureaucracy spread across the globe, all directed from the smallest country in the world. It was unwieldy at any time, but especially during the war when Italy was a part of the Axis, overseen by Mussolini's police and then beginning in September 1943, under direct German authority.

The Vatican had confronted the problem of maintaining open diplomatic channels with France, Britain, Poland, and other European states when Italy entered the war on the side of the Axis on June 10, 1940 and those countries severed ties with Mussolini's government. On June 13, the Vatican welcomed the first of the previous ambassadors to Italy as residents in the Casa Santa Marta, where most would remain for the next four years.[7] *Introducing a note of levity, Mia exclaimed,*

It was really hilarious, because they were going crazy staying there in the Vatican! They could leave but they would have to have a bodyguard assigned, I guess, by the Italian government. Like somebody had a dentist appointment. There were no dentists in the Vatican City, so they had to go into the City of Rome. They had to have a bodyguard take them to the appointment to be sure that there was no monkey business or anything like that.

The relationship of the Holy See to the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany was inconsistent. Pope Pius XI did not protest the 1922 attacks and jailing of dissidents, trade unionists and other advocates for political freedom in Italy, and largely remained silent in the face of growing repression all around him. In 1937, Pope Pius XI denounced the Nazi party's anti-Semitism in Germany, but offered only the mildest reproach in response to the Italian racial laws of 1939, and even applauded Mussolini's "march on Rome" and Il Duce's ability to bring "order and stability."[8] *The Pope denounced the Bolsheviks shortly after they came to power in 1917, excommunicating en masse those who supported or participated in the new communist society. In contrast, while he warned the German government about anti-Semitism, the Pope never moved to excommunicate German Catholics who supported the*

Nazi Party, much less called for them to resist their leaders. Even after1942, Pope Pius XII, who succeeded Pius XI in 1937, said nothing when he was made aware of the deportations of Jews, Roma, and others to extermination camps. By the Church's own logic, the Papacy should have been warning the German government and all who collaborated with it, that the knowing extermination of a whole people was an activity for which they would one day have to answer before their God. It never did.

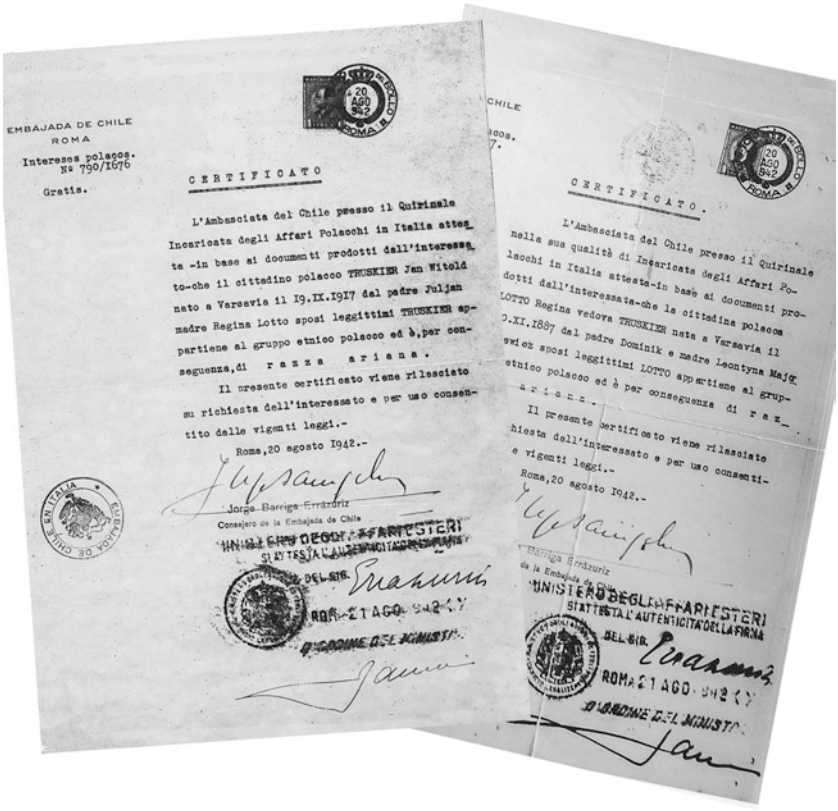
In countries with large Catholic majorities, such as Poland, France, and Italy, some of the clergy and laypersons on their own actively intervened to shelter Jews and oppose the perpetuation of anti-Semitic policies, but not at the Pope's behest or through his example. More troubling, the particular brand of virulent racism that saturated Germany and its allies drew on both traditional Catholic anti-Jewish doctrine and on modern eugenics, but it varied in practice. Individual Catholics, priests and nuns sheltered Jewish children in orphanages while others embraced racist sadism and cruelty.[9]

Mia never spoke of what she and Jan knew of the particular politics of the Catholic Church during the war, but they knew well the Church's record of anti-Semitism. Moreover, if she and Jan, mere civilians far away in Italy, were aware of the program of deportation and mass extermination of Jews, she was convinced that the Catholic Church knew what was happening, in Catholic Poland. While Mia spoke often of the anti-Semitism that permeated Polish society during her youth, and blamed priests for spreading ignorant anti-Jewish superstitions, she denied ever suffering personally, even when I questioned her directly. Until the fateful rejection from the university on the basis of being Jewish derailed her plans to enter Warsaw's architecture school, Mia she seemed to see anti-Semitism as existing in a parallel and adjacent world that seldom interfered with her own. The German invasion of Poland introduced a new and dangerous dynamic that rocked to the core the world of secular Jews, especially in cosmopolitan Warsaw. It was an attitude that followed the Truskiers to Italy where the tenuousness of their predicament caused them to be forever on guard against betrayal, first as undocumented residents and then as Jews, especially after the racist laws intensified in 1944. According to Mia, "undercover agents, fascist agents, were just everywhere. They were on bus stops. They were in front of buildings. Even the so-called neutral Basilica, everything was just full of spies. You wouldn't believe it, there were so many and you had to be very careful."

Operating Undercover in Vatican City

Cautious but undeterred, Mia and Jan took risks helping the Polish resistance by carrying messages from the diplomats confined to the Holy City in Rome to members of the formal resistance operating in Poland.

There was this one [Polish] couple, and he was, I think, the legal attaché to the embassy. He had a very young and kind of flamboyant wife who was a reporter: Mrs. Bronowska. She was really going crazy staying in the Vatican. Then, through a mutual friend, they figured a way that we could


EMBAJADA DE CHILE
ROMA
Intereses polacos.
Nº 790/I676
Gratis.

CERTIFICATO

L'Ambasciata del Chile presso il Quirinale Incaricata degli Affari Polacchi in Italia attes ta -in base ai documenti prodotti dall'interessa to-che il cittadino polacco TRUSKIER Jan Witold nato a Varsavia il 19.IX.1917 dal padre Juljan madre Regina Lotto sposi leggittimi TRUSKIER appartiene al gruppo etnico polacco ed è,per conseguenza,di r a z z a a r i a n a .

Il presente certificato viene rilasciato su richiesta dell'interessato e per uso consentito dalle vigenti leggi.-

Roma,20 agosto 1942.-

Jorge Barriga Errázuriz
Consejero de la Embajada de Chile

MINISTERO DEGLI AFFARI ESTERI
SI ATTESTA L'AUTENTICITA' DELLA FIRMA
DEL SIG.
ROMA, 21 AGO.
D'ORDINE DEL MINISTRO

CHILE

CERTIFICATO.

L'Ambasciata del Chile presso il Quirinale nella sua qualità di Incaricata degli Affari Polacchi in Italia attesta-in base ai documenti prodotti dall'interessata-che la cittadina polacca LOTTO Regina vedova TRUSKIER nata a Varsavia il 9.XI.1887 dal padre Dominik e madre Leontyna Majer sposi leggittimi LOTTO appartiene al gruppo etnico polacco ed è per conseguenza di r a z z a a r i a n a .

Il presente certificato viene rilasciato a richiesta dell'interessato e per uso consentito e vigenti leggi.-

Roma,20 agosto 1942.-

Barriga Errázuriz
de la Embajada de Chile

MINISTERO DEGLI AFFARI ESTERI
SI ATTESTA L'AUTENTICITA' DELLA FIRMA
DEL SIG.
ROMA, 21 AGO.
D'ORDINE DEL MINISTRO

Fig. 4.3 Certificate of Aryan status, purchased from Chilean Embassy in Rome for Jan Truskier, 1942. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

bring them information from the outside. My husband and I kind of became like spies. We would either meet at the Vatican museum, because that was accessible, or we would meet inside the Basilica, because that was also accessible from both sides. We would come from Rome, and she would come from the Vatican and we would sit down, or kneel down and pray in a little chapel, and somebody comes and kneels next to you. You exchange a few words.

We managed for a long time. And Mrs. Bronowska was extremely bold. She was one of those people who dressed in a kind of shocking way. I mean we were all trying to be so inconspicuous, not to attract attention. I remember one time she appeared in the Basilica wearing this long white coat, and dark glasses like a movie star. She was really funny.

If Mia left the impression that she found the flamboyant journalist "funny" as she retold the story many decades later, it was definitely not so amusing at the time.

Anyway, they [the diplomats] were very anxious. And there was this competition going on, among all these diplomats, who was going to get some hot information to London. It happened that we had a dear friend, a Polish woman, Jadwiga Klewer, who happened to be married, that was her second husband, to an old German professor who was very patriotic. He was from Prussia, actually. At an age of 60 or 65 he joined the German army. They sent him to the Island of Rhodes or somewhere. He was in the army, and she had a German passport. Actually, she came from an old Polish-Austrian family and spoke perfect German. She would travel with this German passport to Poland and she would bring money from the Polish government representatives in the Vatican [the Government-in-Exile based in London] to the Polish underground and then bring back all kinds of documents and information, photographs, of what really was going on in Poland. You know, they [the Polish diplomats] had no way of knowing. This woman, Jadwiga Klewer, she really was a hero. And you know, she was almost caught in Warsaw, unfortunately denounced by another Polish-Jewish woman, which was so sad, you know. She was warned not to go back to her brother's house because the Gestapo was waiting for her, and so she didn't go back and her brother didn't go back to the house. After the war she got a golden cross from the Polish Government-in-Exile in London for the things that she did.

At points in this testimony it is hard to know where petty-bribery to gain entrance to the Vatican to pass along clandestine information left off, and social gatherings began. According to Mia, the diplomats sequestered in the

Vatican chafed at their confinement as the war dragged on. Speaking of the legal attaché and his flamboyant journalist wife, Mia explained:

They were getting so bored there in the Vatican, because they were like prisoners. In the meantime they got to meet all these guards. I guess they would bribe them too. I don't know how officially she did this, or just through the guard, but she told them she had this little cousin. I was very young at the time, and I looked even much younger. (Mia impersonated the journalist, using a different voice) "She lives somewhere outside of Rome, and she comes sometimes, and I would love for her to come to dinner here. Would you let her in?"

So I did that a few times. I went there and I said, "I am Mrs. Bronowska's cousin," and they would let me go and have dinner with them. Then, you know, you sit and talk, all this gossip and the English, and who is this or that. I started telling her about this work that I was doing—these lampshades. She gets this brilliant idea she would like to have one. I don't remember now how it happened, but she sent a maid to the *Pensione Milton* to pick up this lamp. Before we know it, I get a call to show up at the *Questura* [the local police]; they needed to talk to me. I was just scared to death! I thought something terrible is going to happen! Then, there was also this kind of dangerous connection that we were bringing serving as intermediaries in the resistance and passing messages across lines. Well, fortunately, all it was, they [the police] were concerned that I was working, that I didn't have the right to work. And how did they know this? Because, I guess, all these spies, they knew everything.

They said "We know that you made this lampshade and that it went to the Vatican. What is this about?" So I said, "Oh, that. You know that was just a gift, because they sit there, they're so bored and they don't go anywhere. She just knows that I am an artist." Somehow they bought that. There was nothing else to worry about. But that really scared us so much that we didn't go anymore. We thought that wasn't safe enough, when you discover how much they knew about every move you made. I guess they really didn't worry about me going to dinner there, or they didn't know about us meeting in the Vatican, in the church or in the museums. But they knew about that darn lamp!

The Movies and Work at Cinecittá

Mia worked at such a variety of jobs during the war years that it was hard to keep them all straight, especially because she described each job according to its particular quirks with such excitement I realized as I went back over the recordings that I had to keep a running tally of all she had done, from the nativity crèches to the lamps and party costumes; from sketching in the Vatican galleries to meeting with spies in the pews of St. Peter's. One afternoon when we were talking, she picked up some photographs and exclaimed, "Oh this is interesting. This is from the time I worked designing movie sets!" Her knowledge of set design began shortly after she arrived in Rome and Mia sat in on classes in costume design at the university and a few in a nearby film school.

They had a school in the Cinecittá, which is like their Hollywood, and I took a few classes there. After the war they used to call it the 'widow of fascism,' because under Mussolini this Cinecittá was such a precious way to produce propaganda. Well, it happened that Jan and I met somebody who was a friend of a friend in our *pensione*. He had connections with some movie producers because he had worked as a cameraman. I told him about my classes at the Cinecittá film school and he encouraged me to try to get work on the film sets. They were making quite a lot of movies in Italy, even during the war. Cinematography is an arm of propaganda, too; it's a very powerful medium. And Mussolini was extremely interested in movie-making, because he had a girlfriend who was the daughter of the doctor who was the doctor of the Pope at the time. Her name was Claretta Petacci, and she was with Mussolini when they assassinated him and they also killed her.

Claretta had a sister [Miriam di San Servolo, also known as Miriam Petacci] who had ambitions to be a great movie star, but had no talent, no looks, nothing. But she was Mussolini's girlfriend's sister, so everybody had to do their best to make her look good. The movie cameraman who I met at the *pensione* and encouraged me to apply for work at Cinecittá, used to tell us stories about how he made movies with her [Petacci]. The producer or the director would say what Mussolini said: "If this movie doesn't come out right, then the director will be shot and the cameraman will be put in jail!" I don't know how much of that was a joke and how much was the truth. Anyway, she never made good movies.

Then they had this whole series of movies that were made from operas, and they did *Faust*. I got this job, I was supposed to produce the heaven;

it was when Marguerita goes to heaven. The idea of the heaven, I think, was taken from Dante's *Divina Comedia*, because there were supposed to be these concentric circles. And everything was made out of clouds that looked like angels. So there were these clouds in the shape of angels in concentric circles that were kind of like a funnel leading to God. There at the end were little cherubs, and here were the larger angels. The whole idea was completely wrong. Technically they really didn't know how to do it. It was all done on a huge piece of crystal glass. There was a huge piece of glass like a store window, and they put it on a big platform. I had to climb on that platform, and then I was making these angels out of cotton, like cotton that you use to clean your face. I just worked with it and made these shapes and glued them in these huge circles.

Mia worked on the set at Cinecittá, but also made some of the designs in her tiny room in the pensione, including the first of the angels. Because they were too large to transport in a taxi, Mia hailed an open air horse and carriage, in which she perched holding the angel, a spectacle that drew amused stares from people on the street. Laughing, Mia relayed the story of a neighbor who some days later stopped her to exclaim, "Oh, I saw you in a horse carriage with an angel!"

In order to make sure that the movies served the single interest of propaganda, Il Duce placed his son Vittorio Mussolini in charge of the entire film industry. The younger Mussolini headed up a national film production company to create the films and ensure that nothing was produced throughout the war that did not meet with his father's approval. There is no evidence that Mussolini killed any movie directors, but Marcello Mastroianni was jailed during the war for his antifascist views, and managed to escape. In the post–World War II era, Italy boasted some of the world's pre-eminent filmmakers, actors, designers, and cinematographers, including Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio de Sica, Bernardo Bertolucci, Vittorio Storaro, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Mastroianni, and others.

You know later, after the war when all these wonderful Italian movies came out, like *The Bicycle Thief*, and *Rome*, *the Open City*, at first we didn't even want to go and see them because we remembered these horrible movies that they made during the war. We thought they would not even be worth seeing. Anyway, I worked for several months on the movie sets. That job was really enjoyable and they paid a lot. I liked it, even if the films were horrible. There were some funny people there, a lot of intrigues, and a lot of competition. It was fun, because they would send a chauffeur for

me every morning to take me there, and then the same chauffeur took me home in the evening. He was the nicest person of all those people that I met there. He called me Signora Pazienza, Mrs. Patience, because it was such hard work. I don't think that it ever turned out all right, but anyway, that was my experience.

The *Ritmica Integrale* Teaching Method

In addition to the connections from the pensione, especially the assistance of the Admiral and his wife, Mia's jobs and contracts for art work stemmed from her association with the Myricae store. Tereza Massetti had a vast network of patrons and contacts, most of whom filtered through her shop on Via Frattini. It was through Massetti that Mia became friends with the remarkable sisters: Laura Bassi (1883–1950), a kindergarten teacher, and Emma Pompilione Bassi (188?–1973), a musician. Both sisters were in their sixties and were contemporaries of the physician Maria Montessori (1870–1952), the celebrated educational theorist who pioneered a method of child-centered teaching early in the twentieth century. Dr. Montessori began working with special needs and working-class children in Italy, where she developed the theory that children learn by doing and that their play is their work through which they are beginning to understand the world. In Montessori classrooms children could choose their object of play, explore it on their own, and were allowed to stay at the task until they mastered it. A component of Montessori's theory was to introduce children to useful work, including setting the table, cleaning and putting away toys, etc. By contrast, Ritmica Integrale, the teaching method Laura Bassi and her sister Emma Pompilione Bassi developed combines music with physical activities. While the Bassi sisters' method drew inspiration from Montessori, they envisioned teaching children skills that would apply to any walk of life. Mia explained the difference.[10]

Montessori's basic idea was to train them [poor children] to be good servants. And as it turned out later, all the skills that they learned were good for child development. Well these two women, the Bassi sisters, worked with slum children and they had this attitude that these children could do anything, not just be servants, and that they were as gifted as any other children. In the classroom, the children would stand in front of an easel and the music would play and they developed these different symbols for different notes, and it had values for different sounds. And they would draw with both hands while the music was playing. And it was amazing, and so this is a little girl from the slums (showing a picture and a sculpture

she made), and they taught them like improvisational dancing. … Well, it was amazing. These women were too sweet.

The Ritmica Integrale method enjoyed some popularity for a while, but mainly exists in the early childhood curriculum as a variant of the Montessori method. In videos on YouTube, made in the 1940s, children are shown practicing the method. It was an interesting marginal practice that the sisters supported with their own money—one of the sister's husband was a well-known radiologist—and through fundraisers. Mia got to know the Bassi sisters when she, and two artists who lived in the Veneto near her, were hired to decorate the reception hall of an elegant hotel for a fundraiser to support the Ritmica Integrale project.

The hotel had this really huge hall with a huge fireplace and they wanted me to make a decoration above the fireplace. And I made the Three Wise Men, from a paper sculpture, kind of bas relief. And it was interesting because I worked with two men who lived next door, quite close, to us and they were a gay couple. And one was a real artist and the other was kind of managing the business. They were also hired to decorate the walls with some paintings and things. And we worked so well together. They were really nice people, and we got to be good friends.

When I asked about whether the gay couple was "out," Mia responded that "everybody knew, but I had no idea what others thought of the couple, or homosexuality in general, since in those years people didn't talk about a lot of things like that."

The End of Mussolini and Start of the German Occupation

The work on the Bassis's fundraisers, the sale of her paper creations, along with all the other sources of income Mia pieced together, began to taper off by the end of 1942 as the economy took a dive. Susan Zuccotti links the decline in Italy's fortunes on the battlefield with a growing discontent on the home front. "Italian casualties on the Eastern front reached unprecedented heights of 115,000 deaths and over 60,000 captured. The return of demoralized and defeated troops from the frozen Russian battlefields bearing the news of humiliating treatment under the command of German officers, on top of heavy losses in a war that few saw as benefitting Italy, turned the civilian population against the war."[11] *In 1943, when the Allies landed in Sicily, they were greeted as liberators. In an attempt to shore up support, Hitler*

summoned a badly shaken Mussolini to a conference in July 1943. On the same day, the Allies began to bomb Rome and a week later King Victor Emmanuel III ordered the arrest of Mussolini. Il Duce had lost the support of powerful economic sectors, a wing of the Fascist Party, and the military. Anxiously anticipating the arrival of the Allied forces, crowds took to the streets in celebration and young men began to roam the city in search of the collaborators and open supporters of the two-decade-old fascist government. The anticipation of the war's end was actually a cruel joke. Not only would it be two more years before the conflict in Europe ended, but for Italy, the German invasion and occupation of the country in the wake of Mussolini's fall, actually introduced the harshest years of the war.

Despite the heightened repression in the society at large, inside the Truskier family this period before the end of the war was very happy. On June 23, 1943 Mia and Jan's son Andrew Julian Truskier was born. Mia shook her head in wonder as she reflected on his birth.

I will never forget the night, when the time came to go to the hospital, and we had to contact the police to get permission to call a cab. Because of the curfew, no one was allowed to be out after dark. Then after he was born at the University hospital, and right when he was only a few days old—in those years they kept women for two weeks in the hospital after birth—there were some bombings of Rome by the Allies. Unfortunately, apparently the Germans had some very strategic things hidden in the residential areas. In the meantime there were these air raids with a few bombs falling. In the hospital we had to run to the basement. There were no shelters, really, to speak of. So to have this tiny baby and have to run to the basement, it was very scary. It is one thing to be scared for yourself, quite a different experience when your child's life is in danger.

What a difficult time it was to be born. There was nothing. There was a shortage of food. You couldn't buy anything. To find diapers—well, of course, we got a lot of hand-me-downs from people that we knew. There were some friends who came from Poland with small children, and they brought baby stuff with them, so they would send it to us from Milan, or wherever they were. We got a lot of stuff like that, but it was still so hard.

Caring for a Baby in Wartime

Even tiny babies can take up a lot of room, as Mia soon learned. While the Pensione Milton was comfortable, the rooms Mia, Jan, Regina, and Ryszard lived in were in the part of the hotel that had been converted years before from the Maronite monastery.

We came home with this baby, and we lived in tiny rooms because the *pensione* used to be a monastery. The rooms were remodeled cells of monks. There was a shortage of water and there was no heating. We had to wash the diapers in the sink. Every room had a tiny lavatory, so we had to wash diapers in this cold water in the sink. If the weather was okay then we would hang them on the roof of the *pensione*. But if it rained or was too cold we had to hang [the laundry] in the room. Fortunately, we had four little rooms in a row. My husband and I were in one room; then we converted the other tiny room into a little living room. You had to have a lot of imagination. My mother-in-law had a room, and our cousin had a room. We managed the best we could.

We were so lucky because of the woman who was the manager of that *pensione*, her name was Signorina Rosina. If you saw her you would have said she just looks like a perfect picture of a witch, the traditional witch from the fairy tales. She really looked just like that, but she had the heart of gold. The minute we came home with Andy, she just fell in love with that baby. Always she did everything she could, even violating her own rules, because tenants in the *pensione* were not allowed to have any electrical appliances. She loaned us her own heating lamp so that we could use it when we gave Andy a bath, because it was just so cold in the room. Heating was rationed and when winter came it was terribly cold. Then she knew that we had a little electric plate (that was prohibited). Later, when he was a few months old; and there was no baby food, there was no such thing at the time, you had to cook your own vegetable broth and cereal for the first solid baby food. She knew we had that little plate.

And everyone who lived there had to turn their food rations over to the *pensione*. The Germans also had food rations, and there were quite a few German officers, even members of the Gestapo, staying at this *pensione*. The dining room was on the top floor and there was kind of a terrace that was enclosed. Part of it was glassed in and these Germans ate there. They, of course, had very good food. They stole all the food that the Italian people had. They took everything for themselves. In order to prevent the rest of the tenants from seeing what they were eating, they put these

screens up. I mean, who cared? We just cared that they wouldn't see us. We didn't care to see what they were eating. But this Signorina Rosina protected us. Somehow all these Germans thought that we were Swiss, for one thing. She would also, when they turned their rations in, give us extra rations for bread and stuff, because she felt here we had a baby, and there were two young men, my husband and his cousin who needed to eat more. So she gave us these extra rations. She was so good to us.

I remember the first few nights after we came home from the hospital. Of course the baby cried, this very tiny baby. And there was a man who was living next to one of our rooms, and he complained terribly. He said that baby kept him awake all night and he can't stand that. Signorina Rosina told him, "Well, I'm sorry, you know, but he lived here before you moved in," meaning, of course, before Andy was even born! But we were there a few years before he was born. She just stood her ground and she didn't care. So he moved out and we stayed. She was really unbelievable, so good to us. This would probably take forever to tell it all. We stayed in the *pensione* until the liberation.

Signorina Rosina allowed them to stay even as their funds were running out, since she was aware that the lack of working papers prevented Jan from earning much at all and Mia's under-the-table income from her artwork declined dramatically while she was pregnant and taking care of the new baby.

We also kept a clandestine radio. I don't know if she knew about that or not. We hid it in our closet, a freestanding wardrobe. We listened to the French and English broadcast, and it was forbidden just to have a radio, as well as to listen to news. We had to put a hat on the door so that people couldn't see through the keyhole what we were doing. And then we would just sit in front of this wardrobe, and then put out heads in to listen to this radio. It was on this radio that we heard the unbelievable news that the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele, who everyone thought was a powerless figurehead, signed an armistice with the Allies after having Mussolini arrested and thrown in jail.

The end of Mussolini's fascist government and transfer of the reins of power to Marshal Pietro Badogli, the aged Chief of Staff, on July 25, 1943 should have signaled Italy's retreat from the theater of war. It did not. Badogli had warned Mussolini from the start that the army was not adequately prepared to fight on the many fronts the alliance with Hitler demanded, such as Spain, Africa, Yugoslavia, and the USSR; however, the end would not come for another two years.[12] *In September 1943, the German army invaded and took possession of Italy, freed Mussolini from his Italian prison, and*

introduced the most repressive year and a half of the war for the residents, especially the 45,000 Italian Jews and uncounted more refugees, such as the Truskier family. Mia remembered late 1943 and 1944 as a time of personal fulfillment with the new baby and her continued work, but the most perilous year for her family. German army officers ate in the dining room of the Pensione Milton and soldiers roamed the city on foot and in huge trucks and tanks. Mia's family avoided the streets as much as possible, and when forced to go out to work or buy groceries, like everyone else they moved purposely with their heads tucked down avoiding the attention of their occupiers.

The Incident in Via Rasella

The Germans came back with a vengeance. They were not the fascist allies anymore, they came as occupiers. For us, the nightmare was starting all over again: the oppressive climate of occupation, a real shortage of food, and no law to protect the population. The streets became a dangerous place. While visiting a friend who was in hiding, I personally witnessed something that would go down in history. Members of the Italian underground threw a bomb in the Via Rasella at a contingent of German

Fig. 4.4 Mia creating artwork in rooms at the *Pensione* Milton. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

soldiers marching through a narrow street, killing some and wounding several others. No one seemed to know what it was, and then we saw these people running and heard shouts, so we stayed in my friend's apartment. The Germans closed off the streets around the scene of the attack and arrested every man and boy they could find. The prisoners were taken to some caves on the outskirts of the city where they were killed. They became known as "the martyrs of *Fosse Ardeatine*" (Ardeatine Caves).

The perpetrators of the March 23 attack that killed thirty-three Germans were a part of the broad Italian Resistance, the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN) that included communists, socialists, Christian Democrats, liberals, Labor Democrats, and other smaller parties and groups. In retaliation for the bombing, Hitler ordered the apprehension and execution of ten Italians for every German casualty. A few more, mostly Jews who were in the Roman prisons, were thrown in so as to fill out the quota. The attack on the German police unit in the Via Rasella and the subsequent murder and burial of 335 random Italians in the Fosse Ardeatine mass grave is still widely remembered in Italy, not without some controversy.

Alessandro Portelli, an internationally renowned oral historian and theorist of historical memory, compiled a book on the Via Rasella-Fosse Ardeatine episode based on the memories of those who witnessed the event (or claimed to), had relatives who were victims (or claimed to have),or were associated with it in one way or another (or claimed to have been). Portelli's extensive research pertains not so much to the events themselves, but to the reconstructed memory of them, to remembered affiliations with them, and to the place those memories hold in the history of the Resistance and of Italy's wartime experience. Portelli's intent, beyond further study of memory formation, is to counter a popular belief among some residents of Rome of the time and among subsequent commentators that the members of the Resistance should have turned themselves in, rather than allow the Nazis to apprehend and execute innocent people to wreak vengeance on the population of Rome. While this may in hindsight seem a minor point in a war that over five years saw the senseless killing of millions, Portelli uses the Via Rasella attack and the German revenge killing at the Fosse de Ardeatine to shine a light on the tenuous character of reconstructed memory, the impact of social and personal factors on that memory, and the errors that may result, often unconsciously. In this case, he argues that "these events have been obfuscated by popular beliefs and narratives drenched in ignorance and misinformation" that end up condemning the Germans for the massacre but also affixing blame on the partisans for an allegedly irresponsible act.

Portelli's book, The Order Has Been Carried Out, gives us an opportunity here to consider briefly some key issues of oral history. It is ultimately an analysis of the production of historical memory, and an exposé of how readily individual memories fall prey to a larger narrative far from the reality. The facts are that the Germans did round up and kill 335 random Italians, mostly by emptying jails, within twenty-four hours of the "crime." The execution order, as Portelli shows, had already been carried out even before most people knew of the explosion. Such precipitous brutality was hard to believe because it contradicted the "commonsense belief that one does not take revenge on three hundred thirty-five innocents before even trying to find the perpetrators."[13]

The postmemory, to use Marianne Hirsch's term, among members of the Italian public and officialdom would have it that the Resistance was responsible for the death of innocents because they refused to surrender. In reality, they would have had no time to do so, even if so inclined, since the order to apprehend and kill over 300 people had already been carried out. This post-it on top of the memory spreads the blame, but it contradicts the reality. Given the wanton and inconceivable madness of the war in its entirety—the genocide of ethnic groups, of disabled people, the destruction of whole cities just to take revenge, mass detentions and horrific tortures—killing over 300 innocents does not seem out of the ordinary. But what all of this indicates is the complexity of popular historical memory, the ways it is shaped by political, cultural, and historical context, and the degree to which is assumes great personal and political importance for those with the memories.

But what does Portelli's analysis suggest about Mia's account of witnessing the massacre? Mia actually read one of Portelli's articles analyzing the incident. Not surprisingly, she was incensed, remarking "Well I was there! I know what happened!" It seemed to me that she overreacted, but in an interesting way. For Mia, and most people, being an eyewitness prevails over any other source of information. For Portelli, and scholars of memory, the firsthand memory may not hold up in the face of other evidence. It bears mentioning that I have no reason to believe that Mia exaggerated or fabricated her observance of the Via Rasella bombing. Given the proximity to her residence, she could well have been present, or she could have heard the explosion even if she was in her own room. (I have walked the short blocks from the Bella Vista Hotel to the plaque on the Via Rasella that marks the site of the bombing.) Is Mia'smemory of this fraught and chaotic event that twisted the memories of others accurate in every detail? We have no evidence one way or another, but what we do know is that her version of what happened is plausible and consistent with the spatial and temporal reconstruction of the event. Moreover, as

with other observers, the Via Rasella bombing and its aftermath had a dramatic and powerful impact on her life. The latter is the most probable aspect of Mia's testimony.

An added twist to this saga occurred a few years ago when I talked with Sandro Portelli at an oral history conference. When I mentioned that I was writing a book about a woman who had heard the explosion in the Via Rasella, Portelli responded, "Sure. Like everyone else in Rome" or something to that effect. It struck me that this single incident, and my encounter with "historians" on both sides of a memory—the amateur who witnessed the event and the professional who wrote about it—illustrated the mutual distrust implicit in memory studies. Ultimately, it is skepticism based on a point of view, cannot be fully resolved, and thus sits uncomfortably at the heart of scholarship.

The Fosse Ardeatine was only one of several massacres and atrocities the German army had carried out since its arrival in September 1943, including "the execution of seventy-two political prisoners at Forte Bravetta, ten men at Pietralata on October 23, 1943, ten women guilty of taking bread from a bakery," and many other murders of civilians for extremely meager offenses. Heightened repression against Jews imperiled the Truskiers, especially Jan and his cousin, Ryszard, who were susceptible to conscription. Portelli notes that German army patrols were responsible for "thousands of able-bodied men taken off the streets and pressed into forced labor in Germany and at the front." Several thousand Jews were caught in sweeps in late 1943 and early 1944, deported on trains and never heard from again.[14] *Ryszard actually had a very close call, Mia remembered.*

You know the Germans were just at random catching young men and taking them somewhere to work for them, for whatever they needed to have done. Ryzsard was just on the street and he had a chance to call us, very quickly, to tell us that he was caught. He managed, however, to escape. And you know, there were some bombings already, by the Allied forces, and there was an air attack, and the truck that he was in had to stop and he actually escaped. And he came home on foot, and … it was just an amazing thing. After that he wanted to leave Rome because it wasn't safe and just because he wanted to get away. He left very suddenly. It was a very strange thing. He told us he couldn't stand all these Germans around. We had a good friend, who lived in Northern Italy, in Genoa and he helped him to get across the border. I don't know how, but he eventually made it to Paris, and made contact with Franciszek. Through a series of connections he might have gone on to London, but anyway he joined the

Polish Second Army. When he returned to Italy in 1945, it was in a Polish military uniform as a member of the Allied forces.

Finally, June 4, 1944, the day everybody in Rome had been hoping and praying for, arrived. I'll never forget that day. People just went crazy. People stayed up all night when they already knew that they were coming, but they (the troops) were in a hurry because you know they were going after the Nazis who were fleeing and this time for good. The Allies didn't want to be fooled again, like in 1943 when Mussolini was arrested and then escaped to the North. People came out in the streets with flowers and bread and wine, and they wanted to hug them. There were the Americans and the British and the French and the Australians and New Zealanders. We were particularly excited to see the Polish troops who had been fighting with the Allies. All in these jeeps and going through the main streets … it was amazing, just amazing. It was one of the most memorable days of my life.[15]

Mia and Jan's pride in the soldiers of the Polish army was well-placed. General Władysław Anders' Polish Army had played the decisive role in the triumph of the Allies' siege of the Monastery of Monte Cassino in southern Italy, a battle that raged from January to May 18, 1944. In fact, it was Polish soldiers who raised the flag over the mountain top outpost as a Polish bugler played the Hejnałmariackł (St. Mary's Trumpet Call), the anthem of Kraków, announcing the victory over the last German holdouts.

Notes

1. Maronite Church is an Eastern branch of the Catholic Church, dating back to the fourth century. It is linked to the Catholic Church, centered in Rome, but mainly draws followers from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, www.wikipedia.org.
2. The original Order of Malta, officially named the "Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta," was headquartered in Malta from 1530–1798 and since 1834 it has been located in the Palazzo Malta in Rome. It has sovereign status, a constitution, observer status at the United Nations, and can issue passports. Like an embassy, it retains extraterritoriality. Originally it only admitted men but over time it included women and embraced a larger charitable purpose alongside its religious calling. A rule change in 1996 allowed for the admission of individuals who were not necessarily of noble lineage, but the society still claims to draw its members from the most prestigious political and

social circles. H.J.A. Sire, *The Knights of Malta* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

3. Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 5, 25–26.
4. Susan Zuccotti, 34–35.
5. Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 266.
6. Rodovetro is the commercial name for *cel*, a substance that was produced in 1938 in an area of Rho, near Milan. *Cel* is a transparent cellulose acetate invented in 1914 and later developed for making cartoon illustrations, eventually for television, www.wikipedia.org.
7. Pierre Blet, S.J., *Pius XII and the Second World War, According to the Archives of the Vatican*, trans. Lawrence J. Johnson (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 47. The Casa Santa Marta was never really a convent, but was instead built in 1891 to house victims of a predicted epidemic, which never occurred. It was used as a medical dispensary, and later as a guesthouse to accommodate pilgrims, visiting clergy, and the members of the College of Cardinals when they convened for papal enclaves. Since 2013 the Casa Santa Marta has been the home of Pope Francis, who remained there after his election to the papacy, rather than move to the traditional palatial apartments where previous popes have lived, www.news.nationalgeographic.com.
8. David Alvarez, *Spies in the Vatican: Espionage and Intrigue from Napoleon to the Holocaust* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 150–51.
9. John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 93.
10. There are examples of *Ritmica Integrale* available on You Tube and a few discussions with Laura Bassi, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyN-f9zdPRI.
11. Susan Zuccotti, 4–5.
12. Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 10–11.
13. Alessandro Portelli, 3.
14. Alessandro Portelli, 13.
15. Indicative of Mia's steadfast political consciousness, she inserted the remark: "At that time we didn't know that Black soldiers in the American forces had to go to a separate blood bank, you know?"

CHAPTER 5

The War Years in Warsaw and the Soviet Union, 1939–1945

Mia Truskier, her relatives, and friends all suffered, died, and survived in every theater of this all-encompassing war. Those who remained in Poland died or survived the ghettos and death camps; Mia's father died of typhus after leaving the Soviet work camp; her brother Tadeusz, survived the work camp and went on to serve as a doctor in General Ander's Army; her mother survived the war on the Aryan side in Warsaw; and Mia, Jan, Ryszard, and Regina survived as semi-clandestine refugees in Italy.

Despite the geographical expanse that divided them, this group of people added to Mia's Storyworld through the letters they exchanged and what she learned of their experiences once the war ended. Their accounts were interconnected and overlapped. In the first place, they were all Jews whose lives were especially in danger as the German army gained control over the population of Poland and Italy. Nonetheless, their identity as Jews is never mentioned in the correspondence, no doubt for security reasons or because it was not at the forefront of life when they wrote. Secondly, they relied on friends and relatives or any contacts they could find to ensure their safety, find jobs, and tap into money. Finally, many of them stayed in touch throughout the war, maintaining a remarkable correspondence linking Italy, the Soviet Union, and Warsaw in spite of censors and convoluted mail routes.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_5

The War's Toll on Poland

Exact statistics on the number of deaths of Polish civilians during the war vary, but the commonly accepted estimate is six million: three million Jews and three million others, including "ethnic" Poles and those from other ethnic groups, plus hundreds of thousands from the areas that are today a part of Poland but were annexed to the USSR during the war. About seventy percent of the Polish Jews who survived were those who were deported to the interior of the Soviet Union, as happened with Mia's father, brother, and family friends, as well as Jan's cousin, Anatol Truskier, and his family.[1] *They were moved with thousands of others to the Soviet-occupied section of Poland after 1939 and subsequently further east toward Siberia. Smaller groups of surviving Jews were liberated from concentration camps by the Allied armies as they marched after the retreating Germans.*

Warsaw stands out in this chronicle of death and destruction, especially as regards what happened to the Jews of Europe. As the world center of Jewish culture as well as the largest concentration of Jews in Europe, its destruction was an inestimable blow to both. "Ninety-eight per cent of the Jewish population of Warsaw perished in the Second World War, together with one-quarter of the Polish population: in all, some 720,000 souls," making it "the greatest slaughter perpetrated within a single city in human history." On the other hand, Gunnar Paulsson reminds us that Warsaw is likewise a remarkable tale of a people's resourcefulness and a too often overlooked will to survive. If the "flight of twenty-odd thousand Jews from the Warsaw ghetto seems by comparison a negligible phenomenon, and has passed almost unknown by historians… it was probably the greatest mass escape from confinement in history."[2] *Paulsson's revelation of what he calls a "secret city," made up of an estimated 28,000 Jews, plus the non-Jews who hid them and the criminals and opportunists who preyed on them, may have encompassed as many as 100,000 people spread over four years.*[3] *Mia's mother, Paulina, her brother-in-law Feliks, and Jan's Uncle Pawel, were among those who hid on the Aryan side. They provide human faces for Paulsson's anonymous numbers, just as Mia gives us a real person on whom to peg the impersonal refugee narrative.*

Thinking back on that time, Mia lamented, "After September 6, 1939, I never saw my father again, and I didn't see my brother for many, many years." She eventually learned how her father died and where he was buried, which actually was more than she or her husband knew about many of their

cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends who perished in the bombings, ghettos, or extermination camps. The full story of the twisted, irregular, and seemingly pointless roads that Zygmunt and Tadeusz traveled after that fateful day when they bid goodbye to Mia and Paulina at the edge of the Vistula River is drawn from Mia's memories and the correspondence that circulated among family members scattered in different countries. Although Mia saved many letters, she does not seem to have talked extensively with either her brother or her mother about the war when they saw each other again. In response to my questions, she simply told me that for her mother the memories of wartime Warsaw were painful and depressing. "It was just too difficult and she didn't want to talk about it." Tadeusz may well have shared his experiences with his family in England before his death in 1986, but Mia never relayed much of what her brother endured, if she knew. Since Mia saw him only on visits over the years, they probably spent their time together catching up on news of family and friends rather than remembering the war.

The correspondence between the three in the Soviet Union with Paulina back in Warsaw was sporadic and long-delayed. Whatever news Paulina received, usually through intermediaries, she sent on to Mia in Rome. Not only were the letters infrequent, they passed through at least one set of censors, and sometimes two, and were routed through a cousin, Ewa Wenk, in Milan. Mia had kept in contact with Ewa after their short visit in April 1940 when she, Jan, Regina, and Ryszard were trying to get visas to stay in Italy. A "letter" was in reality a chain of messages strung one after another such as the one dated July 10, 1940 in which Mia learned of what happened to her brother and father. Mia described the letter writers to me and filled in the background as she translated.

This is a letter to me from Jurek Feinmesser, my brother's old friend who practically used to live at our house in Warsaw before the war. By then we were already in Italy. The second part of the letter is from another dear old friend, Michat Chawin. The two of them were among the Polish people who found themselves in the Soviet Union after the Polish government on September 6, 1939 issued an order (over the radio) for all able-bodied men to evacuate the city and start to join the "regrouped" Polish army, because the government claimed that the city of Warsaw, already under constant bombing by the Nazis and completely surrounded by them, was not going to be defended and the government did not want the men to fall into the invaders' hands.

None of this turned out to be true. The city did not surrender for many, many weeks, and there was no Polish army left to be joined. Most of the militaries in the eastern part of Poland were able to escape and join either the French or British army. Many of the people, who as ordered, evacuated the city at dawn, were massacred by the Nazi planes, and their families left in Warsaw did not find out for a long time whether their loved ones survived that exodus. Those who survived and reached the eastern part of Poland found themselves under Soviet occupation, because at that time Hitler and Stalin were allies. Those people had an option to be willing to stay where they were and accept a job that the Soviet government would assign them to, and be willing to accept Soviet citizenship, otherwise they faced deportation to a labor camp in the Soviet Union. These two friends took that option [citizenship] and avoided being sent to a labor camp.

Poland Under Occupation

Although Mia contended that the Polish military had no plan, or at least a feasible one, historians vary in their appraisal of what happened. Some argue that the Polish army mounted a tough, if dispersed, opposition that was simply not up to the overwhelming power of the German blitzkrieg, the German word for a war of rapid movement.[4] *I tend to agree with Christopher Browning who read over and commented on this chapter: "I think it is misleading to say the Poles fought a prolonged struggle on two fronts for a month. The Germans quickly overran their half of Poland by invading from three sides (Germany, East Prussia, and occupied Czechoslovakia), against which the Polish army was helpless. There was hardly any pitched fighting against the Red Army when it entered from the fourth side. The continued fighting into late September involved the siege of Warsaw, not field campaigns."*[5] *If the capital fell to the invading German army before month's end, the seeds of resistance immediately took root and grew throughout the war.*

Over the next five years, Jews and non-Jews defied the Nazis in active struggle, noncompliance, avoidance of the ghetto, and whatever subterfuge they could find. Despite its history of ethnic, religious, cultural, political, and linguistic divisions, and antagonisms, Poland did not formally collaborate as a nation. Contrary to the Poles' expectations, Britain and France did not come to their defense with anything but words. In fact, the situation in which Mia's family and countless others found themselves was calculated in advance, if not by them or any other Poles. Less than a month before the invasion,

Germany and the Soviet Union had signed the Secret Protocol of Nonaggression dividing Poland into three districts: the German annexed west; the Soviet annexed east, including Byelorussia, Ukraine, and the Baltic States; and a German occupied region called the General Government in the center with the capital in Krakow. Germany created the General Government to justify the fiction that Poland no longer existed, that the Poles were stateless, and that the only citizens of Poland were the Germans who had been relocated to the area following World War I. In turn, the USSR used this fiction to support its September 17 invasion. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov unctuously explained to Poland's ambassador that the Polish Republic no longer existed, leaving the Soviets with no choice but to take possession of the land in order to protect their western border from a German invasion. In essence, since the Soviets had created a straw man—a defeated occupied Poland under German control—they could not be blamed for knocking it down and grabbing over half of it.

From the point of view of the Poles, Mia included, Moscow's annexation of eastern Poland was never simply a preemptive measure to forestall a German invasion of the Soviet Union at that time, no matter what the government claimed. This new interference fell into the historic pattern of Poland struggling for its mere existence, wedged as it was between its two powerful neighbors. By the end of September, the USSR began to reorganize every aspect of national life in the fifty-two percent of Poland that it controlled, including the arrest and removal of all local leaders, the imposition of the Russian language and culture, and the military surveillance of the entire territory. Basically, Moscow carried out a "Russification" plan similar to the one that had been in place under the Tsar and only dismantled twenty years earlier, but this time requiring the 13.5 million inhabitants of the occupied territory to adopt Soviet citizenship or face deportation.[6]

Tadeusz and Zygmunt in the East

My father and Tadzio originally ended up in the city of Lwów. That would be pronounced 'L'voof.' Lwów was a very ancient Polish city in the south, but today it is called L'viv and it's in Ukraine. Because you know after World War II, like after any war, the winning countries kind of arbitrarily move the borders from east to west. After World War II, these places became part of the Soviet Union, and then after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, all these countries came into being, they became

independent. I think maybe Lwów/L'viv might even be the capital of Ukraine. I'm not sure, maybe not.[7]

Anyway, they [Zygmunt and Tadeusz] were just walking. They had no way of getting anywhere, so they made their way to Lwów, and took refuge in the home of these well-to-do family friends, Mrs. Zofia Diamond and her daughter Muszka. There they met up with two of Tadzio's former schoolmates from Warsaw, Jurek Feinmesser (nickname Jerzy) and Michat Chawin, who I told you about. They had likewise left to join the army to oppose the German invasion and they also were "caught" in Soviet territory. Those friends were very helpful, especially Mrs. Diamond. They were very wealthy people and they helped them and they stayed with them.

Wanda Szenwald, Tadzio's girlfriend [at the time], decided to join them. She left her father, Nik, in Warsaw to go meet them. We already knew they had made it to Lwów because some people came back, some other friends of Tadzio's came back to Warsaw. Once they realized there was no army, they just decided to come back home. But Wanda wanted to go to be with Tadzio. She was very brave, because it was a long way [240 miles] and she was traveling alone across this very difficult territory.

I found from some of the letters from friends in Lwów, that I have here in the drawers, that my father and brother really considered trying to come back to Warsaw, except you see, they had never experienced living under Nazi occupation; they didn't know what it was like. But Wanda did because she crossed over. Her trip was very difficult because there was a border … there was a real border between the Nazi-occupied and Soviet-occupied part of Poland, and she had to cross, at night with high boots, through Nazi territory. It was pretty treacherous and she was really courageous. So when my father and brother talked about going back, Wanda was not very enthusiastic about it. She had experienced living under Nazi occupation and knew it was dangerous.

Considering the fate of Jews who remained in Warsaw, or in any of the German-held territories, Wanda's advice was sound. Despite horrendous conditions in many camps, the bulk of Polish Jews who survived were those in the Soviet-held territory. The Soviets conscripted the men into the military and put women into ancillary services, where survival was never certain. Tadeusz' friends from Warsaw, Michat and Jurek, stayed semi-undercover near Lwów, as they explained in the July letter.

From Lwów to a Work Camp in the USSR, 1940

"July 10, 1940

Dear Mia,

I am sorry that I have the painful duty to inform you that Zygmunt, Tadzio, and Wanda have changed their address and moved to the East on June 30. I hope that you will accept this news without too much worry and that your mother will react the same way. A small consolation is that many of their friends left also and hopefully they will find themselves in the same place and will not be too lonely. They took all their belongings with them. Wanda showed a lot of strength through this ordeal. I hope that the rest of them will be able to reconcile themselves to this new situation. Your postcard and letter arrived on July 5. I will send it to them immediately as soon as I get [an] address. I expect to get it in more or less one to two weeks.

Muszka has already written to your mother. I will also write directly to your Mom. If you have any message for your family you can send it to me and I will forward it. I hope you know that I always remember the good years when we were so close, and because of those happy memories I will always do all I can to be of any help. I don't have a permanent address, not even a temporary one and am just living from one day to another, so you can write to the address of Mrs. Zofia Diamond with whom I am in constant contact.[8] In case you should change your address, try to send it to me as soon as possible and I will send it to your family.

I am going to say bye for now hoping that I will be able to help you and do all I can. Jurek." [Mia continues her narration]

Here is the part written by Michat Chawin:

Dear Mia,

We were all very saddened by your family's departure, even more so that together we were trying to make plans for the near future. We have to hope that what happened will not be that bad and that it will only delay the time for the families to be reunited. At this time we have to reconcile ourselves to that.

I do hope with all my heart that sooner or later we will all be together again and that I will be able to offer you personal congratulations (even though belated) on your wedding, which I am doing now in this letter.

Sincerely yours, Michat Chawin[9]

Were Michat and Jerzy hinting that they had tried to persuade Zygmunt, Tadeusz, and Wanda to accept Soviet citizenship, or simply stay in Lwów and

work at an assigned locale, rather than take a chance on life in a distant work camp? The letter offers no clear answer. Jurek's comment that the three were not alone is quite accurate. They joined what is estimated to have been 1.7 million Polish citizens, along with countless more Ukrainians, Byelorussians and others, who over a twenty-month period were loaded onto freight trains that carried them to distant work camps. As Mia put it, "You know there were people from all over. They weren't political prisoners. They just found themselves in that territory that was occupied by the Soviet army. I heard of some cases when these people thought they were being sent back home, to Poland, but then they discovered that the trains were going east and not west."[10]

Because the deportations began as early as the end of 1939 and proceeded in waves over the next year, one can assume that the Tłustys, their hosts in Lwów, the Diamonds, as well as Jurek and Michał, all foresaw their grim fate. It was common knowledge that people had been banished to Siberian work camps throughout Russian history, but the option of confinement in a work camp was preferable to risking death in an effort to get back to whatever existed in Warsaw. Nonetheless, people who came from such prosperous and educated backgrounds might have assumed, mistakenly, that they would be treated with the deference generally accorded to people of their status. In later letters Mia learns that Zygmunt and Tadeusz are depressed that they are assigned manual labor instead of work as physicians.

The Red Army captured and detained almost 200,000 Polish soldiers before year's end along with intellectuals and professionals, to prevent them from forming or joining a resistance movement. The Gestapo, the secret state police of Nazi Germany and German-occupied Europe formed in 1933, and the NKVD, the Soviet Union's internal police force re-formed in 1934, agreed to cooperate in suppressing any agitation from the Poles. The NKVD specifically targeted Polish military officers who had served under Józef Piłsudski in 1919–1920 and had soundly defeated the Bolsheviks, then under the command of none other than political commissar Joseph Stalin.[11] *This was the first group to be deported, taken to the Arctic region near the White Sea, and directed to build their own labor camps in the frigid winter where temperatures reached minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Four subsequent deportations of civilians took place in 1940. The first in February comprised an estimated 220,000 men, women, and children, families who had settled in eastern Poland following World War I. The second deportation of some 320,000 people was in mid-April and included Polish civilians, Jews, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians, many of whom were intellectuals, political activists, government*

functionaries, prosperous landowners, merchants, owners of small businesses and their employees, as well as just about anyone deemed an "enemy of the people." Zygmunt, Tadeusz, and Wanda were probably in the third wave, known to have taken place in June and July 1940, corresponding to the date on the letters Michat and Jurek sent to Paulina. At least one more mass deportation was carried out, followed by smaller ones that continued constantly throughout 1940 and during the first half of 1941until the German invasion of the USSR on June 22. As far as Mia knew, both Michat and Jurek remained in hiding in Lwów or in nearby locales.

Some of the letters that I found came through Tadzio's friends [Jurek and Michat] who decided to take this option of staying [in Soviet-annexed Poland] rather than being deported, but they kind of stayed in hiding because one of them [Jurek] said that 'I don't have an address.' So he gave me the address of this old friend, you know where they stayed in Lwów.

Mia wondered if opting for Soviet citizenship or remaining in hiding would have been better than consignment to the work camp, but the fate of all these people was much the same regardless of where they ended up. Both Michat and Jurek survived the war, but so did Tadeusz and Wanda despite the conditions they endured. Zygmunt, on the other hand, did not survive, but he was twenty years older than the others. It was not the labor, but typhus that ultimately felled him, which he contracted on the train after he left the work camp while trying to provide medical assistance to others. Through the benefit of hindsight, we know that the worst choice would have been for the family to return to Warsaw or any German-occupied territory. The time in Siberia was very hard, however.

Wartime Communications from Warsaw to Milan to Rome and Back

The Tłustys' correspondence from Arkhangelsk to Warsaw and on to Mia in Rome, via Milan, included descriptions and sketches of the camps, those Mia no longer has. For several reasons, one of the most significant of all the mail Mia saved was the first one, a postcard from her mother dated August 27, 1940. Not only was it her first news from Warsaw, it was the beginning of a code that Paulina initiated and refined in their communications throughout the war. The code was never stable as Paulina changed it constantly, relying on an ingenious variety of names, metaphors, and inside jokes to convey day-to-day happenings, to send news of the lives of family and friends who were

also hiding on the Aryan side, to let Mia and Jan know who had been taken to the ghetto and who remained outside and, maybe most important of all, to relay how much she treasured her family and missed them. A few constants pop up in many of the letters. Paulina would generally use descriptions of illness, or mention that someone was sick, sometimes that they had died. This meant that the person had gone to the ghetto. Occasionally she would write that she visited with a friend or relative who Mia knew was dead for years. This was sometimes difficult to understand, but Mia thought it referred to existing people that Paulina did not want to expose, especially if they also were hiding in the "Secret City."

This postcard [dated August 27, 1940] from my mother [Paulina] to cousin Ewa in Milan includes greetings from her [Ewa's] mother. She says that Ewa's mother suffers from a "chronic illness." This means the problems with the Nazis. The aunt could not even go out in the last two weeks, which meant she must have lived in hiding. My mother's news about herself is mostly about her living far from her "dear ones," meaning my father, brother, and sister-in-law in the Soviet Union. The reference to the news from "the boys" means that she did receive some news from or about them.

The significant thing about this postcard is that my mother still uses her real name and our home address, which means that she still did not have trouble with the Nazis. She also sends greetings to "the boy" probably meaning Ewa's husband.

Mia translated and explained a letter from her mother sent on October 25, 1940:

"Mrs. Szopawska is very sick." When she talked about Szopawska, what she means is *szopa*, the Polish word for shed, which she made into Mrs. Szopawska, making shed into a person. "Now she is very sick." That means that the ghetto is being organized.

Paulina sent Ewa postcards and letters through the summer and fall of 1940, asking if her cousin knew whether Mia and the Truskiers got into Italy and sharing her anxiety regarding the plight of "the boys" in the USSR.[12] *The letters that Paulina sent are doleful entreaties for news, short assurances as to her own well-being, and even a tearful remark about how much she misses her own mother. Since as mentioned before, Paulina's mother had died two years earlier, these comments might have been a way of communicating her loneliness and isolation in Warsaw, as well as letting Ewa know that, Aunt Liskowska, would have been a great comfort during those bleak months.*

The letters from April 1940 until the end of the war in Poland reveal valuable information into the domestic lives of people in Paulina's family

and from among her acquaintances. First, Paulina expresses her affection for her daughter and how much she misses her: "I love you above any human understanding, I could not love [you] more … and I assure you that this is not just me talking sentimentally to my daughter." *She goes on to reiterate that Mia* "must have known about it. I want to hold you and kiss you so much. If you love someone so dearly, you want to always cuddle and kiss them." *It is not an unusual sentiment, to be sure, given the direness of their circumstances and the distance between them.*[13]

Secondly, Paulina's letters to Mia paint a picture of days in near constant movement, beginning from when she was forced to leave the apartment in the building she and her husband owned. Her life in the first years of the war, as far as Mia was aware, differed little from Paulsson's conclusion that "the Jews on the Aryan side were at first—in 1940 and 1941—few in number, well integrated into Polish society and for the most part had well-established 'Aryan' identities." His comment, "many of them were regarded as Jews only by the German authorities," conforms to the maxim that some secular Jews did not know they were Jewish until Hitler told them.[14] *Paulina, while Jewish, worked and socialized with many non-Jews in the prewar years and was able to rely on friends on the Aryan side at least for a while. The letters indicate that she spent most of her time with Karol and Teodozja Maciejewski, close friends who stood as godparents for Mia at her "emergency conversion" in January 1940. Because of the severe penalties that could befall this couple should they be found out, Paulina had a long string of pseudonyms for them, including Papciowie, Papcio, Papciowa, Tosia, To, Maciej, Karolak, and Papcie. As Mia translated the letters for me, and explained their content, she was able to detect when Paulina was indicating this couple. The other main source of shelter for Paulina was her friend at the Holy Cross Catholic Church—referred to as "Mabi"—and the Church itself—called "Kato."*

Finally, Paulina passed on information about her husband, son, and daughter-in-law who are generally referred to by the one word "Piotr" or "Piotrus" when she is not using the term "the kids" or "the boys." In this letter Paulina first reveals her protectors, stating, "I am again with Papciowie [meaning Karol and Teodozja Maciejewski]. I will spend the holidays with them—maybe not too long after I will go to the countryside." The holidays probably refer to Easter. Paulina many times mentions the countryside, indicating that she travels back and forth between Warsaw and the surrounding area, or even further into the country. It is not clear if the term she used for "country" was a stand-in for a place in the city, or she actually did go to the rural areas. Paulina ends the letter explaining that she is writing until the

stroke of midnight and mildly rebuking herself for using up the light—presumably the expense of the electricity—which would lead us to believe that she is safe and reasonably comfortable. She closes with her usual commentary on missing Mia very much and sending her warmth and affection. "Kisses, again sending you holiday wishes."[15]

Very often Paulina writes of how much she misses Mia, but also has a kind of whimsical flight of introspection. This may come about because of the insecurity of her situation and daily reflections on what we tend to tritely label, "the meaning of life."

My beloved, as I am writing I am living through and contemplating the complicated human nature. One is certain, without any doubt, that I love you above any human understanding, I could not love more—saying—my life has sense and some essence as long as you are alive, is not just talking of a sentimental daughter. The way it looks, my beloved friend, and always looked this way, and you must have known about it. I want to hold you and kiss you so much, you have always said I was sentimental, but if you love someone so dearly, you want to always hug and kiss them.[16]

News from the Soviet Work Camp

Wanda wrote from the camp to Paulina on August 6, 1940 but apparently the letter did not arrive for at least a month, because Paulina was still writing to Ewa in late August lamenting the lack of information from the trio in the Soviet Union. Not only was regular mail delivery slow, but letters passed through various hands. For example, Wanda's letter dated August 6 was sent to Jurek in Lwów, by way of a courier referred to as "engineer K." Jurek copied the letter, as he tells Mia, and sent the original on to Paulina. He appended a paragraph to the end of the letter stating adamantly that the reply should be addressed to Paulina in care of Mrs. Zofia Diamond, not to him directly since his residence in the house cannot be known to the authorities. Jurek's passport does not allow him to reside less than 100 kilometers from the border.[17]

"August 6, 1940

Dear Mia!

I do not know if you received my first letter, which I sent to 'Milton' hotel. After receiving the new address I am writing a letter right away to the new one. Letter was delivered to the hands of engineer K, from whom I picked it up and am sending it to Warsaw. [signed] Jurek"

Wanda's letter, enclosed with Jurek's, is Paulina's first news from Zygmunt, Wanda, and Tadeusz, and provides the first information on their lives and whereabouts since leaving Poland.

My Dear! [to Paulina]

Last evening we arrived at our place of destination. Seventeen days of travel on a train and one day on a ship. We live by the river, by some tributary of Dvina [River] in a village called Fidiakow, Archangelsk state, Barrack no 3. We have a room size six by six meters, more or less, together with another Polish family from Kulin, all together eight people, two wooden beds on which we sleep three people each, mattresses are coming very handy (from engineer K). We eat at the cafeteria. We have a kitchen in our room, but do not have anything to cook. We get boiled water in the morning and evening for free. Breakfast: bread and tea, dinner: soup, fish prepared in different ways, goulash and sausage (terrible), tea with candy—you can choose individual servings or get everything at once, if you have money. On average dinner costs three rubles. Bread is every day. Overall living conditions (not talking about bed bugs and other insects, they will get used to us) and food are okay.

Now, the work. We were given two days to rest—the day after tomorrow we will start working, we will be assigned appropriately. Work is usually on the river and by the river, and consists of floating timber. We met other Polish people here from Wołyń [a city in southeastern Poland on the border with the USSR] who were brought here in the winter and they enlighten us about how things will be. Women [work] partly in the kitchen and partly weaving wicker for tying rafts. There is nothing else to do, only things in connection to cutting trees, making bricks out of manure or tending grazing animals. The climate overall is not so bad. In the summer fairly hot. In the winter not too cold, they tell us. We have a store, post comes and goes every day by ship. We cannot send telegraphs or money. Mail and packages get here. There will be medical help and the hospital is 30 km away.

Close to our settlement is a *kolkhoz* [Soviet collective farm] in which we are not allowed to work. We are not really watched, but we cannot go anywhere by ourselves by ship or walk away too far on foot. There are about 300 of us, refugees that got brought here (not one person we know), Poles from Wołyńabout 120 people—the rest, maybe another 300 people, are locals. We are curious what our work here will look like. For now we are more or less settled in.

We bathe in the river; drinking-water from the river is boiled, raw water from a well, unfortunately a little far. We are not hungry. People we live with are friendly and living together is pleasant. We are just very, very sad, but we believe, I am convinced of it, we will see our relatives again. We get the newspaper every day. We are not separated from the world, which is very important. I think I told you everything.

Wanda

The rest of the letter is from Jurek also intended for Paulina. He must have been in touch with Tadeusz, presumably by mail. This is the first indication that Tadeusz is working as a physician, at least part of the time. Jurek writes:

Tadzio is complaining that, despite having many clients, he cannot do much about the lack of medications. Mr. Zygmunt is missing everyone very much and is very sad. I think that would be all. I will write the address in the end. First package we will send in a few days. Appropriate funds were left in Lwów, which will last for a long time. We can send eight kg packages once every fourteen days. That means once every two weeks to Wanda and separately to Mr. Zygmunt and Tadzio. Packages take a long time, four to eight weeks. Overall I think that your family is doing pretty well.

When it comes to my modest persona, as a refugee (*biezeniec*) so a person highly undesirable. *[Mia explained, Jurek uses the term biezeniec, which the NKVD used to describe Polish refugees, specifically Jews who found themselves in the Soviet-occupied lands.]* I received a passport with an eleventh paragraph, which prohibits me from being [within] 100 km from borders and some cities. For this reason I am leaving Lwów in the next few days and going somewhere not too far so I can come here often. My address is staying the same, with Mrs. Zofia D. (Reply to Miss Z.D., not to me). Michal Ch. went yesterday to [city is undecipherable] and he will be working there. More than likely I will go to him soon. As to matters of overall nature, I have a feeling I will be able to see Miss Pola [Paulina] soon. Overall everything looks pretty bad and we don't know what is going to come out of it all. Next news from your family I will send to you as well, I am just asking you to notify me about address changes in a timely manner. I should be ending with that.

Jerzy[18]

According to Mia, "Jurek was lucky. He was not deported. They gave him some job in the Soviet Union, and then after the war he got out. I

wish my father and brother had done that." *He moved to Canada after the war and contacted her many years later, after which they exchanged a few letters.*

From June through November 1940, Paulina corresponded with Mia through Ewa in Milan, using a series of pseudonyms. The postcards usually do not have a return address, making it hard to know if Paulina had been forced to leave her apartment, although it is possible that she was still there but not using the address. On August 27 Paulina wrote Ewa that she had heard from "Maria" (meaning Mia) in Italy and that Jan, Regina, and Ryszard are in Rome. Paulina in this postcard told Ewa that she had received news from "the boys" but she asks Ewa not to say anything to Mia yet, since Paulina is worried about their survival in the Soviet Union.[19]

As we know, Jurek sent Wanda's letter to Mia as well. On the same day, Paulina, using the pseudonym "Celina Kraniak," wrote again to Ewa informing her that she has "signed up to leave" but that it might take a long time before she is able to go. Paulina/Celina does not say where she plans to go, but we can only assume that whatever her intentions, she did not leave the city, or at least go very far. The card concludes with an entreaty to "Marysia," a variation on Maria, "not to be worried about mom." Signing off in this way indicates that Paulina intended the message for Mia, not Ewa, and the latter did pass it along. Paulina wrote again on September 14 a very short note on a postcard obliquely ruminating on the importance of family and how much she understands that one should show love to the people closest to you.

These postcards, a maze of mail between Italy, Poland, and the USSR, taken at face value are the sentimental longings of family members separated by war. Paulina speaks of the situations facing "the little one" (Mia), "the boys," or "the kids" (Zygmunt, Tadeusz, and Wanda). By the end of the correspondence that spans the years 1940–1944, Paulina will have used at least twelve different pseudonyms to refer to herself, in the third person, or for her signature: Pa, Pau, Paola, Linka, Linek, Anna Piotrowska, Lenka, Ola, Pulchniakowa, Ewelina Anders, Celina Kraniak, Hedwig Hopler, Polo, Robert's mother. Most times she signs as "Piotrowska" or simply "P."

I asked Mia if she thought Paulina knew what was happening to Jews in the ghetto or after they were deported? "Sometimes, but you know it's painful, but she wrote enough to let me know what was happening. But she couldn't tell me numbers or details, you know, when thousands of people

are killed, it's not 'details.'" But she could not give me exact information, but I'm sure she knew what was happening"

"The sadness here is without color"

Wanda wrote Paulina on August 19, 1940 bemoaning their situation in the Soviet work camp. The letter is dated August but there is no indication when it arrived. In this particular letter, Wanda wonders if they made the wrong decision in leaving Lwów. She surmises, "if a mistake has occurred the guilt is divided into three." Wanda is explaining that the three of them chose to leave Mrs. Diamond and Mucha [Muszka] in Lwów, and they all bear responsibility for the decision. Since it's impossible for her to change their circumstances, Wanda resigns herself to getting through it in this description of their work and living arrangements. I include Mia's comments to me on this letter in italics.

They [Zygmunt and Tadeusz] went by ship, usually they return in the evening but this time, they're returning in a few days. They were well-equipped for this event. … I am sad without them. Work is eight hours, and it absorbs him [Zygmunt] a lot but keeps him busy and helps him forget. The return home and lack of loved ones puts him in a very melancholy mood.

Wu [*Wanda uses this name for herself—Mia*] makes fifty-six rubles daily. We don't know what the kids [Zygmunt and Tadeusz] will make, probably more. It's enough to get us by. We don't have the best living arrangement. The barracks are made of wooden planks and have leaky roofs. We have two beds for the three of us, belongings in a backpack and suitcase, and people vary. In the winter, we're supposed to get a different living arrangement. Maybe we'll leave this place. …. The boys' job is not dangerous, they work near but not on the water. Work consists of pushing wood to the river on a wooden track. It's hard work but there's no other. … On Sunday, we air out the bedding. We do an inspection for insects, we write [letters], we sew, we repair, we mend, we clean, we hit our cloth to rid it of dirt, we contemplate our loved ones and pine for them, we debate. By the end of the day, we are far more tired than during the rest of the week.

The sadness here is without color. Be healthy, hold on, and I will also hold on. You'll see, we'll be hugging before you can imagine.

Twoja Wa [Your Wanda].

About five months after arriving in Italy, Mia received news of her family's status in the Soviet Union in a letter from Paulina dated September 16, 1940, first sent to Ewaas "Dr. Maria Wenk, Piazza Di Napoli 36, Milano, Italia." The letter is sent from "Warszawa Nowogrodzka 17" indicating that Paulina is still living in the family apartment. Mia translated and annotated this letter.

My dear ones, I want immediately to share with you the latest news from the boys. *[That means my father and brother—Mia.]* I will write a long letter later but for now the boys are okay. Zygmunt and Tad are working floating logs to the river. They eat on the ship and work from 7 am till 8 pm. The work site is about 15 km from the place where they live to where they return after work. Wanda works from 4 am until noon. I don't know exactly what she does.

Considering that the kid was a student maybe, maybe it would be possible to arrange something from there. … But who knows … *[Paulina seems to be suggesting that because Tadeusz was a medical student, he might be able to get work in the camp as a physician—Mia]*. Fortunately, physically they don't feel too bad—they miss the family terribly, but unfortunately there is nothing that can help that. I am writing to you sending my best to Ewa, because I don't know whether you have changed your address as you were hoping. There is nothing new where I am concerned. Władzio *[my mother's father—Mia]* is doing okay so far. I am praying for you and the boys and your well-being. I am sending you all my love and best wishes.[20]

Although it took a while for the news from the Soviet work camp to reach Paulina, and then for her to write to Mia, via Milan, there was a steady stream of mail. Wanda was the primary letter writer, but at times all three (Zygmunt, Tadzio in addition to Wanda) would include messages in the same envelope, as they did on Sunday, September 17.

Again it is Sunday. A chance to breathe. One can again speak with their beloved which they indescribably miss all day, every day, all night, and every moment. All week, it's difficult to find a free moment to write you a couple words. After work there are so many chores to do, like airing out the sheets, doing laundry, washing, sewing, etc. All that is left is Sunday afternoon for talking to you and others. We are healthy, physically we feel completely fine and it's still quite warm, maybe this is what's improving our moods. In spite of the hard work, there is no hunger. We miss fats and sweets.

Zygmunt then includes his message, beginning on the same piece of paper so as not to waste any of it.

My darling, you are probably wondering why I write you so little. From the moment of our departure [June 30] after the eighteen hour journey, we found ourselves the way that Wu described us here. We didn't know what was to be expected of us. Pertaining to our living conditions, Wu explained everything in the last letter. We are healthy, we are physically laboring very intensively: "He who does not work, does not eat." That's the motto.

We sit here and wait for salvation. Which road? We don't know. I can't begin to explain the sorrowful longing for you, mother, and the house, that I experience. …Felku [Feliks Gradstein] it is you I ask for the care of my loved ones. You are the only one left of our small family. Remember this, dear. How's Lilka? [Feliks's daughter] Any news from her? I kiss you all strongly. Zyg

Mia said that her mother, and Feliks, were both very moved by Zygmunt's request to watch out for Paulina and the other "loved ones" who remained in Warsaw. According to Paulina, Feliks took this responsibility very seriously, for which they were all extremely grateful. Paulina told Mia after the war that she credited Feliks and his resourcefulness with saving her life.

On October 20, 1940, the anniversary of his marriage to Paulina on October 21, 1915, Zygmunt wrote his wife a particularly loving and sentimental letter. He did not write often, but this particular letter captures well Zygmunt's feelings of isolation.

My dear, beloved Linka [Zygmunt's pet name for Paulina],

It is a sad day for me today, actually the eve of our silver anniversary. It is Sunday, so I am using the occasion to scribble a few words to you. In September we received your card and letter with the postscript from Nik [Szenwald—Wanda's father]. We are healthy; nothing new in our life happened since the last news. From Mia we received a card promising she would send a package with clothes, which we did not receive yet. I am very sad without you my dear, beloved. I understand how much I would like to be together with you. Maybe good fate will allow me to reconnect with you one day. This hope keeps me alive. Write me often, do not leave me without news about you. My beloved, I am sending hugs to you and mom. My beloved, every sign from you is like a great holiday for me. The last letter, from September 21, made us very happy after the last news we did not get more from Nik. We are maintaining, supporting one another. I can no longer repeat the words that could easily become clichés, but we want to [survive] and must persevere. Thank you for uncle's address. I am ending and kissing you.

Fig. 5.1 Zygmunt and Tadeusz Truskier in Warsaw before the War. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Wanda appended a postscript to this quite sentimental letter sent between husband and wife, but the conditions did not allow for privacy since paper and stamps were at a premium. "My beloved, I received father's letter from September 24 with your postscript. Letters are like poetry—I am still enchanted and filled with new strength. You are both so amazingly perfect. Watch out for each other, be healthy."

Wanda seems to be addressing Paulina and her own father, Nik Szenwald, who also remained in Warsaw. In addition, Zygmunt thanks Paulina for sending "uncle's address," but it is not clear to whom that refers. In our conversation, Mia now turns to another stack of letters and eagerly begins to tell me about the news from the camp in late December 1940, offering her comments and insights on the letters as she is reading them to me. Again, I have included her commentary in italics.

[*Wanda writes in this letter that they have been moved to another camp—Mia.*]

We are living in the forest, and it's like a little colony. There are some wooden barracks with 140 people, mostly from Wołczyn, who were transported in February 1940 and some local people and there is dining space and medical facilities. The work consists of cutting logs and other activities connected to that. For communication there is a little train that serves to transport the cut wood. And there is a very large one for the passengers.

Zygmunt works willingly. He is doing fine." *[This is their second camp, so my father was working as a doctor—Mia.]*

He is tremendously respected by our people, as by the local people (Russians), easily content with other doctors. He should be a professor. Tadzio works in the woods. He cleans the space after they cut the logs. He cleans the twigs and branches that are then burned in the fire. I am very worried because of his very bad shoes. In the forest he gets stuck in the snow and his feet get all wet and this is very unpleasant and doesn't have good effects. Recently, when he was home, he was complaining of back pain. He has no fever, I think that maybe it is something temporary and in a few days it will be better. He was sent to a doctor. He got some letters [permissions] from the doctor that he can have lighter work because of not feeling well. Also, he doesn't have to walk to the forest, which is 3 km each way, and he will get some work that is closer.

We have our own place next to the father's cabinet *[The doctor's place, a clinic of sorts, I think—Mia.*). We have two beds, a few shelves, a place to hang your clothes, that means a few nails in the wall, a pail, and then a basin we borrowed from somewhere, and an oil lamp. Of course, there is a kitchen and you have to keep the fire going all the time because it is 39 degrees below (Celsius). *[That is unbelievable!—Mia)* The room is the size of your living room, you know in Warsaw. Before bed every night we have to inspect for lice and fleas in the bedding and clothing. People treat us very kindly and respect us. *[I guess they are living with some local people—Mia.]* Winter is terribly difficult for people who are not used to it. But because there is no wind and there is the forest, it is easier to deal with it. We are sitting in a warm room. Tadzio when he was working never complained about the cold. We really expected much worse.

Our situation generally speaking is now better than the first camp, from the climate point of view, as well as the living arrangements. As for food, it is a little better food. The store is better equipped and has more things and luckily there are not those terrible lines that you have to wait in *[like*

at the first camp—Mia.] because people used to fight in those lines for who would get the food first. People are calm and friendly, maybe less educated and intelligent, but better people. A person doesn't have that unpleasant feeling that you won't make it in time, or if you make it, there is no more food.

[In the other camp, you know we heard that you got one container for your food. If you lost your container, you had no food. If someone would steal it, there was no food.—Mia.]

Recently, they even gave us some sugar, some candy, and some soap. I was so terribly happy with the soap. And then they gave us women's stockings and some fabric and some old cigarettes, so that we can at least smoke something fit for human consumption, not like before where they made some cigarettes out of some weeds rolled in some newspapers. We are smoking, all three of us, and a lot. We are getting the newspaper and all in all, it is not as bad as it was. Once in a while the father [Zygmunt] gets some presents from the patients, something with fat. We eat it, which keeps us going, and you know keeps up our spirits as well as our bodies. Otherwise, we are making it. We are very hardy. I think that as long as there is bread, we have no right to complain. In this case we have more than bread.

So my dearest, I assure you that I am not talking about the emotional side of things, which is very hard. I think that even from my writing, you get an idea of what our life is about.

Other accounts of life in the work camps depict much harsher conditions, hinting that Wanda either knew that the letters were censored and she was intent on avoiding trouble, or she may have taken care not to worry Paulina. Since the latter's situation was so precarious, knowing the horrendous conditions of the work camps would have only made it worse. Years later, after moving to California, Mia became friends with Robert (Bob) Mindelzun who had compiled a unique and valuable picture of life in the camps drawn from interviews with his own mother and father. He and Mia spent several afternoons sitting at the long Danish modern table in Mia's dining room, sharing their accounts—their respective Storyworlds—based on what they had learned from their parents.

Felling Trees, Enduring Cold, Fighting Lice, Surviving Boredom

Born in 1939, Mindelzun was deported along with his parents, Leon (1910–1999) and Halina (1911–2004), in June 1940. The Mindelzuns and one-year-old Robert were loaded onto a train in the eastern Polish city of Białystok destined for Komi, over 1500 miles deep in the Soviet Union from the point of embarkation. In defiance of the odds, Bob survived his first years in the harsh conditions of the camps and immigrated to California with his parents after the war. His mother, Halina, remembered being packed into a train with about 2000 people, subsequently being loaded onto a boat for a two-day ride up the Vychegda River to Komi, a distant republic twice the size of Poland, and eventually to Kierzek. "Throughout our time in the prison camps, he would also be the only child."[21] *To see Dr. Mindelzun today, retired from Stanford University Medical School, yet a robust man of well over six feet in height, his survival against such odds is conceivable.*

The Mindelzun family was incarcerated along with 357 others in a camp with four barracks, a single kitchen, a bathhouse and a meeting room they all shared. The tractor driver who deposited them at the camp uttered a phrase that would be forever seared in Halina's mind: "Here is your new home, where you will live, where you will work and where you will die." Just as in the camp where Zygmunt, Wanda, and Tadeusz were assigned, the prisoners' work consisted of felling trees, stripping them of bark, and floating them down the river on huge rafts. The detainees lived in a world of constant hunger, long grueling hours of work, frigid cold weather in the winter, and suffocating heat in the summer. The Arctic cold winter with little wildlife contrasted with the explosion of pests in the summer. Mosquitoes were, in Bob's father's words, "public enemy number one." His father told him that the joke among the prisoners was that Napoleon was not defeated by the Russian winter, but by the mosquitoes. Similar to what Wanda reported, lice and bedbugs permeated the bedding and their clothes. Years later, Halina remembered her most important family possession: a lice comb. "I kept it on a string around my neck so that nobody would steal it. The comb remained in our possession during the entire war, the repatriation, our life in France and our trip to America."[22]

Fighting the elements was a daily drudgery, whether mud and mosquitoes in warmer weather, or endless darkness, frozen terrain, and mountains of snow in the long, frigid winter. Leon Mindelzun describes horrendous conditions, saying: "the worst jobs involved the cutting of trees in the snow. Not only

was it more difficult to get to a fresh stand of trees through the snow, but the hard labor made you sweat and when you stopped, the water would freeze on your back."[23] *Zygmunt and Tadeusz Tlusty reported spending many days in all types of weather driving the logs down the river, then turning around and walking back to begin again with a new load. The work was hard, grueling, monotonous with no end in sight, in bad weather or good. While Tadzio and Zygmunt do not write the same graphic descriptions, there is no reason to assume they did not endure them. Moreover, Wanda wrote most of the letters and the working conditions filtered through her.*

Operation Barbarossa: Germany Invades the Soviet Union, 1941

Life for all the internees of the work camps changed dramatically on June 22, 1941 when the German army invaded the Soviet Union. A little over a month later, the London-based Polish Government-in-Exile, under the leadership of General Sikorski, signed an agreement with the Soviet Union that granted clemency to all Polish citizens held in Soviet territory. The terms of the July 30 Sikorski-Mayski Pact profoundly affected Zygmunt, Tadeusz, and Wanda. First, the Soviet Union agreed to equip and help to train a Polish army to fight the Germans, under the command of General Władysław Anders. Secondly, the USSR released all Polish citizens held in Soviet prisons accused of a crime against the Soviet state (such was the situation of General Anders) or in work camps, as were the vast majority of civilian Poles. With Operation Barbarossa, the code name for the invasion, the German forces planned to overrun the lands to the east with the same ease they had shown in their rapid defeat of Western Europe.

Mia explained the limited options facing her husband, son, and daughter-in-law, along with thousands of others in the work camps, once the German invasion began.

The question was what to do with these prisoners, these people in the labor camps? Originally the Soviet Union wanted to incorporate them into the Soviet army, but these people who had spent all this time in a labor camp were not very good material. Many of them were in terrible shape, or at least not in a condition to go into the army. Well some people did go. Some people accepted that. I know that Wanda's sister did that and she eventually ended up with the Red Cross working with the Soviet army.

Anyway, the Polish government in London negotiated with the Soviet Union and they agreed to release those prisoners and evacuate them from the Soviet Union so that they could take them to the very southern part of the country and then eventually they were going to join the British army. You know all these countries that are now Iran, Iraq, and Syria were then parts of the British formal or informal empire, so people there were going to be trained in the deserts to join the British army. After two years in the labor camps, the Poles and others were evacuated and took this really long trip. The train trip took some forty days, across the Soviet Union from the North where they were in the camp all the way down to almost near the Chinese border. My father had to get off the train because he got sick in Kazakhstan. And then my brother stayed there for a long time, waiting to be evacuated.

The Sikorski-Mayski Pact ensured the safe-passage of the Poles to what was then Persia, and allowed Polish representatives from the London-based government to gather the recollections of the evacuees. Thus, in addition to the letters from the Tłusty family, and the descriptions from Bob Mindelzun's parents cited above, we also learn of camp conditions from this trove of over 20,000 written testimonies. Stanisław Kot, a historian by training who in 1941 was appointed Polish Ambassador to the Soviet Union, initiated and directed this effort. Scholars have only been able to see these accounts since the end of the Soviet era in the 1990s and many of them have yet to be analyzed. Katherine Jolluck states that "the authors represent a cross section of Polish society in terms of class, education, occupation, and place of origin. While some documents are comprehensive and eloquent, others are barely literate, written almost as a stream of consciousness, sometimes rendered phonetically. Children too young to write drew pictures."[24]

The picture the testimonies paint of life in the work camps, as with those from Leon Mindelzun, is considerably grimmer than the one in the Tłusty letters. Indeed, Wanda's letters were filled with rather impartial descriptions of their living and working situations, generally claiming that the camps were hardly comfortable, but not life-threatening. Since the Polish government collected information from its citizens when they were far from the oversight of the NKVD, their description does not gloss over the harsh conditions. According to their accounts, "the living conditions of the exiles were abominable. Securing the most basic physical necessities became nightmarish struggles. Prisoners worked long hours mainly felling trees and floating them down the river. With little access to medical care, many of them succumbed to exhaustion, starvation and disease."[25]

Why did the Polish Government-in-Exile go to such extraordinary lengths to collect as many as 20,000 records in 1941, while the war was raging? According to Jolluck, Poland had two reasons. In the first place, it wanted a record of how many Poles were in the camps and the living conditions in order to make a claim for reparations and to ensure the restoration of any Polish land and property when the war ended. Secondly, Ambassador Kot was hoping to find out what happened to 15,000 Polish military officers who went missing in the first year of the war. The bodies were eventually found in the Katyn Forest, where the Soviets had buried them, but at the time Kot took the testimonies no one claimed to know what happened to them.

There is no record of Zygmunt, Wanda, and Tadeusz providing testimony to Ambassador Kot. All that Mia knew was that they were released from the camp and were on their way to Persia when Zygmunt contracted typhus while he was attending to patients either on the train or in one of the camps along the way. Despite the efforts of a Romanian physician, also a refugee, to save Zygmunt's life, he died in 1942. Mia's forty-seven-year-old father was buried in Kazakhstan. It is not clear how long Tadzio and Wanda stayed in Kazakhstan, but Mia was sure it was several months. Tadzio worked as a physician while they were there.

They needed doctors so badly they were happy to have him. And you know he traveled hundreds of miles in Kazakhstan to treat all these people. There were lots of Polish families who were refugees there and he just traveled all over. And that's where he did some drawings of the huts that the local people lived in.

At that time Tadeusz got very sick with malaria and typhoid fever and nearly died. Wanda saved his life. She was stealing medicines for him and then when his head cleared he would tell her what to do. He always said that she saved his life. When he recovered, he and Wanda were taken into the British army. Since Tadeusz was close to finishing his medical training, the British commanders sent him to a French university in Beirut, Lebanon to finish his studies. Once he had his degree, he joined with the Polish army under General Anders and served throughout the war in field hospitals.

As for Wanda, she and Tadeusz did not stay together. Why? I don't know. But then Wanda, you know, she gave everything that she had, and then you know, sometimes people don't have more to give. But she met a

Polish soldier in the British army and she married him and they went back to Warsaw. Years later Kazimiera Hanna Abramowicz, Tadeusz's second wife, complained to me: "You know, Tadeusz kept all of Wanda's letters!" So I told her that was not unusual because my brother kept everything! It was true! After the war when Wanda and her new husband moved back to Warsaw, Tadeusz used to send them some medicines and other things. Yes, Wanda was a great person and she adored my mother. She really loved my mother.

For Mia the Second World War in Poland and the Soviet Union was constructed from the experiences and the recollections of her own family: the Tłustys. Although life in wartime Italy with her Truskier husband, his cousin, and mother was the Storyworld she relayed to me, the seminal feature of the war was Poland. When trying to remember what happened to one or another relative or friend she would shake her head and say, "I don't know, they went to the ghetto I suppose." All lives are scattered with unknowns, inconclusive adventures, or things we simply never figured out; however, the refugee leaves behind a void that can only be filled with the incomplete and sometimes scattered memories of others.

Mia's Storyworld of life during World War II was constructed from the interaction between her own and her family's experiences, in Italy. The other components were drawn from what she had been told, both in letters and in accounts after the war, from the family in Poland and the Soviet Union. Since the latter was entirely communicated to her by various indirect, circuitous, and intermittent means, the exact account remains elusive. For example, for some reason Wanda's letters do not convey the harshness of life in the camps that we get from Mindelzun's and the testimonies from the Polish survivors that Ambassador Kot gathered. No matter Mia learned what happened during the war through letters or from what her family and friends told her after the war, these disparate stories come together to form the arc of her memory.

Notes

1. Timothy Snyder puts the number higher, for those who survived the Soviet camps/the Gulag, but the human loss from starvation, famine, and disease was astonishing all over the Eastern areas, *Bloodlands*, 146–57.
2. Gunnar Paulsson, 1.
3. Gunnar Paulsson, 3. See also Ariel Joseph Kochavi, "Britain and the Jewish Exodus from Poland Following the Second World War," in *Jewish Life in*

Nazi-Occupied Warsaw, Antony Polonsky, ed. (Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1992), 162. See also Deborah E. Lipstadt, "Simon Wiesenthal and the Ethics of History," *Jewish Review of Books* (Winter 2011).

4. Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
5. Christopher R. Browning, correspondence with author (May 5, 2018) and his summary in *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland*, C. Browning, Richard S. Hollander, and Nechama Tec, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45–46.
6. Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 5.
7. Philippe Sands describes the many iterations of the city Mia refers to as Lwów. It changed hands many times, from being a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of independent Poland, of Soviet-occupied Ukraine. Its name changed from Lemberg, to L'viv to Lvov to Lwów and back to L'viv depending on the nationality of the occupants (Kyiv/Kieve is the current capital; Lviv is the largest city in Western Ukraine), *East West Street: On the Crimes of "Genocide" and "Crimes Against Humanity"* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), xi.
8. Mia clarified her family's relationship with Mrs. Diamond: "This was the woman living in Lwów with whose family my father, brother, and sister-in-law stayed before being deported. She was an old family friend."
9. Jurek implies that the mail service between the USSR and all parts of Poland functioned better than mail from those areas to Italy, despite the fact that by July 5, 1940, Italy had entered the war allied with Germany. Michat is referring to Mia's marriage to Jan Truskier on January 29.
10. Stefan Waydenfeld describes this situation exactly. He and his family only realized they were heading east when the sun rose in the morning. *The Ice Road: An Epic Journey from the Stalinist Labor Camps to Freedom* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 1999), 372.
11. Katherine Jolluck, "'You Can't Even Call Them Women': Poles and 'Others' in Soviet Exile during the Second World War," *Contemporary European History* 10:3 (2001), 464–65.
12. Mia and Paulina both refer to Ewa Wenk as their cousin, apparently indicating that Ewa is "a cousin," not Mia's own first cousin as the term usually implies.
13. Letter dated April 11, 1940.
14. Gunnar Paulsson, 99.
15. Letter dated April 11, 1940.
16. Letter dated April 11, 1940.

17. Jurek refers to a man who was working as an engineer in Lwów before the war and who served as an intermediary between the camp and Jurek in the first month of their relocation. The man is referred to as "engineer K" in order to keep his identity hidden. Mia never knew his name.
18. Jurek assumes there will be mail service and ends with "Ps. I think you can write to them directly." He then gives the "exact address" in the Russian script.
19. In this postcard to Dr. EwaWenk, August 27, 1940, Paulina refers to the news she received from Wanda in the letter dated August 6.
20. Postcard from Paulina Tłusty to EwaWenk (June–July 1940).
21. Quotes are drawn from Robert Mindelzun's memoir and conversations with the author. The book, *The Marrow of Memory* (Robert Mindelzun, 2012), is available online at amazon.com and from the author, 97–115.
22. Robert Mindelzun, 115.
23. Robert Mindelzun, 117.
24. Katherine Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*, p. 9. Jolluck also notes that in addition to the testimonies from Polish civilians, the Polish Army of the East, formed in the USSR in 1941, collected information on the conditions of the Soviet camps from the released detainees and passed it on to the Polish Embassy.
25. Katherine Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*, xvi.

CHAPTER 6

Poland: In the Warsaw Ghetto and on the Aryan Side, 1939–1945

Mia's recollections of what she had learned of life in Poland during and after World War II had enormous gaps. She had fled bringing very little with her, she never returned, and she had almost no news of what had happened to so many friends, relatives, and acquaintances. The war and its aftermath in Warsaw was like a building that people were moving in and out of, but the bricks and mortar, the boards and windows, were all in shambles. Mia had letters, although censored, that let her know what had happened with the Tlusty family, and she had conversations with her mother after the war, but little more. Some of the lost building blocks of life during the war in Warsaw came to her many decades later.

In 1999, Mia came into contact with a family of Jan's relatives who had survived the war in several locales, including in the Warsaw Ghetto, in more than one concentration camp, in Soviet work camps, and even as conscripts in the Red Army. This family of Truskiers, who Jan seems to have known only vaguely, if at all, from his youth in Poland, immigrated to New York State after the war. Although only related to Mia by marriage, and unbeknownst to her during the war itself, this part of the Truskier family fills in essential information on life in Warsaw during the war. Thus, Mia's wartime Storyworld was constructed decades after, and a half world away from, her own experience of World War II. In my early interviews with Mia beginning in 2011, she told me of this branch of Jan's family who, ironically, live only a few miles from me in Albany, New York.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_6

Meeting the Albany, NY Truskier Families

Mia learned of Gabriela (Truskier) Sherer and subsequently, of Abraham Lacheta, through a serendipitous encounter with an eminent Polish puppeteer, Henryk Pijanowski. In early 1999, Pijanowski was performing in the "The Puppetmaster of Lódz," a renowned Polish play, at the Marin Theater north of San Francisco.[1] *As a member of the San Francisco Bay Area Puppeteers Guild, Mia was an invited guest to both the performance and reception following it. Pijanowski caught the name "Truskier" on Mia's nametag and remarked that he had gone to elementary and high school in Warsaw with a "Gabriela Truskier." As the surname is not common, he wondered if Mia was related. She was, and through Pijanowski and an exchange of phone calls between Mia and Gabriela (with whom the puppeteer had been in contact when he passed through New York), the previously remote wings of the Truskier family established an ongoing relationship.*

Following the war, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) had arranged sponsors for several of Jan's cousins to settle in Albany, New York. As it turned out a second generation of the Albany family had relocated to Walnut Creek, California on the other side of the tunnel from Berkeley and Oakland. On one of her trips to see her son's family, Gabriela and others from the dispersed Truskier family got together in Mia's Berkeley apartment. While the number of surviving relatives from Poland had dwindled, several generations of Truskiers, now bearing the names Sherer and Lacheta, with more to come in a few years, filled the ample downstairs of the three-story house Mia shared with her son's family. Over the years before her death in 2014, Mia saw Gabriela often when the latter visited the Bay Area. Similar to my many interviews with Mia, Gabriela, Abe and I sat around the table in Gabriela's comfortable dining room at her house in Albany. Over several meetings, they filled in the pieces of the Truskier family's experiences of the war, mainly from what their parents had shared with them over the years.

Gabriela Truskier Sherer

Born in 1936 in Warsaw to Anatol and Aniela (Rojek) Truskier, Gabriela was just a baby when the war broke out. She recounted her story to me at her house in Albany, NY.

Since I was very young, only about four years old when the war began, much of what I know came from my parents later. I know, or they told me, that for a time when Warsaw was being constantly bombarded, we stayed

mostly in the cellars of the building. I know that when the bombs were falling around that my crib was always covered with debris from the ceiling. My father, Anatol Truskier, left on the appeal of Warsaw's city president to join the army. He was never really in the army, and so not in the [army] reserves, but the government's appeal was to all able-bodied men who could carry arms. The Germans were moving from the west so they [the conscripts] were supposed to go east to try to join the Polish army, but the Polish army was already disintegrated and there was nothing to join. My father was supposed to join up with these two cousins, but there were thousands and thousands of men, and so they never found each other, at least for quite a while.

This following exchange between Gabriela and her cousin, Abraham Lacheta (b. 1948), on Anatol's decisions following the call up to fight the German invaders, brought up the issue of Polish patriotism. In their retelling, Abe and Gabriela slightly disagreed, mainly in emphasis, on why Anatol joined the Polish army. Abe was quite insistent that Anatol's motives were patriotic, similar to how Mia explained her own father's choice. In answer to my questions, Gabriela stated:

Gabriela: You ask why did [my father] join? I think because he and his two cousins planned to go together.

Abe: He joined because he considered himself a Polish patriot. That's what he told me.

Gabriela: Well yes, because they wanted to defend the city. They were supposed to join the army and come back and defend Warsaw. But he said that he joined up with his cousins.

What happened with my father is that he and these two cousins that left with him, they were not brothers, just cousins; it was three cousins. So there were three cousins and two of them had wives and sons. The wives and sons also went to Białystok to join their husbands and these two families stayed in Białystok. My mother and I and my two aunts, and my parents' very close friends who lived with us, and my paternal grandmother, were all requested to leave the apartment where we lived in Warsaw. This was because the Polish army requisitioned the building. I know this from my mother telling me about it when I was older. We lived in a very large institutional-type building on the right bank of the Vistula River, in Praga. In September 1939, we were evacuated by the Polish army to another part of Warsaw. The Polish army took the building but they provided a bit for

us, which was a horse and wagon for all our belongings. They were piled up on top of the wagon and my mother, the two aunts and the friends were walking. My grandmother was holding me as I was sitting on top of all the bundles. I am saying this because apparently at one point German planes, that were just strafing Warsaw all the time, flew over us and the horse got spooked. The horse pulled [on the harness] and my grandmother with me toppled down on the pavement. Now nothing happened to me because my grandmother protected me, but she broke her arm, or her shoulder.

I am mentioning this because I think that accident was somewhat significant regarding the next event, which was in Białystok. Eventually my mother when she found out where my father was, in the eastern part of Poland in the city of Białystok, she took me and decided to join him. Now by then Poland was already divided into a German part, which was west of the Bug River, and a Soviet part, which was east of it. The border ran through the river. And so for people to join their families, their husband or wife, or for children to join their families when they found themselves in the Soviet part, they had to clandestinely cross the river. The local men were providing these pretty large barges that could carry quite a few people to the other side quietly at night. My mother wanted to cross from the Białystok, on the German side of the river, to the Soviet side so that she could join my father. Again, my mother related this story to me about us trying to get across the river in one of the barges in November 1939. As soon as the barge began to move, I began screaming I guess maybe because I remembered the experience with the horse and my grandmother when we fell, and I guess I got scared that it was happening again. But the people on the barge got very angry and scared and they were ready to dump me into the water of the river to stop me from screaming. Well, anyway, fortunately it was not far back to the shore since I had started yelling right after the barge left the bank. So my mother persuaded this oarsman to take us back to the shore.

My mother told me that the boatmen brought us back and they just left my mother and me in the German part of the city, which was what we were trying to get away from. Well if I am not mistaken, she went to some *Wehrmacht* officer who was responsible; he was the German border guard who was in charge. My mother spoke German perfectly and she explained that she needed something to stop me from crying. She went to the pharmacy and bought for me a drug that was called Luminal, which was used as a sleeping pill in those days. So she got this for me, and with the help of

that [German] officer, and the help of the sleeping pill that put me to sleep, my mother was able the next night to transport herself and me to the eastern side of the river and to join my father. I think the German officer thought my mother was German.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, we had to leave Białystok. After the Polish government in Moscow was formed, they organized the Children's Home Orphanages for Polish children in Russia who had lost or been separated from parents. My parents joined one of those orphanages for children from Poland. And from there my father was recruited into the Polish army that was fighting with the Soviet army, called the First Polish Army.[2] My father served protecting rail transports going from Russia to Germany. These transports were already happening [last unclear]. He returned to Poland with the Red Army, and my mother and I came back with the Polish orphans from the Soviet Union."

The Lacheta Family

Gabriela's cousin, Abe Lacheta, son of her Aunt Eugenia, recounted for me what he had been told of his parents' separate wartime ordeals. (They met in a Displaced Persons Camp at the end of the war). Abe began by telling me of his father's youth in Poland and his experiences long before he met Abe's mother, Eugenia, and then what he knew of his parents' meeting after the war. His father, Herschel Lacheta, was not called on to join the Polish army because he did not live in Warsaw, and even if he had, Abe thought he was probably too old. Abraham Lacheta relayed what he knew of his family.

My father was from Kielce, which was a medium-sized city. After the Germans occupied the town, they eventually sought him out as the most renowned tailor and put him in charge of the tailors in the camp. He was at first a tailor in the Kielce ghetto, right in 1940 and 1941 when they first formed the ghetto, and then he was sent to the camps. He was in three camps over the course of the war. The first was Blizyn [a subcamp of Majdanek] and then after that he went to Auschwitz and after that to Dachau.

My father learned to be a tailor when he was young and was sent off to be an apprentice. He then spent a year in Argentina, where he went with a cousin and both of them were learning to be master tailors. My father's cousin stayed, and my father said his cousin really tried to persuade him to stay, but my father wanted to go back to Poland, so he arrived home before the war broke out. He married his first wife and she died in the

hospital of natural causes in the first year of the war. A nurse in the hospital saw what a devoted husband and father he was—he had two children by his first wife—and he and the nurse married. But his new wife and the children were taken to Treblinka and killed there. My father was moved to Auschwitz when the Kielce ghetto was liquidated and from there to Dachau, in Germany, near Munich. In Blyzin and Auschwitz he was a tailor, even the head of the tailors in the camp because he was very good, but in Dachau he was just trying to survive like everyone else. His camp was liberated by the Allies—the American army. He saw Eisenhower up close, but he couldn't even sit up by that time. It's like he was within a day away from death by starvation.

Abe's account ends here, to be taken up later. His father's life, from his work during the war as a tailor in more than one extermination camp and ending with liberation from Auschwitz, is a harrowing tale of survival against incredible odds. That Herschel grew up in Kielce, the site of a brutal pogrom after the war, adds to this survivor account, even though Abe's father was not on Kielce at the time of the postwar massacre of Jews.

Mid-1941 found the branches of the Truskier and Tłusty families in various degrees of peril: Mia, Jan, and Regina Truskier, along with Ryszard Landau, living under illegal pretenses in Rome; Zygmunt, Tadeusz, and Wanda Tłusty in Kazakhstan where Zygmunt would die; Gabriela and her parents, Anatol and Aniela, in the Soviet Union; and Herschel Lacheta, who would survive and marry into the Truskier family after the war, was in Auschwitz. Various relations of Mia and Jan remained in Warsaw, either like Paulina living on the Aryan side, or as would be the case with the rest of the Truskier and Tłusty families, herded into the ghetto. Mia's mother, Paulina, survived and was, as Mia often proclaimed, "The unsung hero of the resistance to the Nazis," but we know little of how she managed to do so. Not a particularly religious person, nonetheless, Paulina ended a letter in September 1941with the words: "I am praying for you and the boys and your well-being."[3] *Her prayers for the safety of her family were needed as much for herself as for them.*

Paulina and Feliks on the Aryan Side

Paulina Tłusty remained in Warsaw throughout the war, always hoping that her husband and son would return. As with others in her family, including Mia and Jan, Paulina never put on the identifying armband with a yellow Star of David that the German officials mandated on November 23, 1939. Mia gave the impression that from late November until the end of January, it was possible for a Jew who could pass as Aryan to avoid detection. Her family, including her mother, and several members of Jan's family, took advantage of the first few months of German occupation to establish themselves on the Aryan side. Mia left the city, but her mother and uncle remained and obtained Aryan identity papers before the ghetto was sealed. Gunnar Paulsson corroborates Mia's account. "It seemed at first surprisingly easy for a Jew to live on the Aryan side: it was not always even necessary to establish a false identity."[4] Vladka Meed was providing assistance on the Aryan side to Jews who had escaped the ghetto; it was rumored that "some thirty or forty thousand Jews were living [hiding] in the Warsaw area."[5] It took the Germans some time to issue documents to the Poles and in the meantime they relied on the existing ones. The process of separating Polish Jews from other Poles grew in relation to the Nazis' systematic oversight of all facets of society until such a point when everyone needed identity papers with official stamps and authenticating signatures. From April 30, 1940 when Jews were sealed into the Lódz ghetto, through late November when the ghetto in Warsaw was sealed, proceeding through towns and villages throughout the country and ending in August 1941 with the closing off of the ghettos in Białystok and Lwów after those cities fell to German control, the process of confining Jews in wait of deportation went on without interruption.

Prewar Polish identity papers relied on baptismal records, since most Poles were Catholic, with Jews making up the next largest religious/ethnic group. Once the Germans arrived, Jews seeking to pass as Aryans needed to procure a fake baptismal certificate, which at first was not too difficult. So many documents and possessions were destroyed in the bombing and assault on the city in the fall of 1939 that the German authorities were forced to issue temporary identity papers. A Jew could obtain a temporary document based on having perfect Polish speech, an acceptably Gentile appearance, and the sworn testimony of two witnesses as to their Christian status. Even as the Germans developed a more rigorous racial practice of demarcating Jews in the succeeding months and years, they still had to rely on the identifying documents of the Catholic Church since that was all most Poles had.[6] As with many other

secular Jews, the Tłusty and Truskier families needed the support of contacts in the Aryan world, in Paulina's case a friend who worked as the secretary of Holy Cross Catholic Church. Mia explained that "his friend who would make a new birth and baptism certificate, which you know in the Catholic Church goes together. … When you get born you are baptized, you get the birth certificate, which means you were baptized. This friend of my mother's would just give the baptismal/birth certificate to people under new names." This was the same friend who helped arrange Mia and Jan's "emergency conversion" which was discussed in Chap. 2.

Paulina and her friend worked at the church making the certificates. Mia was unsure how long this continued, but she believed they did it until the ghetto was liquidated. The fake birth certificates were suitable for getting identity papers to live on the Aryan side, but they were not used to obtain passports from the German authorities. According to Mia, once the war started, "it was impossible to get a passport any more. We were very lucky because when we left [in 1940] you could still leave and we had passports." In response to my question as to how they as Jews were able to get past the German authorities and leave, Mia merely responded, "They didn't know."[7]

A World of Informers, Bribery, and Corruption

The main danger in this act of defiance came from informers, who turned in people passing as Aryans, either to collect a material reward, to show great loyalty to the German invaders, or out of pure anti-Semitic conviction. Vladka Meed described the work of people who had "the nose," meaning the ability "to sniff out" someone's ethnicity. She explained that these Polish collaborators kept watch on Jews for the Gestapo, all the while collecting extortionate bribes and generally harassing those who they knew to be passing. Meed adds that "very few lower-class Jews managed to escape to the 'Aryan Side,'" They needed money to pay "professional smugglers" who would provide food, bribe collaborators, and secure housing.[8]

Jan's cousin, Eugenia Truskier, whose experience in the ghetto is documented in the Jewish Historical Institute Archives in Warsaw, described a world where the rules changed on a dime, where it was best not to trust anyone outside a very tiny circle of family and friends, but she also understood how the desperation of their situation forced Jews to find protection wherever they could. After the war, Eugenia described her experience in Warsaw, where she and her sister, Judyta, lived on the Aryan side until they were arrested on February 18, 1940 and sent to Pawiak prison where they remained for a year

until they were released into the ghetto population. They were assigned jobs, Eugenia in the office of the Judenrat and Judyta in the post office, affording them close views of life in the ghetto.

Eugenia Truskier wrote,

The very first directive to wear armbands became the pretext for arresting Jews. At all times and all places, there were people and even kids who would yell "This is JUDE!" pointing to a person and demanding that this person be arrested. The next directive concerned assets. People had to report and list their assets, and under this directive, the Jews were allowed to have no more than 2000 *złoty*. Obviously, not everyone wanted or could surrender the possessions earned by hard work. And so, they tried to hide everything, or give their valuables to someone (Aryans) for safekeeping.

A few Aryans assisted the Jews out of human kindness, while many sought to profit. As soon as they got the assets, they would have a third party inform the authorities, and once the person was arrested, knowing for sure that he or she would never get out of prison alive, they took possession of everything the person owned. And, unfortunately, there were such people who would knowingly and on purpose set others up, and there were those, who maybe not on purpose but due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the situation sent people to death either directly or indirectly.[9]

On the other hand, even a practiced informer, such as Mr. Lubranetsky whom the Truskiers encountered in Naples after the war (identifiable because he was allowed to jump the queue and get a visa, as will be explained in a later chapter), made mistakes. Mia described an incident in her household in Warsaw shortly after the Germans arrived.

Mia Truskier:

A lot of people you know, like my mother and my brother, or my cousin Stasio, no one could ever dream that they were Jewish, and Polish people wouldn't know unless you told them. During the first month of the war when we were all living on Nowogrodska Street, he [Lubranetsky] sent the Gestapo to question my mother because he said she was a Jew. When the police came to the apartment my mother talked to them. She spoke perfect Polish, owned and managed the building, and Tłusty was a common Polish name. So they didn't believe the informant. There were some people in an apartment in the building who were Poles, however, with darker hair and features, and fitted more the Germans' impression of what a Jew should look like. The Gestapo arrested that Polish family and took

them to the station for interrogation. The Germans were so stupid. They didn't know what Poles looked like. They came here and thought all the Jews were dark haired with brown eyes and that kind of swarthy look, and all the Poles were blond with blue eyes. But Poland has a bit of everyone. It was conquered by the Tartars and people from eastern Russia and everywhere.

According to Paulsson, if the Germans could not distinguish Jews from Aryans, neither could many Poles. "By 1939 nearly all Warsaw Jews spoke Polish, some 50,000–60,000 were acculturated native Polish-speakers, and, of these, 25,000 or so mainly middle-class Jews were assimilated."[10] *Timothy Snyder observed that Warsaw with its cosmopolitan culture, highly educated residents, and many assimilated, middle-class Jews was incomprehensible to the Germans. "Warsaw was a metropolis that had no place in the Nazi worldview."*[11]

Mia lamented that even if you could pass, a lot of people refused to do so.

I remember I had a friend—oh she was a friend since we were five years old, and then we kind of lost contact and then we met again, when we went to this municipal school for girls, you know. Well, I ran into her in the street and she was wearing the thing. [Mia gestured to her upper arm] And I hugged her, and maybe it was dangerous, but it was just instinctual, you know. I saw her and I was happy to see her and I hugged her. Nothing happened.

I also remember that my father had a friend who was a doctor, and he married very late, he was much older, and we became very friendly with his wife; she was much younger, a very beautiful woman. And he went to the ghetto with his mother, even though he had a perfect Polish name and he could have passed very easily, even without changing his name. My mother tried to convince him to pass as a Christian, and to take the fake identity papers, but he refused. His wife, who was much younger than him, did take the papers and she survived the war and ended up in South Africa eventually, with a new husband. Her husband, my father's friend, even answered the call that the Germans sent out to all the Jewish doctors, requiring them to present themselves at a certain place and they were assigned to work as doctors. And you know how that went … that was the end of him. They were just taken to a death camp. And he could have saved himself, but he was afraid.

And there was this other one, my mother tried to save him, but at the last he chickened out. And he had very good chances. He felt he was safer trying to be there rather than trying to get out. He was like a lot of people whose attitude was to do what they want us to do and if we obey these laws—they are terrible laws—but if we obey then they will leave us in peace. It wasn't illogical. It had worked before so why wouldn't it work now?

Mia relayed these stories with a resigned tone. Never judgmental, even if the words sometimes seemed that way, she had after so many years simply accepted what happened. Not only was it the logic of the day, it was the received wisdom of centuries for the Jews of Poland. Whereas a large number of secular Jews were from affluent backgrounds, spoke Polish without accent, and were familiar with the customs of mainstream Christianity, that did not mean they were ready to defy the racial laws. Mary Truskier reflected on her mother-in-law's experience at the memorial service.

I remember Mia talking a lot about their peers in Warsaw from similar families—assimilated Jewish families—who were well-to-do dentists and doctors, other professionals, who said, "We've been through this before, there's always been a threat. It always blows over and what harm could come to us who are so valuable to this society and have so many skills to offer? And they stayed, and they were wrong." Mia and Jan saw the threat and they lived.[12]

The Polish Jews who lived through World War II were the exception. In Soviet work camps, in far-flung exile, passing as Aryans in one place or another, or clinging to life as the last starving and exhausted souls of the Nazi death camps, a minority survived. Since ninety percent of the Jews in Poland perished, the following testimonies provide a rare glimpse of life during the war. Most of what we know of Paulina's time in Warsaw can be deciphered from her letters to Mia, all of which were written to pass the censor.

"We had this code and she would make up this name, like having a roof over a woman's house and then it became a woman's name." To illustrate, in a long letter to Mia dated June 6, 1941, Paulina explained the impossibility of hiding her father on the Aryan side because of his looks, his speech, and the fact that his second wife, his mistress who he married upon the death of Mia's grandmother in 1938, was also from the country. Mia reads the letter to me, interjecting her explanations. Mia's mother wrote, "Władzio is sitting in the same place for now, possibly gotten rid of fat Lerkicho (*That's a made up name, possibly for a caregiver or friend—Mia*), he will stay with the old Strzechcia." This word "*Strzechcia*" [which

Paulina writes as though it is a name] stands for "*strzecha*," a thatched roof on a peasant cottage. Paulina uses it to refer to the rural and definitely non-cosmopolitan Władzio and his wife, Czarna Cymerman, whose rural background and heavily accented Polish identified them as Jews. At the same time, Paulina chastises herself for underestimating her father's new wife who, as she revealed years later, accompanied him to the ghetto and cared for him until he died. She uses an old Polish expression—to "spit in her own beard"—to convey that she is ashamed of herself for her ridicule and dislike of her father's second wife. Loosely translated, the expression is analogous to a similarly bizarre phrase in English of being forced to "eat crow" upon being proven wrong.

Mia drew a verbal picture of the difference between how survival and death could hinge on a particular background, generally the separation between urban and rural Jews.

There were people who came from small towns and from poorer backgrounds, who lived under the Czarist Russian regime for so many generations, and they really didn't speak very good Polish and that could betray you. The looks and the speech … that would seal your fate. It was very tragic, you know. There were some people, of course, some Jews if they had money they found a place where they could hide and they would just hide. Some of them survived.

Paulina and Feliks: Taking Chances in the Underground

Within this unnervingly distrustful world, the actions of Paulina and her brother-in-law, Feliks, were exceptional, if not extraordinary. How did Paulina and Feliks avoid capture and exist for a full five years passing as gentiles? Having false identity papers was only one aspect of a survival strategy. They needed money to buy food, a place to stay, friends to warn them of any sign of danger in their immediate surroundings, and that was just for the day-to-day. What about times of heightened surveillance during periods of attack or uprisings? Mia teased out information from Paulina's letters to cobble together a narrative of how her mother moved about the city and interacted with many contacts. Paulina left no doubt that Feliks was the key to her survival. Mia remembered that her mother spoke lovingly of her brother-in-law and the debt she owed him for his resourcefulness during the early months

of the war, and of his bravery in support of the resistance for the many years they were in hiding.

There are some letters from my father from the Soviet camp to my mother in which he tells her how grateful he is to Feliks. He sent a message to Feliks saying that he was in debt to him for watching over our family. My father had a lot of regrets that he left my mother, terrible regrets, and he wanted Feliks to know that.

A sharp judge of character, knowledgeable and fearless, Feliks managed to save his own family in hiding, while at the same time working with Mia's mother. Paulina and the secretary from Holy Cross Catholic Church created the fake identity papers from the baptismal records of deceased parishioners. They then passed these papers on to Feliks who would ride the streetcar into the ghetto. After the war, her mother told Mia how it was done. "Uncle Feliks would jump off the street car and deliver whatever he had to people in the ghetto—papers, or whatever—and then jump back on." Mia was unsure who he met, but "he developed all kinds of connections. He knew people who were there."

As the ghetto reduced in size it was divided into two parts, the Large Ghetto and the Small Ghetto, connected by a new footbridge. Since the ghetto was an encirclement of the traditional Jewish quarter in the center of Warsaw, the preexisting transit lines were maintained. Five tram lines crossed the ghetto, always stopping at the entrance gate where a Polish policeman boarded the train. These were called "Blue Policemen," differentiating them from the German Gestapo. The trams traversed the ghetto but they were not supposed to service it; there were no stops. Nonetheless, because there were several sharp turns, the trams slowed down considerably and people were then known to hop on or hop off, which is precisely what Feliks did. Also, if a rendezvous was somehow arranged in advance, there was time when the train slowed, for people to throw out bags of food or supplies to waiting recipients. To be successful, the tram conductor or driver often had to be bribed and the Polish passengers on the train had to be counted on not to turn in a smuggler to the authorities.[13]

This description of secreting food, supplies, and even people, into and out of the ghetto gives some indication of the extent of bribery and black marketeering in the city. While the Jews were a special target, the rest of the Poles still feared and hated the German occupiers. Paulsson argues that it was this fact that prevented many among the Polish non-Jewish population from going out of their way to assist the Nazi police. On the other hand, anyone who aided Jews took a tremendous risk, no matter their class and social status, no matter

if they did so out of friendship, a sense of justice, or to collect a payment. Most people simply did not want to get involved, and it was safest to ignore any suspicious activity and say nothing. Feliks, and others like him, used that small window of opportunity to carry out their subterfuge even under the watchful eye of the police.

Feliks and Paulina provide human examples of Paulsson's claim that the secret city of Jews living on the Aryan side "arose, spontaneously, through personal networks."[14] *Jews who avoided the ghetto were able to survive outside the walls through contacts with friends, neighbors, and family. Hence someone like Feliks, who had a prosperous business—a movie theater—that catered to the public before the war, knew people throughout the city. Mia surmised that her mother drew on her contacts from The Literary News (Wiadomości Literackie) one of the foremost literary magazines of prewar Warsaw and to which Paulina was a contributing writer. Begun in 1924 and considered the voice of Poland's intelligentsia among Jews and non-Jews alike, Paulina's past relationship with the magazine afforded her access to sympathetic contacts on the Aryan side.*[15]

Paulina and Feliks may have worked with a particular organization or organizations, but that relationship most likely developed spontaneously. From Mia's account of her youth, she was unaware of her parents belonging to any particular political party or organization, and she stated that her mother's collaboration with the church secretary was accidental, arising from a chance encounter on the street.

Mia Truskier:

Well, you know after all these years there are a lot of things that one doesn't remember. Like I know when I read those letters from my mother, and she uses those code names, and I don't know who she's talking about. For example, I don't know that she was working with any group until the Warsaw Uprising [August–October 1944], then she became a part of the Polish Underground, and she then worked with the Red Cross.

Mia was more sure that Feliks was affiliated with an organized group and through him her mother as well, but her uncle left no written account.

Mia Truskier:

I don't know who he worked with but I know he was a part of the Underground during the [1944 Warsaw] uprising, and before that with other people. Feliks was killed when the ceiling fell on him during the bombing in the last days before Warsaw was liberated.

Eugenia Truskier's Testimony

According to Eugenia, the Germans were never successful in controlling the ghetto boundaries and the system was "full of holes from the beginning." Her description, drawn from her perspective as a prisoner inside the ghetto, deepens our understanding of the world in which Feliks was operating.

The smuggling began. The most courageous and enterprising Jews scale the Ghetto's walls and bring food into the Ghetto. It is hard to tell how many fell victim to their own ingenuity. People compete for the best ideas of how to smuggle food into the Ghetto. Some smuggle at night over the roofs and windows of the houses neighboring the Ghetto boundaries, others tunnel their way through, some use the concealed holes in the wall, and others use the sewer tunnels. It went as far as buying and eating provisions smuggled in coffins and hearses.[16]

Survivors such as Eugenia and Judyta have been able to provide a valuable picture of the internal workings of the ghetto, even the uncomfortable issue of Jewish cooperation with the authorities. Eugenia explained the methods of control.

Eugenia Truskier:

The Jewish *Gmina* [the traditional Jewish leadership council] holds full authority over the Jews, and now it is called the Jewish Council [*Judenrat*], whose operational scope has increased significantly. Engineer Adam Czerniaków became its head, assisted by the presidium composed of three men: Wielikowski, Lichtenbaum, and Sztolcman, and eleven council members. People were given jobs in the shops, in exchange for money, of course. By now, Jews have their own post office, banks, hospitals, police, the Census Department, and the Department of Statistics. A variety of gardens, bakeries, and restaurants emerge in the Ghetto. Rich people and the so-called "golden youth" including primarily the police and the higher ups of the Jewish Council are having fun and dancing up a storm, while other people drop dead in the streets. These are poor and homeless people victimized by hunger or cold.

The creation of divisions among the Jews squeezed into the small space of the ghetto turned the victims on each other. The German authorities relied on

the time-tested strategy of exploiting every possible division to sow distrust in order to maintain their unquestioned and brutal authority.[17]

The Ghetto Post Office: Judyta Truskier

Judyta Truskier was assigned to the ghetto post office after her release from jail and she remained there until one of the last deportations that sent her to Majdanek. Her careful description of the postal service is a valuable insight into the German commanders' obsession with maintaining order while at the same time carrying out the series of Actions, the term for rounding up and deporting thousands of people to the death camps. The mail moved in and out of countries, passing through censors, but even more remarkably, in and out of the ghetto. Despite the sustained and routine deportations leading to the murder of millions of Jews, mail service continued with few interruptions.

Judyta begins her testimony with a description of her arrival at the post office job.

Judyta Truskier:

With the creation and closure of the Jewish District on December 24, 1940 marked the establishment of the Jewish post office. …. Considering the overall Jewish situation in Warsaw, as of that day the entire Jewish postal operations (meaning not only letters, but also parcels and money transfers) are to be handled by the Jews. We have the honor of working in that office and therefore, he [the Jewish postmaster] addresses us and ever so respectfully asks that we treat this job seriously, work honestly, fast, and well, so that the Jewish people receive their correspondence on time and in good condition.[18]

The building at 32 Krochmalna Street only housed the letter unit; the unit that handled parcels and postal money transfers was on 19 Zamenhofa street. As early as day one, a postal truck stopped in front of that building on Krochmalna Street and unloaded a few bags stuffed with letters. Everyone sorted the letters, and there were many different types of letters, both domestic and international, envelopes and postcards. At that time, the international letters came from all over the world—oh, how pretty some stamps were! Many envelopes that came were all covered with stamps on purpose; these were for the stamp collectors. But there were also stamp collectors in our band of clerks and mailmen, and despite their honesty principles, they would often remove the stamps. Oh, the fights they had, the inquiries that followed! Once it even went so far that one of our coworkers lost his job.

On the morning of August 30, 1942, the Jewish Council building was surrounded by a whole band of Germans and Ukrainians. The policemen ran from room to room like madmen telling everyone to go to the courtyard. In spite of a couple of thousand clerks standing in the courtyard, there was dead silence, except for the harsh drunken German voices and [shots]—the Ukrainians were having fun. Then there was selection. Only the chairman, the presidium, and heads of individual departments are left. The rest, destined to die, are escorted by the Germans, the Ukrainians, and the Jewish police to the so-called *Umszlak*,[19] or the "antechamber of death." Only a few managed to escape from there.

Now the post office included the letter unit only, and its scope was rather small. From then on, Bland [a German officer] became the "guardian" of the post office—one of the main ringleaders in the *Action* of exterminating the Jews. First of all, he ordered that a stamp [a device for labeling with ink] be made, *Unbekant Vercogen*,[20] meaning that a person moved to an unknown address, and stamp all letters arriving to those deported. Every day, a vehicle stopped by the office carrying one bag of letters, often not full. These letters were brought into the Polish post office. There clerks recorded the numbers of regular mail and certified mail separately. After the record entries were made, they brought the mail to us.

The mail for the deported was placed into a separate box. Then one of us, as I mentioned earlier, would stamp these letters with *Unbekant Vercogen*, tying them neatly with a string, and placing them into a dedicated cabinet with a dated card on top. Every few days, Mr. Bland's car would stop by the post office, with Mr. Bland rushing into the post office building yelling like a demented man to have the letters taken to the car.[21]

Judyta's explanation of the German's preoccupation with safeguarding the mail of those who had been deported to their death, reveals a preoccupation with correct procedure that in hindsight is nothing short of bizarre.

The *Judenrat* and Jewish Police

Eugenia shows no sympathy whatsoever for the Jewish police and the Judenrat although some historians have argued that without them there would have been chaos. Hannah Arendt contended that the Jewish leaders were collaborators with the Gestapo and their role was "undoubtedly the darkest chapter in the whole dark story." Eugenia's words in her postwar testimony eerily echo the same conclusion.[22]

Eugenia Truskier:

That same year the Germans demanded that the *Gmina* provide several thousand men for labor camps. The Jewish Police was the worst disgrace; it is a black mark that could never be erased from the history of the Jewish people. The police enlisted the worst elements, men with plenty of cash brought in exchange for employment. They did a perfect job, catching and sending to death the poor, starving people, at the same time stuffing their pockets with money from the rich who bought their way out.

Paradoxically, Adolf T. Truskier, Eugenia's uncle, was an original member of the ghetto Jewish Council, though it is possible, if unlikely, that Adolf's membership escaped Eugenia's notice. He was one of a small number of Jews to serve in the Polish Senate before the war, and later in the lower representative chamber known as the Sejm. He was photographed and mentioned often in the Warsaw press for his role on the presidium of the Jewish Merchant's Association. While a man of Adolf Truskier's background would have been a natural for a position in the Judenrat, he did not serve for long. He became ill in 1941 and died in November of that year.[23]

Considering the fate of Adolf Truskier, the options and motives of the Judenrat might have been more complex than Eugenia wanted to accept, at

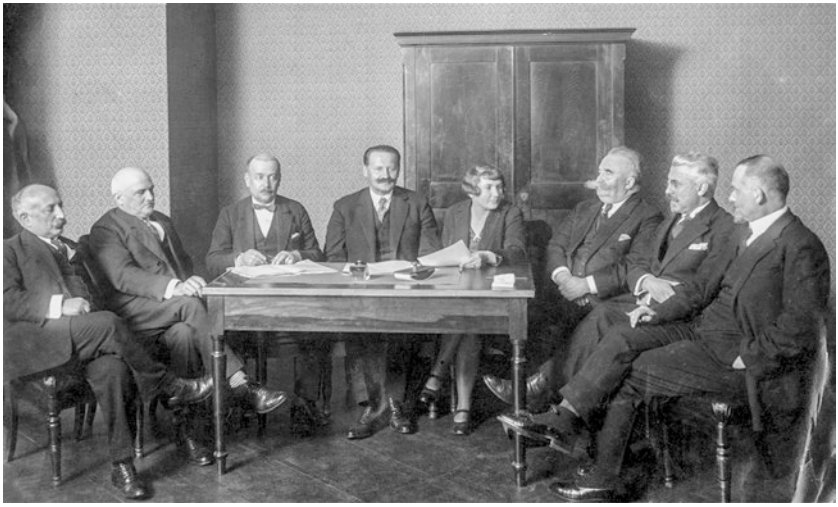


Fig. 6.1 Adolf (Abram) Truskier (left) at a meeting of the Jewish Merchants' Association, Warsaw before the war. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Fig. 6.2 Grave of Adolf (Abram) Truskier in the Truskier family plot, Warsaw Jewish cemetery. (Credit: Photo by author)

least in 1945 when she wrote her testimony. According to Mia, Adolf Truskier could have avoided the ghetto but insisted on staying with the others. "He felt it was his responsibility to his constituents to refuse any special privileges. I know my mother tried to convince him to leave, but he wouldn't abandon the people who relied on him for protection. And in the end he couldn't protect anyone, not even himself." Adolf's cousin, Pawel, successfully avoided the ghetto and paid for protection for himself and his wife Ewa.

Eugenia blamed the Judenrat for deceiving the ghetto population at large and sending them to their death. She points out that Czerniaków, unwilling to continue the subterfuge, took a cyanide pill instead of signing a paper stating that the Jewish Council would deliver 10,000 Jews daily. After his suicide on July 23, 1942, others in the Council stepped up to carry out the orders. According to Eugenia, it was at that time that the Nazis began to systematically deport Jews to the extermination camps. She described the process.

Eugenia Truskier:

The Ukrainian and Szaulisi[24] detachments arrive in Warsaw to kill Jews, as do the specially trained German divisions. The police are to ensure that each boxcar was filled with 100 to 120 persons before the car was sealed. And here yet once more the Jewish police did a perfect job. Only some of them had the courage to lie to the Germans and count not quite accurately, so that the boxcars could be sealed with fewer people.

We now know what happened to the Jews in the ghetto, but at the time, the Judenrat justified their actions as holding out as long as possible in hopes of an Allied victory. The honest among them saw themselves as negotiating better terms for the mass of people being herded into the ghetto, doing what was possible to secure food and housing, and to soften the rule of the Ukrainian and Polish thugs the German authorities relied on for law enforcement. Not only the Judenrat but other Jews cooperated with the Nazis to steal and benefit themselves. After the war, Eugenia's brother, Anatol, returned to Warsaw and served as a judge in the Citizens Courts, presiding over charges against Jews accused of collaborating with the enemy.

The Last Days of the Ghetto

On January 18, 1943 Eugenia remembered that a major deportation began, lasting three days. She felt that the remaining Jews needed to prepare to revolt. "We will die, but we will take some of them with us," Eugenia wrote in 1945, looking back to the years before. The Ghetto Uprising began on April 19 and lasted five weeks, ending on May 16, 1943. Eugenia vividly describes the aftermath of the defeat of the ghetto fighters.

Eugenia Truskier:

Oh it was butchering! Those who never experienced it can never imagine what happened. In a wild frenzy, they would barge into apartments and murder every living person found, even babies in their cribs. As it later turned out, everyone was killed. Some died during the Ghetto's defense, others were shot dead to the last man in Trawniki and Poniatowa camps in November 1943. Only very few were able to escape.[25]

The Germans surrounded and slaughtered most of the ghetto fighters, deporting the rest, including Eugenia and Judyta in late May.

The following year, in August 1944, the Warsaw Uprising began when civilian forces throughout the city joined with the resistance and fought for sixty-three days. By the time the uprising ended in early October, 23,000 insurgent soldiers and 180,000 civilian inhabitants of the capital had lost their lives. Rather than join with the Poles to liberate the city from the

Germans, the Soviet army waited on the other side of the Vistula River until the civilians were exhausted and the Germans began to retreat. In their wake the Nazis destroyed the city, such that by January 1945, eighty-five percent of Warsaw was in ruins, leaving the Poles prostrate at the feet of the encroaching Red Army.

Mia was of two minds as regards the role of Red Army. She was grateful to the Soviet Union for defeating Hitler. "That was something that people don't recognize: the heroism of the Soviet army. I mean regardless of your political views, you have to recognize that. And as for Stalin, you have to give the devil his due." On the other hand, Mia like many of her fellow citizens deeply resented Stalin's cold calculation that sacrificed thousands of Polish lives and the nation's sovereignty. There was to be no repeat of the 1919 "Miracle on the Vistula."

Notes

1. Noma Faingold, "The Puppetmaster of Lodz," *The Jewish News* (January 15, 1999).
2. There were two Polish armies. The Polish First Army was formed from the People's Army of Poland that had resisted the invasions of 1939–1940 and had been held in work camps or as prisoners of war by the Soviets. After the German invasion of the USSR in 1941, the freed Polish soldiers joined with a unit of the Soviet military and by 1944 began to fight on the Eastern Front with the Red Army, eventually participating in the 1945 capture of Berlin. Mia's brother, Tadeusz, joined the British-linked Second Polish Army, under the command of General Władyslaw Anders and the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. The combined Polish armies comprised ten percent of the European Allied forces and fought in some of the bloodiest battles.
3. Letter from Paulina to Mia, September 1941.
4. Gunnar Paulsson, 99.
5. Vladka Meed, 183.
6. Gunnar Paulsson, 99.
7. Mia and Jan had converted to Christianity, but that would not have protected them from being identified as Jews. They succeeded because they left before the rules were enforced. Most likely they would have been stopped even a month or so later.
8. Vladka Meed, 182.
9. Eugenia Truskier, *Testimonies of Jewish Survivors*, Jewish Historical Institute Archives, Cat. #301/4/74. (Written down 1945), translated by Viktoryia Baum, 4–5.

10. Gunnar Paulsson, 30.
11. Timothy Snyder, 261.
12. Comments at Mia Truskier's Memorial Service, Berkeley, CA, May 2014.
13. Gunnar Paulsson, 61.
14. Gunnar Paulsson, 53.
15. See Ron Nowicki, *Warsaw: The Cabaret Years*, 76–80.
16. Eugenia Truskier, 3.
17. When the ghettos were sealed the Germans appointed a Jewish ruling directorate, or *Judenrat*, and police force, whose roles were to keep order. They were often corrupt and notorious for exchanging stays of execution and favors for money, Timothy Snyder, 222.
18. Judyta seems to give the date of December 24, 1940 as when the post office was established. The ghetto was sealed in November, ca 24 or 25. Michal Grynberg, *Words to Outlive Us: Eyewitness Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto*, translated by Philip Boehm (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 28.
19. The translator noted a discrepancy between the typed text and the original handwritten copy. The typed version says "Umszlag," while the handwritten version says "Umszlak." The name is "Umschlagplatz"—the assembly point in Warsaw from where people were transported to death camps. Translation follows the original, preserving the author's spelling.
20. Translator's note: Author's original spelling preserved. The correct spelling is "Unbekannt Verzogen." Thanks to Mark Walker for clarifying the difference.
21. Judyta Truskier, *Testimonies of Jewish Survivors*, Jewish Historical Institute Archives, Cat. #301/4492 (Written down August 23, 1945), translated by Viktoryia Baum, 1–4.
22. Hannah Arendt, "Answers to Questions Submitted by Samuel Grafton," in *The Jewish Writings*, Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 480–83.
23. *Gazeta Zydowska 1941*, Official Newspaper of all the ghettos licensed by the German Command.
24. *Szaulisi* refers to members of the Lithuanian Rifleman's Union (translator note).
25. Eugenia Truskier, 13–14.

CHAPTER 7

The Aftermath of War in Europe, 1945–1949

No other part of Mia's narrated experience, along with the pieces she drew together to form her Storyworld, is as fraught with contradiction, speculation, questions, even wishful thinking, as are these varied accounts of life during the war. In talking with Mia, it was apparent to me that the reminiscences of her prewar life were inseparable from memories of what happened during and after the war. Invariably when Mia talked of her father's decision to volunteer with the Polish army in 1939 she would segue into the ink pot incident, saying something like: "And did I tell you about the time when my father was nine years old and he threw an inkpot at the portrait of the Tsar and was expelled from school?" Her remembrances of her father and his decision to go to war were part of an intricate web of memories of his patriotic actions and beliefs. They were a eulogy to a proud Polish citizen.

Reflecting back on Paulina's actions working to save victims of Nazi terror, Mia would always say that her mother was "the unsung hero" of the resistance. Her brave departure from Poland and long walk to Rome on roads clogged with thousands of other homeless and displaced persons was as exhausting as it was heroic. Mia remembered that when her mother finally made it to Rome, she barely had time to recover before Jan's mother began to complain. At first the two mothers shared a room, but Regina grumbled that it was too small and that Paulina's persistent cough kept her up at night. "I can never forgive her [Regina] for the way she treated my mother after she got to Rome," Mia remarked bitterly. Regina's self-centered whining is indeed

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_7

astonishing, given the general hardship of war, the immense number of lives that had been lost, and the herculean tasks facing the survivors to overcome grief and put shattered lives back together. Unlike Mia, Regina had not maneuvered to make a living in Rome's semi-clandestine underground market. Although not as steadily employed as was Mia, Jan had taken on whatever jobs he could find, including some tutoring and research work on the side, and he managed the household purchases and monitored the funds from the Swiss bank account. Jan also participated in the spying operation in the Vatican along with Mia, all the while dodging the watchful eye of Italian or German authorities and the threat of being conscripted into the armed forces. While Regina supplied money, it was not as though she had suffered to make it.

Paulina, on the other hand, kept herself and others alive in Warsaw during some of the worst conditions of the war for civilians and risked her life to aid others. Although much of what she saw was too painful to discuss after she had reached safety, we know she witnessed the destruction of her home and city, was aware of the inhuman persecution of Jews in the ghetto, and of their deportations to extermination camps. After all the hiding, clandestine work in the resistance, and worries over the fate of her family, Paulina learned of her husband's death in Kazakhstan in 1942. Finally, when the Soviet army marched into Warsaw, she donned a small backpack with all she had, left the city and traveled over nine hundred miles, most of it on foot, to reach her daughter in Rome. It must have been a tremendous blow to Mia, and to Paulina, to be greeted with complaints from Jan's mother. But for Mia, despite the anger and discomforts, the contrasting experiences of Regina and Paulina, and the implicit conflicts between these, became contradictory parts of the complex Storyworld she constructed about the war years—and as such it perhaps suggests some deeper realities.

When it became feasible, Paulina left to live with her son in England. Mia and Jan remained in Rome where they were finally able to access work through legal channels as they began to decide in what country they would settle. Returning to Poland seemed unlikely, especially after hearing from Mia's mother the fate of so many friends, relatives, and the very environment itself. Jews often found that their houses, even if they were still standing, had been taken over by Polish gentiles during the war who then refused to leave. Now a client state of the Soviet Union, Poland's short life as a sovereign nation had once again been torn asunder. Initial hopes for building national unity, resolving the long-standing tensions between Jews, gentiles, and other ethnic/religious groups, and reconstructing a society from the ashes of destruction, seemed very unlikely. For Mia and Jan, returning to any semblance of their

earlier lives in Warsaw seemed all but impossible. Other members of the dispersed Truskier and Tłusty families, finding their lives similarly in flux, set about fitting the remnants of their prewar existence into dramatically altered postwar venues. Along with millions of others, they weighed the pros and cons of reestablishing their lives in familiar surroundings or beginning anew someplace else.

Poland

After the war, Jan's cousin, nine-year-old Gabriela, moved back to Warsaw with her parents, Anatol and Aniela Truskier. As a lawyer Anatol began work with the Citizen's Courts under the auspices of the Central Committee of Polish Jews, litigating family unifications and petitioning the government to return lost and stolen property to Jews who had been displaced during the war. The latter proved unsuccessful. The Citizen's Courts also tried Jews who were accused of profiteering and otherwise benefitting from the German occupation. Anatol served as one of the judges in a famous trial against a popular cabaret singer, Vera Gran, who was accused of enriching herself by entertaining the occupation forces in the ghetto and trading sex for material favors. In her book on the singer, Agata Tuszyńska convincingly argues that the evidence against Vera Gran was circumstantial at best, and mostly based on rumor. The case was never resolved and Anatol was one of the judges who refused to convict Gran, and other defendants, stating that he did not know the conditions under which the accused were forced to provide services. Vera Gran's piano accompanist, Władysław Szpilman, was not accused of collaborating, having survived in the ghetto and then on the Aryan side until the end of the war. Szpilman was a member of the Polish resistance under the protection of friends from Polish Radio. He wrote a memoir of his experiences, which the director Roman Polanski made into an Oscar-winning film, The Pianist.[1]

In the years after the war, Gabriela's mother, Aniela, worked for the Central Committee of Polish Jews and the Red Cross to recover Jewish children who had been hidden with gentile families to escape the camps. Aniela told her daughter that repossessing children whose whereabouts were sought by relatives in Canada and the US was traumatic under the best of the circumstances, as the children had lived since infancy in different families and had formed bonds with the only parents they knew. Gabriela also remembers her mother telling her that "in some out-of-the way villages, Jewish children survived while working on the farms and in some instances were not even told that the war had ended. A number of times peasant families had kept the

children as uneducated, poorly fed slave laborers. Sometimes my mother needed to travel with a militia escort."

Gabriela's Aunt Eugenia was nearly thirty at the end of the war when she was freed from Majdanek. In a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in southern Germany, she met and later married Herschel Lacheta, a Polish man sixteen years her senior who had survived three extermination camps. Their son, Abraham (Abe), was too young to remember his family's decision to leave Europe for the US but recounted what his parents told him.

Abraham Lacheta

I was born in a hospital in Munich, Germany in 1948. My mother said that she was taken to the hospital from the DP camp and that's where she gave birth, and then we came to the US in June of 1949. You had to have somebody sponsor you so that you wouldn't go on welfare. They didn't have anybody, but some good citizens, strangers, sponsored them. My mother and father were to come to Albany and Judyta, my mother's sister who was three-years younger and her husband [Juda Weiss, 39 years old] were supposed to go to Skokie, Illinois, but the sisters refused to be separated so they both ended up coming to Albany.

My mother and aunt had been inseparable, except for a short time in Pawiak prison, for the entire war. They were arrested and imprisoned together in February 1940 (where they managed to have cells on the same floor), and then released into the ghetto where they remained together until their deportation to the Majdanek death camp in May 1943. After the war, which they both survived together, the sisters went back to Warsaw. Their trip to Warsaw in 1945 to see their brother Anatol [who had returned from the Eastern front], was specifically to convince him to leave for America with them, and bring his family.

Gabriela remembers that her father was very angry with his sisters for leaving, but the sisters were determined to immigrate to the US. Abe said that his mother told him that their family's decision was sealed when her husband learned of the death of many Jews in a pogrom in his hometown of Kielce on July 4, 1946. Historians have noted that the horror of what happened in Kielce is of great importance to history for what it portended about postwar lives for returning Jews.[2] For these Truskier and Lacheta families, it was both.

Kielce was one of the worst anti-Semitic acts of violence after the war. Jews were frequently the target of popular vengeance, whether based on standard prejudices or the anticommunist, anti-Semitic propaganda that said the Jews

were responsible for welcoming the postwar Soviet occupation. By April 1946, a reported 1200 Jews had been killed in anti-Semitic attacks, leaving all Polish Jews with reason to be wary of their future safety. But the senseless massacre and injury of over eighty Jews in Kielce, was particularly alarming. The July 4 massacre began when the state militia and local police were called to investigate the claim of an eight-year-old boy that he had been held in a basement by a Jewish man. The police, who initially rounded up and attacked hundreds of Jews, were then joined by townspeople. In response to the rumor of "blood libel," an ancient superstition that Jews drink the blood of Christian children, the mob set upon Jewish men, women, and children, including a newborn baby, and brutally slaughtered them while others in the town looked on. The massacre was a perilous warning to all Jews, but for Herschel Lacheta it was more than a warning of dangers close to home. It was home![3]

Anatol Truskier's adamant refusal to join his sisters is an indication of the extent to which some Jews were still determined to rebuild their lives in their Polish homeland, even in the face of all that had happened during the war and their fear of continued persecution after it. In her memoir, Janina Bauman explains that even Jews who had suffered horrendous abuse and postwar anti-Semitism, nonetheless wanted to stay in Poland.[4] *The determination of a persecuted people and their rightful attempts to build a multicultural and tolerant Poland in the postwar years cannot be dismissed, even though it eventually proved futile. The dilemma of whether to stay or leave split the members of the Truskier and Lacheta families. Judyta and Eugenia Truskier with their new families left their brother behind and moved to the US, as did millions of others. Poles from all religious and ethnic backgrounds emigrated in the wake of President Harry Truman lifting the quota on immigrants to the US from places that had endured the most destructive effects of War II.*[5]

Gabriela Truskier grew up in Warsaw and came to Albany, New York in 1962. Then a young woman, she was sponsored by her aunts, Eugenia and Judyta. Not for another six years did Gabriela's parents finally give up on their hopes that postwar Poland could forge a positive future under the communist government. The wave of anti-Semitism, ugly repression, and discrimination against Jews following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, drove Gabriela's parents to join their daughter and relatives in the US. Gabriela remembers that her parents nonetheless were still very reluctant to leave and her father in particular remained hostile toward the US for some years after relocating to Albany.

Mia and Jan in Postwar Rome

For Mia and Jan, the years from 1945 until they left Rome for the United States in 1949, were a time of rebuilding and honing their skills in hopes of obtaining visas. Mia recalls that it was a relief to no longer fear subjecting their residency papers to close scrutiny, to being caught without working permits, or enduring the stares of German officers in their hotel. Mia never mentioned getting papers certifying an Aryan identity, but several documents turned up in the boxes of letters and papers, indicating that at various times during the war they had purchased Aryan certificates, quite likely in case they had to leave suddenly. From the time the war ended they were focused on three things: securing steady and legitimate work, planning to leave Italy to immigrate to the US, and, in the meantime, finding a new place to live. Mia explained:

We were there after the war ended, because we didn't come to this country until 1949. But it [a right to work affidavit] wasn't that critical anymore and Jan got a job with the UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration).[6] He worked there and he worked with the refugees coming from all over. First he worked for the Polish Red Cross, so the Italian government had nothing to say about that. Then Jan even got a job working with some architects in Rome, which was very nice for him. Because of the war he couldn't practice architecture and he had lost all these years of his professional work.

Looking ahead to the postwar years, Mia reflected: "Unfortunately, an occupation or liberation, even if it's friendly, creates a lot of corruption and then bad feelings. So after a while the honeymoon was over." One of the cruelest reminders of not only corruption, but the kinds of decisions that were to determine the alignments of the future Cold War, began to surface in the treatment of refugees and the distribution of visas.

When Jan worked for UNRRA, it was run by this older woman who used to say, "Jan was born to be a social worker." Anyway, his work involved sorting through the affidavits of Polish refugees so as to determine their priority for emigration. Many Poles, both Jews and gentiles, who had survived the war, were hoping to obtain visas to travel to the US. Sometimes people came who pretended to be refugees and they were former guards from the concentration camps. Because you know it was very hard to know who was who, because these guards knew the same things that happened that the refugees knew, from the other side, but they knew. And they talked about all these facts and you know it was sometimes

very hard to distinguish who was who. Some of them were just opportunists who worked the Nazi side until it appeared that the Allied forces would win and then they'd switch to the other side. When Jan was working with UNRRA he had to try to figure out whether these were legitimate refugees or not, and sometimes he thought that there were people who, you might say, "jumped the queue," because they had contacts in high places.

We saw this man, a Pole named Lubranetsky who used to roam around our neighborhood in Warsaw and he would point out people as being Jewish, even if they were not wearing the star. I mean he had 'the nose' as we would say. And sometimes he would make a mistake, because a lot of people you know, like my mother and my brother, who had blond hair and blue eyes, no one could ever dream that they were Jewish, It was … well, you know Polish people wouldn't know unless you told them. Anyway this guy, Lubranetsky, must have left Poland for Italy at some point during or after the war and we saw him when we were waiting at the immigration office in Naples to get our visa. And he got a visa before we did. It was not an accident.

I speculated as to where he might have settled in the US and why the immigration authorities allowed him to jump to the head of the line, to which Mia delivered one of her most emphatic replies, "I don't know, and I don't want to know!" Her eyes flashed their intense blue in one of the clearest displays of disgust I witnessed during the many hours I spent with her.

For Mia and Jan, as for many Poles and Eastern European refugees, the US was a popular destination, not only after the war but also in the early years of the century. Central and Eastern Europeans who emigrated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, established communities especially in the Midwest. However, US restrictive legislation passed during and after World War I placed a very limited quota on Slavic, southern European, and African immigrants, excluding Chinese entirely. When the US opened up to immigrants after World War II, thousands of the newly displaced persons in Europe tried for visas. For the Truskiers, America was their preferred option among several, including returning to Poland, staying in Italy, or applying for visas to England or another country. Mia explained their reasons for choosing to immigrate to the US, which saw the "future" only in terms of citizenship.

Well, there was no future for us in Rome. Our cousin Ryszard stayed in Rome all that time, and it took him 25 years to get citizenship, even

though he was married to an Italian citizen. There was just no hope. Italy is such a small country and they just don't have room. They can't take people who come and want to stay there, and we didn't want to go back to Poland. We wanted to come to this country. But normally, before the war, it would have been impossible because there was this system of quotas that was based on where you were born. So if you were born in Poland, it was almost hopeless because there were so many people that wanted to come. After the war, President Truman created this new thing, special quotas for what they called "displaced persons," people who were displaced by the war and could not, or would not go back to their countries. The US was like a dream for us and during the war it was like a guiding star. We always thought gee, this is the country of freedom and of liberty, and all that. But we had to have a sponsor.

Mia's mother-in-law Regina was in contact with her brother, Joseph Lotto, and his wife Heddi, who had moved to the US several years before the war broke out and settled in Lincoln, Nebraska. Joe and Heddi agreed to sponsor Regina, Jan, Mia, and Andrew. Even with the invitation in hand, the Truskiers had to pass through a long-drawn-out process requiring many trips to Naples, filing papers, passing physical exams, and fulfilling many conditions before the visas came through, and they were able to book passage.

Finding a Place to Live in Rome

Ironically, as they began the extended process of getting visas for the US, they confronted the same problem they had faced upon arrival in Rome in 1940: they needed to find a place to live. The Allied command requisitioned the Hotel Milton to house the officers charged with overseeing the postwar recovery. With the arrival of the Allied forces came huge numbers of aid workers, officials, medical and social service personnel, and journalists, in addition to the military itself. Not only did the occupation forces grab up housing, but entire buildings were taken over for offices, supply depots, distribution networks, and other purposes. This was, Mia admitted, not only inconvenient, but also kind of sad, since the pensione had provided them with so many friends, contacts, opportunities, and eventually memories throughout the war. It was assumed, however, that the hotel's many foreign occupants would now return to their home countries or wherever they had moved to Rome from, even though most foreigners had no place to go back to. Mia and Jan learnt from friends of an available apartment whose renters, not owners, had followed Mussolini to Milan.

So then we moved to that apartment that the family had vacated. The reason they left was because the father was a lawyer and he was a devout fascist, to the point where he followed Mussolini at the very end when Mussolini went north after he was already imprisoned. You remember that after Mussolini was sprung from prison, he went to the very north and was trying to kind of recapture power, but eventually he was murdered by the partisans. He was hanged, and even his girlfriend was killed with him. Her name was Claretta Petacci. She was the daughter of the physician of the Pope. I think I told you about her and her sister who was a terrible actress. Anyway, we got the apartment that the family had abandoned when they went north with Mussolini. But then that family tried to come back after El Duce was killed. They wanted to reclaim their apartment, and we let them come back even though the police came to tell us that we had no obligation to vacate that apartment, because it didn't belong to them and they had no rights to it. If they wanted their stuff, their furniture, they could take it, the police said, but we had a perfect right to stay in the apartment. But then, they wanted to come back. First the wife and two children came back, and then two more children came back.

Incredulously, Mia said that she and Jan decided they would share the apartment with the family, and look for another one for themselves!

We somehow felt that, in spite of their bad politics, still they were a family and this was their home. We just didn't feel like we really wanted to push them out of their apartment. Then eventually the father came back, too. He was so clever. First he was disbarred, and then eventually he just recuperated. He was readmitted to the bar, and he made it. The other part of it was that we did it all because we thought that they were such a loving good family. Years later we found out that the woman who was their best friend and who was there all the time, turned out to be the husband's mistress. So much for the good family!

Shortly, they found another place to live, which also was not quite free of encumbrances, but suited them for a while. Mia smiled wryly as she told me the story of their next house, which also had the makings of a soap opera.

From there we moved into another place which was like a little villa. It was really very pretty. We lived there with the owner and his wife for four years. Well they were actually not married, because at that time there was no divorce; he couldn't get a divorce. She was a Venetian lady who was pretty nice. Then also, his sister and family lived in that same place down in the basement. They would have made another chapter, but I'm not going to go into that. They had two little children, and by the time we left

they had five. And she never admitted to being pregnant! She always said, "Oh, no, no Signora, no I'm not." When she couldn't conceal it any more, she would say, "Oh, well, where there is innocence there will be providence. Where there is enough food for three, there will be enough food for four." But the way they had enough food was that they were stealing our food!

You see the kitchen was down in the basement, and they had their room off the kitchen. All of them lived in that one room, the parents, and by then there were four or five children. So things would disappear. Because there was no refrigeration you had to keep things, shop every day and cook every day and hope the food won't spoil. Sometimes you had to shop twice a day. I mean, you cook for every meal. Sometimes we'd go down to get our meatloaf from the kitchen and it is gone, or half of it is gone. Then she would say, "Oh, you know, Signora, it was the cat, that cat that comes in the window." The cat was smart enough to open doors and cut the meatloaf in half? Or take our soup? She did it all the time. But they were so poor. Then their little girl played with Andy, and we would invite her to have a snack in the afternoon. When people are that poor you can't really blame them if they steal your food. But, finally, as I said before, we got the visa and it came. We were so overjoyed, also amazed. Somehow, we never thought it would happen.

For the Truskiers, remaining in Europe would have meant years more of rationing, searching for a suitable home in which to raise a family amid the rubble and destruction of so many bombed out cities, even crowding into apartments and houses with ever-growing families that stole your food. America, on the other hand, promised a vibrant economy, opportunities for work, a stable environment for raising children, and a security they felt so long denied in Poland and Italy.

Ryszard Landau and Mya Tannenebaum in Postwar Europe

Ryszard, however, decided to stay in Rome and not travel to the US with the others. As it turned out, his life in Italy was more "colorful" personally and politically than were the lives of those who left for America. Mia described how she remembered Ryszard's postwar life.

The war ended and so there was no army, and Ryszard was free to leave the military. He married Mya Tannenbaum, who was a concert pianist,

and they lived very luxuriously. Her father was extremely rich and there were jokes and rumors because he had made his fortune "producing" Etruscan sculptures (Laughs). They said they were from excavations, but I don't know if they were real. Her family was very Leftist—the Tannenbaums. It's a Jewish name and her mother was from Russia and her father from Germany, I'm not sure, but they were Italian citizens and they owned this beautiful villa in an area where all the diplomats lived. Mya was born in Italy and after they married she and Ryszard lived in that beautiful villa. That's where he still lives [but at this writing he has died]. They even had a "man servant" and I remember we used to laugh and wonder if they called him towarzysz (the Polish word for comrade).

The full story of Mya Tannenbaum's Russian family is quite fascinating and bears a fuller explanation. Mya's mother, the former Assja Soloveychik (1890–1949) is described in some detail in the memoir written by her grandnephew, Roger Cohen, a journalist and opinion writer for The New York Times. In The Girl from Human Street, Cohen describes his Uncle Bert Cohen's encounter with the Tannenbaum family when he reached Rome in April 1944 as a part of the Allied liberation forces.[7] *For Roger Cohen, his Grandmother Polly's sisters, Assja and Zera, were a part of "family legend" dating back to the family's roots in the Lithuanian Jewish community. Only slightly older than Polly, Assja and Zera were daring agitators against the tsarist government who crept out at night to teach illiterate working people to read and write and to stand up for their rights. As Cohen explains, "they were arrested by tsarist police, and they ended up in Capri, joining a colony of exiled Russians established on the Italian island in 1906 by the writer Maxim Gorky."*[8]

Mya Tannenbaum, Ryszard's wife (who is alive as of this writing) wrote a memoir describing what she could learn of the details of her mother's and aunt's bravery, their arrest by the Russian military, time in prison and in a Siberian work camp. The details differ, but it appears that the illustrious Russian writer Maxim Gorky had established an organization that freed young leftist revolutionaries and moved them to Capri, where he lived from 1906 to 1913, after the 1905 uprising. Gorky's organization rescued Mya's mother and Aunt Zera, while their other sister, Polly (Roger Cohen's grandmother) moved from Lithuania to South Africa before World War I, married and lived there until her family moved to England. It was Polly's son, Bert, Roger's uncle, who reconnected with the Tannenbaums in 1944 while a soldier in the Allied campaign to liberate Italy. He described in his diary the night he heard the talented teenaged Mya play the piano. Already captivated

Fig. 7.1 Italy, ca 1946, Jan with Mia and Andy in front, and Mya Tannenbaum and Ryszard Landau. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

by her "wonderful eyes and lovely mouth and red dress," he says of her playing: "She does not seem to strike the keys; rather she strokes the keys and so conjures from them a rapture of melody with the light caresses of her hands."[9] *Within the next decade Mya Tannenbaum met and married Jan's cousin, Ryszard Landau.*

Ryszard (in Italy known as Riccardo) linked up with the Polish Embassy shortly after the war ended in 1945. Politically sympathetic to Poland's emerging communist ideology, Ryszard developed a correspondence with his uncle Franciszek Fiedler who was teaching economics in Warsaw and rising

high in the ranks of the Polish communist government. Whether Ryszard's appointment to a post in the Polish embassy in Italy was helped by his relationship with his communist uncle or through other connections, Mia was unsure, but it does seem likely. If the Russian adventures of Mya Tannenbaum's aunts were the stuff of family lore, Ryszard and Mya added a new chapter, or better, "chapters" because the chain of events are contested.

Ryszard was working for the Polish embassy and it lasted for quite a while, and they had a very nice life. And then the government said, "Enough, enough playing. We want you to come back to Warsaw." (Ryszard was a Polish citizen.) And they went back to Warsaw where the aunt and uncle (Gustawa and Franciszek) were still living and were very happy to have them. And then Ryszard and Mya started not to like it. They were not very happy. They were in their mid-twenties when that happened and Warsaw was probably not very comfortable and certainly didn't have the luxuries they were used to in Rome. So they decided to escape and they did such an idiotic thing. You know, they had a car with diplomatic licenses so what do they do but send this car by freight to Rome and they take a train! In Vienna they get arrested, for stealing the car and escaping from Poland. They were brought back to Warsaw and they were put in jail. Mya got sick with tuberculosis and eventually they let her go, but they shouldn't have arrested her in the first place because she was an Italian citizen. But the Polish authorities who let her out ordered Ryszard to remain in jail in Poland, for two years. Eventually Mya got him out, I'm not sure how, and he went back to Italy.

Mia was convinced that Mya Tannenbaum used her connections as a member of an influential Italian Communist family to plead for her husband's release. If so, this was a rather extraordinary feat, since Ryszard himself had relatives in high places in the Polish government. Mia speculated that Franciszek may not have wanted to use his influence to gain his nephew's release. He would have been extremely disappointed both at the antics that got Mya and Ryzsard arrested in the first place, but also because the couple rejected Poland and preferred to live in capitalist Italy. The latter was seen as a betrayal of the new communist order consolidating in Eastern Europe.

Possibly the most interesting aspect of this relationship involved the "creation" of two Landau families. After returning from his incarceration in Poland, Ryszard moved back to his wife's villa and they had a daughter, Assja. Shortly afterward, Ryszard began an extramarital affair in Rome with Augusta Gregorini, who then became pregnant with their child.

The baby, named Janina, was conceived in Italy and then Ryszard and Augusta went to England when Augusta was ready to give birth. In England you can register a child as legitimately yours, but in Italy she would have been a bastard. As soon as Janina was born, and had her British birth certificate, they all went back to Italy. I'm not sure about now but Mya was not happy about Ryszard's relationship with Augusta and hostile to Janina. I don't know if she ever forgave Ryszard for what he did. Mya always had her own life but she gave up her piano when Assja was born and she never let Ryszard forget that she sacrificed her career for their family. But they stayed together and before Ryszard died in 2012, he and Mya spent a lot of time in their villa in Capri.

Mya had a career as a very prominent concert pianist, just as Bert Cohen foretold when he saw her play on his trip to Italy with the US Army in 1944. When Assja was born, Mya stopped performing and became a music critic with regular columns in the Corriere della Sera. In addition to her accomplishments as a concert pianist and well-known critic, she authored a book, Conversations with Stockhausen, in which she profiled the career of the avant-guard composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Along with John Cage, Stockhausen is known for groundbreaking electronic music and as an influence on composers from classical music to the Beatles, Frank Zappa, and a wide gamut of musicians.[10]

Separation, Relocation, and "Survivor's Guilt"

In the case of her mother, Mia's memories were tinged with regret, a sentiment aptly described in another of author Viet Thanh Nguyen's remarks: "The problem of war and memory is therefore first and foremost about how to remember the dead, who cannot speak for themselves. Their unnerving silence compels the living—tainted, perhaps, by a touch or more of survivor's guilt—to speak for them."[11] *Even though I am not sure she would ever have admitted it, Mia experienced "survivor's guilt" regarding her mother, although it was not exactly about the war, since Paulina survived the war and quite heroically at that. But the kind of survivor's guilt that Nguyen invokes does not necessarily require the silence of war death; it can also reference the silence that those traumatized by war never break.*

Mia offered clues pointing to her regret about Paulina's fate after the war ended. For Mia, the flip side of blaming her mother-in-law for treating

Paulina badly in Rome, and driving her away, was her own grudging regret at leaving her mother in England as she, Jan, Regina, and Andy immigrated to the US. At first, Paulina hoped to find employment and training in England, as had been promised to the Polish refugees, especially those who had contributed to the Allied effort during the war. Tadeusz was able to practice medicine, but the expected training and accreditation for Paulina proved elusive. As Mia remembered:

Well, my only relative was my brother, and he went through a lot—the labor camp, the war, the forced march, and he just wanted to live his life. It was hard, especially for my mother, who ended up in England not knowing the language and she was such an amazing and brave person. She took all those chances while she was under the Nazi occupation and how hard she worked for other people. She was with the Red Cross and the Underground at the end.

When she got to England she was about forty-eight and she became a nurse. But you know it was kind of hard because I know in the beginning they sent her to a hospital in Scotland. And she hardly spoke English and she thought that they were enrolling her in a nursing course in the hospital, but it turned out that these Polish refugees that they accepted to the hospital they expected them to be orderlies. She was hoping, she was under the impression that there would be a nursing job. So she didn't stay very long and then she developed very high blood pressure. She worked as a nurse later, but she wasn't in good health. You know she died when she was fifty-nine.

Mia's remorse at her mother's plight in England was palpable. When I asked if Paulina considered coming to the US with Mia and her family, I got only a vague reply. Mia would shake her head and dismiss the idea as unworkable for one reason or another. At one point Mia admitted to her daughter-in-law, Mary, that she regretted not having insisted that Paulina come with them when they got the visas for Nebraska. If it bothered her, and I got the impression that it did just in the way she talked about her mother, she did not outwardly express it.

Reliving the war years in Italy, replete with the colorful cast of characters from the Pensione Milton, was easier than speculating about Paulina's life in Warsaw. Mia always said the years were very painful for her mother and as a result she never gave her daughter a full accounting of how she survived, where she lived, or what she witnessed. There was the story of Władzio's death by heart attack, of her brother-in-law Feliks' heroism and of what she was told of Jan's family, but nothing is fully verifiable. Some wartime tales stood out.

Fig. 7.2 Mia, with Paulina and Tadeusz on the beach in England after the War. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Mary remembered Mia talking once of how Paulina had to hide for over a day in Warsaw trapped in a room with a dead body, but more details were vague. I knew that Mia had only scant glimpses of how her mother spent the war and I sometimes wondered if it was just easier to cling to the memories from before the war than face the grim reality of life during it?

Mia never saw Poland again. Her youth in Warsaw was frozen in images of the dining room table with the low light, around which she sat with her family conversing, doing her homework, eating the delicious pastries Tadeusz brought from the shop. In Mia's retelling, her life in Poland was happy, almost ideal. It was walks along the river, ice skating in the park with her father, flirting with young men at the swimming pool, weekends at the country house in Józefów outside Warsaw. Emerging outside this domestic bliss to intrude upon her memories was a country replete with virulent anti-Semitic policies that denied her a place in the university, thugs who attacked Jewish stores, roughed up Jewish youths, and perpetuated insidious stereotypes. By 1939, the saber-rattling of Poland's powerful neighbors, combined with the growing authoritarianism inside its borders, destroyed the comfortable lives of families like the Tłustys and Truskiers. Even after the Nazis were defeated, they came to realize that Poland reserved a very small and fragile space for secular

Jewish patriots such as themselves. Concrete, direct experience of postwar Poland, and a devastated Warsaw, never became part of her Storyworld.

Leaving Italy and the Beloved Italians

The last years in Italy for the Truskiers were less adventuresome than those of the Landau-Tannenbaum family. The long-awaited visas finally arrived and Mia and Jan embarked on the bittersweet process of leaving. While they were eager to settle in the US, Mia said they left behind in Rome friends and fond memories of the generosity the Italians had shown them. The interesting and exotic cast of characters Mia and her family had met and worked with in Rome included Tereza Massetti who gave Mia her first break when she agreed to display the nativity crèches and Christmas trees in Myricae, the posh store near the Spanish Steps; the Admiral and his wife who helped them obtain their first officially stamped documents; the filmmakers and awful films along with the subpar actresses, especially the sister of Mussolini's girlfriend; Mrs.

Fig. 7.3 Gabriela and Aniela, Truskier at the Fifth Anniversary Commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Warsaw, 1948. They are walking in front of the banner, Aniela in a dark suit wearing a hat, Gabriela next to her. (Credit: Truskier-Sherer Family Collection)

Bronowska, the flamboyant and bored journalist wife of the legal attaché in the Vatican; the spy Jadwiga Klewer with whom Mia and Jan conspired as intermediaries between contacts in the Vatican and the Polish government-in-exile; the innovative Bassi sisters of the Ritmica Integrale teaching methods; and the gay couple who worked with Mia on the fundraisers for the school. They were forever indebted to the generosity of Signorina Rosina who smuggled in food for the newborn Andy and firmly protected Mia from any criticism from other guests.

The war years in Italy had been terrifying, but also filled with amazing experiences and fond memories. Nine years after their arrival in Italy with their bogus Bulgarian visa that they used to get transit visas good for twenty-four hours, Mia, Jan, and Regina, with the addition of six-year old Andy, were leaving to take up a new adventure. In November 1949, they boarded an ocean liner for New York, and from there on to a place they had barely heard of: Lincoln, Nebraska.

Notes

1. Agata Tuszyńska, *Vera Gran: The Accused*, translated by Charles Ruas (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 172. *The Pianist: The Extraordinary Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939–45*, is the English edition by Anthea Bell, translator, of Szpilman's book with Jerzy Waldorff, also a famous musician, called *The Death of a City. Diaries of Wladyslaw Szpilman 1939–45 (Picador, 1999)*.
2. Tony Judt, 43.
3. Tony Judt, 43.
4. Janina Bauman, *Beyond These Walls: Escaping the Warsaw Ghetto* (London: Virago Press, 2006).
5. In 1948, the Truman Administration passed the first revision of the restrictive 1924 exclusive immigration act. The quota expanded to include European refugees seeking permanent residence in the US. The bill ended Asian exclusion, raised the quotas on Eastern Europeans, and allowed for many more Polish immigrants to enter the country.
6. UNRRA was founded in 1943, two years before the end of World War II. President Franklin Roosevelt brought the agency into being to administer relief to refugees from areas liberated by the Allies. FDR had coined the term United Nations to use for the Allies, and that name was later applied to the current UN when it formed in 1945. The UNRRA functioned in Europe and in Asia until 1947 when its responsibilities were taken over by various UN agencies and eventually folded into the work of

the UN International Refugee Organization, the precursor to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees), formed in 1950, and the World Health Organization. The UNRRA represented 44 nations and employed over 12,000 people to provide food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and basic social services to the millions of people who were displaced and in severe need following World War II. See, Anne Hammerstad, *The Rise and Decline of a Global Security Actor: UNHCR, Refugee Protection, and Security* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 69–73.

7. Roger Cohen, *The Girl from Human Street: A Jewish Family Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 34–35; 271–73.
8. Roger Cohen, 34.
9. Bert Cohen, quoted in R. Cohen, 272.
10. *Conversation with Stockhausen* is translated into English, http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n85154615/ and a book on her time in Poland that offers a slightly alternative view to the one Mia told me. *Fuga della Polania* (Escape from Poland) in Italian and not widely available. There is a short interview available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RLgA-h6kQE; paper and ebook versions are listed on World Cat. See https://www.worldcat.org/title/fuga-dalla-polonia/oclc/871203600.
11. Viet Thanh Nguyen, 45.

CHAPTER 8

Mia's American World: From Nebraska Immigrant to California Activist, 1949–1970

Andy Truskier sat on the deck of the ocean liner in late 1949, clutching his favorite toy, a stuffed dwarf named Ciapcius (pronounced chápchoosh). No matter how much the ship rocked on the swollen sea, movements that confined his mother and grandmother to their cabins deep in the ship's hold and rendered his father's face the same stone gray as the clouded November sky, six-year-old Andy and Ciapcius were fine. It was Andy's first major trip away from his home. Except for short day and weekend excursions by car or train to the Italian shore or countryside, or a longer stay in Naples while waiting for visas to the United States, Mia, Regina, and Andy kept close to their small apartment in Rome. Only Jan traveled back to Warsaw and then for a short visit to determine both the extent of the damage to the city in order to decide whether to return, and to clear up some of the family's affairs. Finally, after years of waiting and mountains of paperwork certifying to their health, financial stability, educational level, and readiness to work; after securing the appropriate sponsors and a defined destination—Lincoln, Nebraska—they were en route with all the possessions they could fit in their baggage. For Mia seasickness was the last challenge.

We were so excited because we got a cabin with a window. Of course, it was in November and the sea, the ocean was just awful. That window was under water every single day. Not one day that window could be opened. I thought I'd never get here alive. I was so sick to my stomach, because these cheap cabins were close to the hold, where they stored all

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_8

the food and the wine. It was this kind of acid smell around it all the time, and the food was pretty horrible. But we didn't have money and had to content ourselves with what we could have. That trip was horrible. Mostly it was the seasickness. Toward the very end when we were getting close to the shores, you could see the seagulls and we knew we were getting there. I remember I finally felt a little better and could come out on deck and enjoy the air. Everybody was sick, except Andy actually. He carried Ciapcius in a little knapsack that my mother sent to him from England. He had Ciapcius with him all the time. I have this picture where he's sitting on the boat with a life preserver and Ciapcius on his lap.

The "Ciapcius Backstory" bears hearing in full. Her description of making this beloved and well-traveled puppet that Andy guarded closely on the trip to America tells us a great deal about Mia. It illustrates her ingenuity and resourcefulness, her care and concern as a mother, and finally, a bit of the introspection and serendipity of her personality. Mia sees in the origin of Ciapciusas an embodied metaphor of the family's refugee status and she

Fig. 8.1 Andy Truskier on the ship enroute to New York with his doll Ciapcius, November 1949. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

envisions Andy's bond with the little puppet as a window into his adult personality.

I made Ciapcius for him when he was two and half years old. For Christmas, there was nothing really one could buy. It was so hard to get anything. So I had these balls that were formed by seaweed that I collected at the beach during an earlier summer trip when you could still go to the beach. Later the beaches near Rome were mined and people were not allowed to go. But we had gone to a beach not too far away in Ostia, and we found all these really strange looking little balls that were on the sand that the water would throw up. They looked like they were made out of hay and just rolled into hard balls. It turned out those were seaweed. The waves just worked on it, I don't know how long, weeks, months, or years.

I don't know why I collected them, maybe because it was in my blood to collect things. I thought these were so interesting. Then also there was a lot of symbolism to it, because here we were, kind of pushed around by forces that we could not control. And here were these little balls, some were little, some were big, like little families. Some were together; some were by themselves, just kind of pushed back and forth. I don't know why, but there was some deep symbolism in it, for me. I collected a full box of these little balls and I took them home and put them in the wardrobe. They just sat there, next to our illegal radio, waiting for whatever, I didn't know.

Then that Christmas [1945] I thought, something can be done with this. I'm sure that I can do something. I had some white glue. We had very few supplies. I kind of crushed these balls and mixed them with white glue, and then modeled them into a head. Dwarfs were very popular in Polish folklore, like the story of the 'Seven Dwarfs.' There were strictly Polish stories written for children about these little dwarfs. I made this little dwarf and then I covered the face with a stocking and made the body the same way with this seaweed stuffed into various pieces of fabric from old clothing. An old pair of pajamas that I had, that was kind of a pale green, I dyed it red. In Poland they call these dwarfs 'Little red people.' They call them *krasnoludki,* which is similar to Russian, *kasno*, *krasny.* Except Krasny I think in Russian means 'beautiful,' but in the Old Polish it means red.

So Ciapcius was all dressed. He had his pants, kind of a tunic, and a cap on his head. Then I made him a beard and hair out of a pair of old wool socks that my husband had. They were tennis socks, and very fine wool. I unraveled it all; it was kind of curly. I gave it to Andy for Christmas that

year he was two and a half. That toy became so important in his life. I often wonder later, when he became such an activist and was always so sensitive to human suffering, whether this little doll had something to do with it? Because this Ciapcius, he is kind of asking for compassion and for love. Andy always slept with that doll. He had other stuffed toys; he called them 'my company,' kind of like 'my friends.' He would say 'All the others are toys, but Ciapcius is real.'[1]

On the ship we made friends with some people. There were some immigrants like us, but mostly they were Italian-Americans who lived in the US for many years, but then now that the war was over they went visiting to Italy and were coming back to this country. Everyone's stories were so different. Everybody had a different life. Our destination was Lincoln, Nebraska, because that's where Jan's uncle and aunt lived. Joe and Heddi Lotto drove to New York to meet us. It was November, and in that year there was already a lot of snow. So we stayed in New York for a few days. I remember we were going to all these different restaurants and cafeterias seeing food for the first time in years that I almost forgot existed. In Rome we just didn't have certain things, like pickles. There were no pickles in Italy, or cranberries or stuff like that. I ate all this stuff, herrings, things that I remember from back home. After a few days I got kind of sick. Still, it was fun. And we visited some places, museums, Radio City Music Hall, some movies. To see this huge city that was untouched by war was really amazing.

But then we started our trip to Nebraska. It seemed so strange. I had the feeling that we were going in circles because it all looked so much alike. You go from one city to another, and it looks pretty much the same, all these towns that we passed and all these hotels we stayed in. Then it started snowing and we went through a lot of states where it was snowing and very cold. Eventually we got to Lincoln, Nebraska, and were greeted there by some of our family's friends.

It Was Like Starting a New Life

While delighted at the prospect of finally having a home, after so many unsettled years in Italy, the Truskiers, like most post World War II refugees, needed to prove they had the skills to support themselves and would not become a burden on the state as they embarked on the path to US citizenship. According to Irene Bloemraad's comprehensive study of US and Canadian refugee and immigration policies, only after World War II did North America begin to

recognize the difference between immigrants and refugees. "Even as Europe was engulfed in humanitarian crises, from the Turkish persecution of Armenians to the horrors of the Holocaust, American and Canadian governments refused to enact special refugee provisions." After the war, however, both countries "cautiously opened their doors to the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in camps across Europe."[22] *From 1945 until 1980 refugee policy in the US was based on a series of executive decisions, special legislative acts, and various ad hoc directives, but the Truskiers were able to take advantage of President Truman's directive that admitted people from countries that had suffered from the war.*

Mia never mentioned whether they were accorded any special status for being Jewish refugees, and as far as she knew they were not. Being entirely secular, the subject of their religious and ethnic background did not come up. According to Peter, his mother told him years later that Joe and Heddi had specifically warned his parents not to say anything about being Jewish, or about their close calls during the war. Whether they would have been welcomed so warmly had their neighbors been aware that they were Jewish refugees, would be difficult to say. Since Joe and Heddi were quite adamant that they not say anything about being Jewish, one might assume the couple had confronted anti-Semitism in Nebraska.

We were so excited. It was like starting a new life, finally knowing that we are in a place where we can stay, where they will accept us—that we don't have to worry about what we'll do tomorrow. We can stop wondering about collecting more visas. All these visas that we had to Bulgaria, to Turkey, places where we never wanted to go. Or, if we wanted to go then something happened and we didn't, like going to Brazil. We finally felt like we've made it. Here we are, and this is going to be our life from now on. We lived in Nebraska for six years. I have very fond memories of Lincoln, really. We made wonderful friends there. In many ways it was probably better for us to be in Nebraska to begin our life here, than if we had gone to either coast. At that time in Nebraska there were so few foreigners. We were perceived as kind of exotic and interesting, and not as a threat or competition, taking anybody's job away from them, or anything like that. Well, the climate was difficult but, you know, we were raised in a cold climate in Poland, so snow, ice, all that wasn't that much different. But it was hard because there was hardly any spring. All of a sudden there's this hot, humid summer, full of bugs, chiggers, mosquitoes, and things. It was very hard to grow anything.

But people were very friendly. When we got our citizenship after five years in Nebraska, all our neighbors got together and they gave us a big picnic and celebrated. People were very nice. We made a lot of very good friends.

Two factors that facilitated their integration into the new community were that Lincoln is a university town, home to the University of Nebraska, which provided them a more liberal and multicultural environment than Nebraska as a whole, and the friendship they established early on with a Viennese immigrant of long standing in the community.

The uncle who sponsored us was my mother-in-law's younger brother. When we arrived the arrangement was that my mother-in-law was going to live with him and his wife. That building was a duplex, and they were downstairs. And upstairs there lived this old friend of theirs. Her name was Emily Schossberger and she was a Viennese. She was the director of the University of Nebraska Press, I recall at the time. Jan, Andy, and I were living upstairs with Emily. She was really a wonderful person. She did everything she could to help us meet people, and find jobs. She gave a party once and invited everybody in the art department, all the faculty, to meet us. I offered to make pizza for that party. It was so funny because when you think of pizza today, it's just like apple pie or motherhood, it's so American. Well maybe somewhere like New York, somewhere else, but at that time in Lincoln nobody ever heard of pizza. They were just amazed at this thing. So I made these pizzas with the little pans that I brought from Italy. I still have those pizza pans, by the way.[3]

Today, I must say that the relatives were not that nice to us. I mean, they sponsored us. It didn't cost them anything. They didn't invest anything in it. As a matter of fact, my mother-in-law gave her brother a beautiful diamond ring, for her sister-in-law. They had this attitude, they used to say, "Oh, when we came to this country then we didn't have it so easy," which was nonsense because they came and they got very good jobs. There were very few people coming at the time they came. I think she came in 1925, and he in 1928 from Switzerland. They went to New York. I mean, they had a very good life, very easy.

In fact, Jan's aunt Heddie (Weber) immigrated alone to New York in order to escape her patriarchal household that refused to allow her to marry Jan's uncle, Joe Lotto, a man the Webers considered insufficiently wealthy. She left on her own for the US, with Joe joining her after a few years, and they married in New York.

But they were always critical, and the way they were trying to help us was not very helpful. For one thing I think the uncle had a vested interest, because he was an interior designer and he was in charge of the interior-decorating department at a large department store. He wanted Jan to be his assistant. At that time, I think he was paying $140 month. He wanted him to go around with him, to clients' houses, to measure for draperies and carpeting, and stuff like that. Work is not demeaning; you can do any work if you have to. But Jan was a trained architect. He wanted to work in his profession. He already had lost many years of his professional life, although in Italy, toward the end, he did have a job with some architects. He was really very anxious to start working, doing what he was educated to do and what he loved to do. But the uncle was not very anxious to help him, even though he knew architects in the city.

Finally, Jan got tired of it, and he just took the telephone directory and looked up all the names. There were not many architects in Lincoln. He wrote to them all and then he followed with the telephone and got himself a job with a firm. The uncle was kind of unhappy about it, like he was being stabbed in the back. He kept saying things like, "Something has been cooked up." You see, on the other hand, this Emily, the friend with whom we lived upstairs, she was so good to us. She was really a wonderful person. When she had the party for us and invited all her friends, Aunt Heddi, didn't even show up, begging off with a headache, while Joe came for maybe ten minutes and then left without greeting hardly anyone.

Even though young, middle-class, white mothers in the US in the postwar years were encouraged to become housewives and stay-at-home moms, Mia never considered not having a career. With help from Emily Schossberger, Mia set about immediately looking for work, hoping to take up costume design or some form of artistry where she could use her creative talent.

Emily personally called and made an appointment for me to meet the director of the advertising and display department at this very fancy women's wear store Hovland-Swanson that was like, I guess, a Nebraska edition of Niemen Marcus. They had the same kind of designers, very expensive, very elegant stuff. She took me there and introduced me to this man. I brought a sample of what I could do, like a little scene made from paper sculpture. He was very impressed, and they gave me a job. I had to fight to get paid $1.00 an hour, but in those years, a dollar was not what a dollar is today. I worked just part time, and was paid by hours, no benefits or anything like that. Since I did a lot of artwork when we lived in Rome, what I had in mind was that I would be able to do this kind of

thing, like create props for display windows. In those years people actually walked and looked at the display windows. Stores spent a lot of money and gave a lot of attention to windows, because it was important.

Although unaware of it at the time, Mia was pioneering a new career when the modern department store was in ascendance, along with the rise of the middle-class consumer and the advent of window shopping. As Jan Whitaker demonstrates in her book on the influence of the department store in shaping consumer culture, the old dry goods stores of the nineteenth century paid little attention to display because "most of the store's merchandise was packed away in boxes, shelves, and drawers, often concealed in solid wood cabinetry and requiring clerks' assistance to find it and unpack it for examination."[4] *In the first two decades of the twentieth century, beginning with the flagship store Marshall Field in Chicago, managers turned their attention to creating attractive window displays, including artfully arranged merchandise and mannequins dressed in the most recent fashion offerings. Mia explained her new job.*

It turned out that they [the managers] expected me to be mostly a window dresser, and to dress the mannequins, and do things like that. I thought, well, okay, if that's what I have to do that's what I will do. I'd never done it before. I remember the first time I had to dress and undress a mannequin, I didn't have the faintest idea how you take it apart. So I said, 'Oh, you know, these mannequins really are very different from the European ones.' I never saw a European one!

The excuse worked and, after a short orientation, Mia was soon adept at dressing and displaying the latest fashions on the mannequins in the window. This was an essential component of the store since, at that time, the display windows of department stores showcased both the personality of the store, where it ranked in terms of price, elegance, and clientele, and it served as one of the main forms of advertisement. Flagship stores such as Macy's in New York, Marshall Field in Chicago, Filene and Jordan Marsh in Boston, Wanamaker in Philadelphia, and others, emerged as "palaces of consumption" that actually schooled the consumer into the culture of buying. This education depended on key features: an attentive and solicitous sales' staff, usually women who could intuit the needs and desires of the consumer, a spatial design that could awaken the customer's desire to buy, and the attractive display of goods, often enhanced and decorated with objects that were extraneous to the product itself.[5]

If by the 1930s most stores showcased their merchandise in attractive shop windows, there was still little emphasis on the artful display of merchandise

inside the store, despite the urging of trade magazines to "make the store interior a showroom instead of a stockroom."[6] *It was not until the 1940s, and then only in the major retail markets in the coastal cities and Chicago, that department stores embraced the importance of the interior display. Many stores in the small cities of the Midwest and South clung to the attitude that all they had to do was to get the customer inside the store, and then simply have a clerk bring whatever she wanted to buy. In the 1950s, the notion of creating a consumer demand, often for items people did not think they needed nor had any idea even existed, became more widespread. With the explosion of ready-made, affordable goods adorning display racks, customers with newly acquired disposable incomes became accustomed to browsing through stores, often deciding on a purchase based on an enticing display. The process of what Susan Porter Benson called "visual merchandising" was well on its way by the time Mia began her job at Hovland-Swanson in 1950.*[7] *Drawing on her artistic acumen and eye for design, honed under the desperate circumstances of making a living as a refugee in Rome, Mia soon became a very adept "visual merchandiser" at one of the most elegant department stores in Lincoln. Creating chic displays both inside the store and in the windows came to Mia naturally, but her boss took some persuading.*

My boss, a very nice man really, but he had certain ideas he was used to. Every year, all these people that had jobs like that would travel to Chicago to these display marts and buy props for their windows. One year, he went to Chicago and he bought some props that were horrible really. They were huge bunches of plastic grapes, frosted grapes or something, that he was going to put in the window. What happened was that a couple of weeks before the competition that typically began in the fall with the stores all trying to outdo each other with fancy window displays, the department store across the street put that same kind of stuff in their window. They had the same ugly grapes because their manager probably bought them from the same wholesaler in Chicago. So here my boss was left with nothing original for the window display, even if what he had planned was really pretty ugly.

Then I told him, "You know, what we should do is make our own props. It will be cheaper for you and you will be sure that nobody else will have the [same] stuff in their window." So he agreed to that, and from then on we started making our own props. I made some for that year and then for the following Christmas, I think it was, I decorated the whole store. I made these figures. Well, he didn't want them to be angels. He was a very devout Catholic and he said, "I don't mix religion and business,

so they cannot be angels floating in the air." So we just had these floating figures without wings, but they were very nice. They were these floating ladies, and we had them on all the floors. I made some special decorations for the elevators. Then I decorated the windows. I can't remember the theme for them.

They really turned out quite nice except that it was very hard [to make them]. We had a workshop in the basement of the store, and there was no good ventilation. They would bring me a big fan but there was no fresh air coming in. This stuff that I worked with—this material called Silastic—was very unhealthy because you had to soak it in acetone before you could mold it or shape it, so the fumes were very bad.[8]

Mia finished the project in early November, having worked on it for several months while pregnant with their second child, however possibly not aware of the danger of the fumes, until after she left the job.[9]

And then Peter was born on April 23, 1951. It was a very exciting time for us. At that time we were living in our own small apartment. We had moved from Emily's place. It was a small apartment but we were so happy to have a place of our own. We hardly had any furniture but we managed and we were very happy to have that place. The only thing was that my mother-in-law was very unhappy living with her brother and sister-in-law, so when we moved, we just said, 'Okay, you come with us.' I never really thought she would always live with us, but it happened.

This problematic arrangement, with Regina as a part of their household, stretched through at least four different houses spanning their lives from Nebraska to California, until Regina died in 1968. True to form, she was never content with her living arrangements. Mia's first encounter with Jan's mother back in Warsaw in 1938, when she was left to wait over an hour in a hard chair in the mansion's entryway for an "audience," forever scarred her view of her mother-in-law. Given that Mia and Regina never saw eye-to-eye, and even Jan found his mother to be a less-than-gracious houseguest, the situation was probably the most miserable aspect of Mia's otherwise quite pleasant life in the US. Not only did Regina never adjust to living devoid of wealth, servants, chauffeurs, and the deference accorded one of Warsaw's elite, she continuously complained as though the Truskiers were leading lives of deprivation, when actually their circumstances were comfortable, but not wealthy. One could argue that Regina's discontent was a feature of the refugee's displacement, even if an unsympathetic one. She never found a community of peers in her new homeland with which to share her experience, but then she apparently did not try very hard. Peter remembers tempestuous arguments

Fig. 8.2 Andy, Jan, and Mia with newborn Peter, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1951. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

that would leave his parents drained after enduring Regina's explosive accusations and complaints, but which seemed not to affect his grandmother. Her tirades that caused the rest of the family to retreat to their rooms in silent fury or fearful escape seemed to serve as a release for Regina, leaving her calm and even invigorated.

Anyway, by that time we started thinking about getting a house of our own. That was the first, well, not only in this country but ever, for Jan and me, because all those years we were married there was no way to have a

place of our own. We got this new house; it was built in a development. It was kind of far. Lincoln was a small town really, maybe 100,000, not very large, and it was a new tract.

The purchase of a new tract home, branded the Truskiers as full-fledged members of the postwar suburban American dream. Whereas before World War II forty-four percent of Americans owned their homes, the number increased to sixty-two percent in 1960.[10] *Home ownership in Nebraska and in the neighboring agriculture states of Iowa and Kansas, was slightly higher than the national average. In addition to many family-owned farms, none of these states had large metropolitan areas to match those in Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, where apartment-dwelling and areas of urban poverty brought the averages for home ownership down. As with many other postwar families, Mia and Jan delighted in having a place they could irrevocably stamp as their own.*

We could make some choices. In those years they always built these houses so the living room was looking on the street with these big picture windows. Then people would put a table with a lamp looking on the street, even though there was a big front lawn. We thought that was silly. You don't want your living room to look on the street, and the street looking into your living room.

We arranged to have the plan changed so that our living room looked on the back yard. There were beautiful old trees in the back yard and there were lilac bushes, which I loved dearly, because of nostalgic feelings connected with lilacs from back home. We didn't want them to move a single tree, and just worked around them. We had a mulberry tree, some elms; it was really nice. It was an old neighborhood but it wasn't built up. There had been only one house on kind of a small hill not far from where our house was built. And that big old house was moved. All the cockroaches from that old house moved into the new development. Ever since we moved in we always had cockroaches at that house. We just couldn't get rid of them. All these brand new homes and full of cockroaches!

I appreciated the logic of Mia's critique of the typical suburban house, complete with a picture window wasted on a view of the street, and only wish her innovation had caught on more generally. Ironically, she described their design innovations in the Lincoln house, as we sat in the lower floor of a Berkeley house with a large window looking out on the street. The picture window, an essential feature of suburban ranch-style homes such as the one the Truskiers were buying, looked out onto a small front yard. The suburban home advertised to the world the "American Dream": landownership for

common people, even if it had only a postcard-sized yard. Beginning in 1951, the Federal Housing Authority supplied loans to millions of white first-time home buyers. FHA loans were expressly restricted to "Caucasians" only, such that even Black GIs returning from the war could not apply, but recently arrived immigrants from Europe could. As a result, the "American Dream" only went so far, but it is highly doubtful that Mia and Jan knew this. Indeed, years later they were active in the California Fair Housing Campaign to overturn racist real estate practices.[11]

With two small children, a new house in the suburbs, and Jan securely employed as an architect, the Truskiers, knowingly or not, fit the stereotype of the 1950s American family, except that Mia continued to pursue her career. Returning to work as a designer at Hovland-Swanson when Peter was only a few months old, Mia's ambition to seek professional fulfillment outside the home set her apart from the "typical" postwar married mother.

I kept working, part-time. I had to rush home because I was nursing Peter. I'd leave in the morning and I'd nurse him, then my mother-in-law would stay with him. He was a very good baby and slept, no trouble at all. I would come home at noon so that I could nurse him again, go back to work, and then come back about four o'clock. I had stopped doing the designs for the windows and the store interior because that involved a lot of running up and down, bringing dresses and accessories and all kinds of things. I had started to work more in advertising. In those years they used art work, they didn't use photographs to advertise fashions. The person they had doing the art work left suddenly and the store had a freelance artist who was so bad. When I saw these drawings I said to myself, "I never learned to do this but I certainly can do better than that!" I made some sketches and showed them to the boss. It was the same boss who was the director of the display and advertising departments. He looked at my sketches and said, "Hmm, that's pretty good." So he let me do some ads for the papers, and that was really fun.

Hovland-Swanson was a very fancy store in Lincoln, Nebraska, but it was not big enough to afford life models that were commonly employed by the major department stores like I. Magnin or Lord & Taylor. Those stores had their own models and their artists would draw the fashions. So I used magazines and pictures, just to get ideas for the pose. The boss who was the owner of the store once saw an ad that I did for some cashmere sweaters, or something; some of these ads were a full page or sometimes half a page. He was so funny; he was a big snob, but he was a pretty nice man. Always when he liked something he would say, "It looks like us."

NEBRASKANS: In The Workshop And At Home

Paper Sculpturing Draws Lavish Praise

BY VIRGIL FALLOON
Star Staff Writer

Using scissors instead of a sculptor's knife, paper instead of clay, Mrs. Jan Truskier of 3315 Van Dorn created foot-high statues of medieval-costumed characters which brought a note of amazement and praise from the director of the Denver Museum of Fine Arts.

In a handwritten note—"because I couldn't wait until my secretary returned"—the director enthusiastically acknowledged that she had "never seen anything like" Mrs. Truskier's paper sculptures when four figures and a "painting in paper" were placed on exhibit there last winter.

☆ ☆ ☆

As a high school student in her native Poland, Mrs. Truskier had seen examples of paper sculpturing in the Warsaw Museum of Fine Arts. But it was not until convalescing from an illness during her first winter in Rome, Italy, that she attempted the art.

"I was feeling very sorry for myself because I couldn't see the Nativity scenes in Rome during my first Christmas (1941) there," she explained.

Working with paper while confined to bed, she constructed a Nativity scene. After becoming quite adept at sculpturing by 1946, Mrs. Truskier sought a practical use for her art and constructed a life-size Santa Claus in paper which was a "very big success."

☆ ☆ ☆

Mr. and Mrs. Truskier, who came to Lincoln in November, 1949, met as architectural students at Switzerland's Federal Polytechnical School, which has one of the "finest schools of architecture in Europe."

Mrs. Truskier completed two years and her husband had just been graduated when war broke out in Europe. They returned to Warsaw arriving just a few weeks before Germany attacked Poland.

In the Spring of 1940—a year later—they were married and left war-torn Warsaw for Italy. They hoped to reach Switzerland, the native land of Mr. Truskier's mother. At that time it was possible to leave Poland, but continuation of their journey farther than Italy proved impossible during the war.

A visa to the United States also was impossible to obtain, and during the next eight years they lived in Rome where Mr. Truskier did free-lance architectural work for Italy's movie industry and worked for UNRRA and an architectural firm.

In 1949 they were able to obtain passports to this country and came to Lincoln, where Mr. Truskier has an uncle. Accompanying the couple were their son, Andrew, 9, and Mr. Truskier's mother. A second son was born in Lincoln.

(Star Photo)

MR. AND MRS. JAN TRUSKIER
. . . for her work, a handwritten note . . .

eople Speak

Fig. 8.3 "Nebraskans: in the workshop and at home," feature article on Mia's paper sculptures, *The Lincoln Star, October 2, 1952*, p. 4. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

And if he didn't like it then it was just thumbs down. He saw my ad and said, "Hmm, this looks like us." So I was in business. I did that for a few more years.

Those were very happy times, even with some difficulties; living with my mother-in-law was not that easy. But let me tell you about a thunderstorm we had, and how sometimes these feelings just kind of come and you don't really know how it happens. I remember so well when Peter was a very small baby, he couldn't even sit up yet and we were pretty new at our new home. That day there was a big thunderstorm. It was lightning and thunder. A lot of that happens in Nebraska in summertime. I was changing his diaper on our bed. I don't know why, all of a sudden I just felt this sense of how happy I was, and how much I had to be grateful for. It completely overwhelmed me and I always remember that. Sometimes I remember it with thunderstorms, which is good because I'm really scared of thunderstorms, ever since I was a little girl and we had a lot of thunderstorms in Poland. It's just one of those mysterious moments when out of the blue something kind of comes over you and you can hardly put it into words. That must have been summer 1951.

Becoming Citizens

After five years in Nebraska, Mia and her family became citizens, an event featured in the local Lincoln newspaper, complete with a particular commendation from the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce for the multi-generational Truskier family: "Included in the new citizens whom Gov. Victor Anderson and Mayor Clark Jeary will welcome in talks are Mrs. Regina Truskier, her son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Jan Truskier, and their son, 12-year-old Andrew, of 3515 Van Dorn." Over several paragraphs, the story detailed the varied origins of the Truskier family (Switzerland, Poland, and Italy), their graduation from European universities, their architecture professions, the role of their sponsors, "Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Lotto of 1900 King's Highway." The paper quoted the Truskier family's "deep joy in becoming United States citizens" and gratitude toward their sponsors who made it all possible.[12] *Mia and Jan's accomplishments as artists were discussed at length, even the date when Jan passed the Nebraska state exam to earn his architecture license. At no point did the article mention their harrowing years as war refugees. There was nothing about the circumstances of the Truskiers' travel to the US, nor their reasons for leaving Poland and living as refugees in Italy, nothing to hint at being Jewish nor of losing family in the Holocaust. From the vantage*

point of contemporary society, it seemed incomplete, but possibly for a newspaper in 1950s Nebraska, it was not. In Peter Truskier's memory, neither Heddi nor Joe Lotto, nor his parents and grandmother, ever mentioned their Jewish ancestry, and apparently, no one asked. Knowing Mia and her identification as Polish, this did not strike me as unusual, but I tend to think she, or the reporter, would bring it up in a similar article today.

After the ceremony, Mia recalled that "all our neighbors got together and they gave us a big picnic and celebrated. People were very nice. We made a lot of very good friends."

Even though we had a lot of friends there, we always thought Nebraska really wasn't the place where we wanted to spend the rest of our lives. For one thing, Jan had very bad allergies, and that was a terrible place for people with allergies. Once somebody advised him to try Seattle. So he took a trip to Seattle but when he got there he went to see a man who was a doctor, a friend of some friends of ours, and this man told him, "Well, if you have allergies, this is not the place for you. If you're allergic to ragweed and sagebrush and stuff this is not the place for you either." So we gave up that idea. Then he tried to go to the West Coast, San Francisco, and the Bay Area, but at that time there were just no jobs available at all.

Newest Citizens Honored

Lincoln's newest group of naturalized citizens, including four persons representing three generations of one family—will be guests of honor at a reception set for 7:30 p.m., Wednesday in the Chamber of Commerce Building.

The group, totaling 82, have been admitted to citizenship in the United States District Court.

In addition to these new citizens and their children under 16 years of age who automatically are citizens through their parents' naturalization, all friends, relatives, patriotic organizations and interested citizens are invited to attend.

NOW THEY'RE ALL CITIZENS—Four-year-old Peter Truskier, a native of Lincoln, is joined by Mrs. Kenneth B. Smith, (far left) chairman of the civic affairs committee, Women's Division, Chamber of Commerce, in congratulating his brother, 12-year-old Andrew and his parents and grandmother (from left) Mrs. Jan Truskier, Mrs. Regina Truskier, on their newly-acquired American citizenship.

Fig. 8.4 "Newest citizens honored." Photo and news article on the Truskier family's citizenship induction, May 22, 1955. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Then we had a friend in Lincoln, a young man who had just finished the school of architecture, and he became a very good friend of ours. He was quite peculiar. His name was John Butler, and he was a very strange character. He decided that he also was going to try to go back to California and eventually he left. Then one day he called Jan on the phone and he said, "I have a wonderful job for you, so come right away." Well, Jan couldn't do it immediately. He had to make arrangements to take some time off from work. But then he said, okay, he's coming and by the time Jan arrived it turned out that this friend of ours not only didn't have a job for Jan, he even lost his own job! But that was him; he was that kind of a person.

Luckily before Jan left, we had some contacts by then in Lincoln, somebody gave us names of people, friends who lived in California, and the man happened to be an architect, too. Jan contacted him, and through him he found out that there was a big architectural firm in Long Beach that possibly had a job. He contacted them and, sure enough, he got this job. It was a large firm in Long Beach.

Our dream was really to be in Northern California, but since there were no jobs at all there at the time, we just decided, let's do this. We eventually moved to Southern California. We had a station wagon and drove through the desert, through the mountains. We always heard so much about this desert, and we had these visions of a Sahara. Then we hardly noticed that we went through the desert because at that time it was November and there was already some greenery.

Southern California

Peter remembers the trip from Nebraska to California as kind of a blur. He was four years old and viewed the trip from the backseat squeezed between his grandmother and older brother. The vast expanse of the western US can hardly fail to impress any traveler, but can get tiring and even boring for hours on end. At the end of their journey, the Truskiers found that their arrival in California proved to be bumpier than the drive through the desert.

We arrived in Southern California, and this friend, our dependable John, he was there and living on Balboa Island. He rented an apartment for us there. The movers were bringing all our furniture, so we didn't have anything with us. He said, 'Don't worry, everything will be here.' We arrived in this little apartment and there was no bedding, nothing. So he went and somewhere from some friends borrowed some sheets for us.

Then Jan started to work at the place in Long Beach. Balboa Island at that time was very interesting. It was very fancy, very expensive to live there, too. Grocery stores and everything was quite expensive. Somehow, in those years, Balboa Island was like a colony of estranged wives of people who worked in Hollywood, not so much actors but there were story writers, illustrators, cartoon designers, a lot of people like that. What was happening was that these men, in those years the wives didn't work so much so the wives were at home with the children, the husbands would commute to Hollywood. After a while they would find somebody in Hollywood, start commuting less and less to come home to their families, and eventually get divorced and just stay in Hollywood. There were quite a few families like that. There was this one wonderful woman who we met through our friend John, and she was so nice to us and helped us a lot. With her husband it was the same kind of situation. He eventually just left the family.

Mia's accounts tend to insert a touch of reality into a scene that is supposed to be "Ozzie and Harriet" ideal. In Warsaw, in Italy, in Southern California, there was often an underside to the patina of contentment: strife in families, wayward men and their affairs, children born of parents who were not married to each other, Ryszard's two families, and the falling out with Jan's aunt and uncle in Lincoln, and finally, Balboa Island with a fairly established routine of men leaving their families to take up with younger women. Piece together Mia's stories and you have a swatch of realism, disrupting the hearth-and-home ideal and punching holes in "normality." Personal testimony has a way of revealing that.

Everything looked so promising and Jan started working. But then, about a week after Jan started working, one night, all of a sudden, he got terribly sick. We were in this little apartment that didn't even have a telephone, so I had to go out and use a public phone. We didn't know anybody; we didn't have a doctor. We knew John but he was not very dependable and we knew the woman who was a friend of his, but not well. I just called the operator and I said, "I need a doctor. My husband is very sick. He has this horrible pain in his low back." He was in a lot of pain and I was just frantic. It was such a terrible experience, I'll never forget it. This woman connected me to the police instead of a doctor. I told them again, "My husband is really sick, I need a doctor!" I heard them, one cop talking to the other and making jokes, "Oh it's another one of those." I said, "What do you mean?" They started asking questions like, "Are you sure your husband didn't have too much to drink?" and stuff like that. I just got so angry. I was frantic, and I shouted at him. I said, "Stop! I don't

know what you're talking about. I need a doctor. This is a real emergency!" Eventually they did send a doctor, but before the doctor came, two policemen came. Apparently there had been problems of police being robbed and they were hesitant to answer what they claimed were bogus emergencies.

Anyway, a doctor came, a good doctor. There was a very famous hospital not too far from there, Hoag Memorial Hospital in Newport. They did x-rays and things, and they found that he had this huge mass in his right kidney. As it turned out later what really saved his life was that he also had a kidney stone. The kidney stone started moving and that's what produced this horrible pain. But they found this mass and it was cancer. He had cancer of the kidney. Without the stone nobody would even have known until it was too late. So he had to be operated on and they removed the kidney. Here we were, with this little apartment and two kids. Peter was four years old and Andy was twelve. So it was really very hard to keep it all together.

We moved to Long Beach and we managed somehow. It took a while before Jan could start working full-time, but he did recover. Then I remembered my father's motto: "Straight ahead, with a good posture and a bouquet of flowers in your hand."[13] I tell people about that, and then I always want to say that it's from my father, "whose name was Zygmunt Tłusty." I want them to know who he was. I wish he could have seen his grandchildren.

I was the one who scouted the area for houses, and I saw that house. Somehow, I don't know whether it was the wood floors, there was something about it, even though it was completely different from my background. It felt like home the minute I saw it. It was a lovely house.

Built in 1928 or 1929, the one-story stucco, "Spanish style" house in Belmont Shore, Long Beach, was common in Southern California. It had dark wood beams in the ceiling, whitewashed walls, a walled-in small front yard, and was close to the beach.

It was kind of small for us because the boys, especially with eight years difference between them, had to be in one room. My mother-in-law had a tiny room and Jan and I had a tiny bedroom. Then we had our living room and dining room. Everything was so small. We had friends, and if we had a big dinner with ten or twelve people we had to put the table kind of diagonally across the dining room because there wasn't enough space. Sometimes we had to move the furniture around: it was fine. I really loved that house.

We added a whole story upstairs. Jan designed it with wood panels that would open up to create one big area. And at the same time you could separate it and have a bedroom there. It had a kitchenette and a very nice bathroom. Originally it became Andy's room, which left Peter with a room for himself and enough space to pursue his enthusiasm for amateur radio. He communicated with people all over the world on the radio. That was in the years before computers and email and all that, so that was a nice hobby for him.

Parenthetically, during the turbulent era of the 1960s' student movement, Peter used his ham radio skills to connect with activists in other parts of the world, including attempts in 1970–1971 to connect his brother Andy in California with Black Panther-in-exile, Eldridge Cleaver, in Algeria. Later Andy traveled with Cleaver to the Soviet Union and other places, but the ham radio connection between the US and Algeria never worked out.[14]

Once the family was settled in their new home, Mia began to look for work, hoping to find a position as a fashion illustrator and commercial artist.

I tried to find something in art, but it turned out that Long Beach was not a very good place for art or design. You know that figure of the Spaniard that I have, the sculpture made of *Silastic*, that special material I told you about? I made that as a sample to show what I can do. I was trying to get some work in Los Angeles, and I went to talk to the people who are the creators of the "Oscar" and "Emmy" statuettes. They were very interested. When I showed them some small figures, they asked "Yeah, but can you make a big one, like a life-size?" I said, "Sure enough.' So I made this figure to show them."

In a scene reminiscent of when she hauled a life-size angel to a movie set in Rome in an open air cart, Mia managed to squeeze the elaborately glued conquistador into her car for transport to downtown Los Angeles.

But what really turned me off immediately was, they saw my work and they were very impressed, and this and that. And then they said, "Do you know how to type?" (Laughing) "No, I don't know how to type." And, you know they wanted to have me as a girl Friday, or something. I realized that if I took that job I would be doing all the work, and they would be getting all the credit. Besides, I couldn't commute to Los Angeles from Long Beach, with two children still young.

I had gone to some of the fancy department stores to see if I could do fashion illustration for them. I went to Robinson's in Los Angeles. And everybody liked my work, but there was always something. Eventually I decided to go to an employment agency in Long Beach. When I told them

that I studied at the school of architecture, they said: 'Oh, so you must have done a lot of drafting.' I said, 'Sure,' which was, of course, true, although I hadn't had a lot of on-the-job experience. I knew I could work as a draftsman, but I had never practiced it. So I said 'Fine, if you find me one, and one that is in Long Beach. I don't want to go anywhere on freeways. I want to be right here." He, the man at the employment agency, would sometimes call me and say, "Oh, you know there is a job with Soulé Steel, blah, blah, blah." I said, "Well, how far is it? Oh, it's only six miles on the freeway." I said, "If it's on the freeway, I'm not interested." I wanted it to be right here in town.

In retrospect, it is amazing that she made such a request in the first place, given that travel in the Los Angeles area apart from the freeway was almost unheard of, and even more astonishing, that eventually she did get a job and a good one.

So one day he called me and said, "Do you know how to wire a house?"

I said, "I don't have the faintest idea how to wire a house." Well there was an electrical engineer here in Long Beach, who was looking for somebody for a draftsman. And I thought just to be polite I will go for that interview. Of course, the employment agency charges you. You had to pay them I think half of your first month's salary or something for these services, or even more. I don't remember now; but anyway he was trying to be helpful.

I went, and it was kind of ironic because when I studied in Switzerland at the school of architecture I did very well. I had very good grades. We had to pass all these exams because we had to make up for the difference between the Polish high school curriculum and theirs in Switzerland, which was on a much higher level. When I took my physics exam, there were four students together taking the exams, like an oral exam. Every student was asked questions on electricity. That was one thing I just didn't have time to prepare. My name, Mia Tłusty, started with 'T' so I was at the end. By then I think the professor got tired of asking about electricity. So he asked me about optics, which I knew very well. And I ended up getting an A on the exam. Then, when I went to see this electrical engineer, I said, "Now I'm paying my debts, because I got an A in physics without ever knowing much about electricity. And here I'm going to work for an electrical engineer."

In a stroke of generosity seldom extended to skilled men, much less women, the owner hired Mia on a provisional basis.

He said, "In two or three weeks we'll see how you like it, how I like it, and then we'll take it from there." I was on that job for, I think, 11 years. I learned on the job and I became a designer. At first I didn't know anything about it. As you work, you learn and you become interested. Then I really enjoyed it; I had lots of fun. This man, the owner of the firm, the engineer, he was such a funny guy. He was a tiny little guy. He was one of these few men in those years who felt that women were superior, and that they were so suited for this kind of work. There were, when I came to work there, already two women. One of them had been with him for many years. She kind of became his right hand. None of them were engineers, but they did the work of engineers. They all learned on the job.

Eventually, I started working on a big hospital. We did all the electrical work for the Long Beach Memorial Hospital—a huge job. I really did a lot of work on that hospital. Sometimes when he would introduce me to somebody, he would say, "This is my hospital department." In many ways he lacked manners, but he was so sincerely convinced that women can do as good a job as men. Or better! He was very generous. When we completed a job he would give us gift certificates to a restaurant for dinners to take our families. He was a funny guy.

Without a doubt Mia was a conscientious worker, making sure that the blueprints for the electrical circuitry fit the intended purpose and passed a rigorous inspection. Nonetheless, one has to marvel that the electrical work on a prestigious hospital in Southern California was designed, at least in part, by a group of untrained engineers! Mia was extremely intelligent and very skilled. She took on projects and learned as she went along, such as the props for the store windows in Lincoln, Nebraska, or the centerpieces and lamp shades for Myricae or the movie sets at the Cinecitta in Rome. That she faked knowing how to dress a mannequin for a store window was one thing, but wire a hospital?!

What stands out in this long and varied list of accomplishments is that Mia had remarkable self-confidence in her ability to create and meet a high standard. A man at that time, or even today, who demonstrated the level of talent, resourcefulness, self-confident artistry, and work ethic, could have advanced to the top rungs of the designing world. Mia's creations sold because they were exceptional, attracted a clientele, and held up. Her designer eye was sharp, with an assured sense of novelty. Her creativity was innate and irrepressible, resulting in a prodigious artistic output. I often thought she would have fashioned centerpieces for her own memorial service if someone had suggested it.

After a number of years working in a large Long Beach architecture firm, Jan and another colleague from the same office started their own business, which had its ups and downs but prospered for eighteen years. This financial stability allowed Mia, after more than a decade in the engineering office, to go back to school to finish her degree, in hopes of one day becoming a teacher. In fact, her proficiency as a puppeteer grew out of her desire to teach, both of which she took up in her late forties.

I thought that I would get my diploma in French, and I was hoping to teach French in junior high and high school. In 1967, 1 started to audit some French classes. It had been so many years since I went to school. Then I was accepted at Cal State Long Beach, and I did eventually get my degree in French.

In order to obtain her teaching credential, Mia had to complete a number of hours of practice teaching. She was assigned to some tough schools in Compton and South Central Los Angeles, one of the most daunting learning environments in the entire country. To meet the challenge of this classroom, Mia introduced learning through puppetry with some success. If learning French was not high on the priorities of her teenage audience, she found she could engage them in staging French language puppet shows. While delighted to have achieved her college degree after so many years, graduating after one of her son's and shortly before the other, Mia never pursued her teaching career. It was very difficult for a heavily accented middle-aged white woman to command the authority required to teach high schoolers from such a different background. Admirably she tried, but soon decided against the teaching career opting instead for community puppetry workshops and political activism.

The Unitarian Church and Political Activism

We had a lot of friends in Long Beach. We joined the Unitarian Church, and the way it happened was that Andy had a friend in school, whose name was Nick Harvey. We became very friendly with his family later. His mother Albertine became one of my dearest friends. She's been dead for several years now. Andy used to talk about Nick and his family going to the Unitarian Church in Long Beach. He said, "You know, maybe we should go and visit there sometime." So we did go.

If their initial attraction to the Unitarian Church came from Andy's friend, it was the activist message of the young minister, Jack Kent that sealed their interest in joining. Unitarian-Universalism is a broad religious

movement that incorporates nearly all religious and nonreligious beliefs, providing a place where liberal and leftist parishioners can support each other morally and find kindred spirits dedicated to the cause of working for social justice and equality.[15] *Needless to say, not all Unitarian churches are the same and the degree to which they espouse a progressive activist agenda is entirely unpredictable. Mia remembered that Kent was a wonderful speaker, very enthusiastic and dedicated.*

We made a lot of friends; some of our best friends for life were people who we met at that church. It was a good experience. Andy was active with the youth group. Peter was about six or seven years old when we started going there. He went to church school. Later, that minister left and we had another minister who we didn't like very much and we kind of drifted away.

It wasn't until years later, when I wanted to help raise some money for the Indochina peace campaign that I contacted the Unitarian Church about using their facilities. I wanted to give a puppet workshop and raise money that way. There was a woman, Junella Henson; she became a Unitarian minister. She was very nice to me at the time. She suggested that we make it an intergenerational kind of thing. So it worked out very well. We had some grown people and children working together. It was mostly like improvisational puppets. I raised some money, a few hundred dollars for this purpose and that was good.

Mia increasingly drew on her talents as a designer of puppets and stage sets, as a scriptwriter of puppet shows, the voice and manipulator of puppets for staged performances in the service of various social and political causes ranging from entertaining children at the public library to fundraisers for antiwar and refugee assistance causes. One of the first shows was part of a very successful campaign to raise money for the Indochina Peace Campaign with which Andy was involved, along with activists Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland, Tom Hayden, Bob Scheer, and others.

During this time, Mia began to see herself as an artist and activist, expanding out from her work as an engineering assistant. "Well, I started making puppets. But I mostly was teaching, and working with children. We had some dear friends who had a connection with a cultural center in Fullerton, in Southern California. They invited me to have workshops for children, and I did that, and some others like that."

Peter, Mia, and Jan began to engage with the civil rights and antiwar activism permeating the era. Mia enthusiastically explained how they joined the campaign for fair housing, which Peter remembers as "my first political

issue campaign." After the passage of the California Rumford Fair Housing Act in 1963 outlawing discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origin for anyone involved in real estate transactions, the California Real Estate Association, along with the Committee for House Protection, and the Apartment House Owners' Association, went into full-bore opposition. Quickly amassing the needed signatures, the realtors and their allies placed Proposition 14 on the 1964 ballot. The Proposition sought to win a constitutional amendment that allowed property owners to sell or rent to anyone they wished. Restrictive covenants, such as existed in the FHA loans and public programs that facilitated the suburban boom for white homeowners in the 1950s, were gradually overturned, if not fully enforced, through civil rights legislation. Proposition 14 was couched in the language of individual freedom of choice and the sanctity of private property. Playing on the fears of white homeowners, Proposition 14 won over the majority of the electorate and paved the way for the downfall of then governor Edmund (Pat) Brown. Brown had forcefully backed the fair housing act, going so far as to compare the backers of Prop 14 to Nazis. Victorious at the ballot box, the Proposition nonetheless was declared unconstitutional and overturned two years later in the courts.

Both the campaign for Proposition 14 and its repeal in the California State and US Supreme Courts sparked calls for enforcement of fair housing standards and gave rise to local initiatives across the state through which progressive activists sought to rectify unfair practices. In late 1964, the Truskiers and their fair-minded neighbors joined the Long Beach Fair Housing Foundation (FHF), a "non-profit, educational organization devoted entirely to the promotion of fair and open housing practices in our community."[16] *The FHF organizers embarked on a campaign in the predominately white areas of Signal Hill, Los Altos, Lakewood, Belmont Heights, Belmont Shore, and Naples that involved recruiting volunteers to provide monetary support, to subscribe to the FHF newsletter for $2.00 a year, to place the organization's sign advocating nondiscrimination on their lawns, and to actively engage in exposing discriminating landlords and house sellers.*

We had a big sign on the front yard, which upset our neighbors in Belmont Shore. Someone threw eggs on my car. The woman next door, she was the same witch who pushed our cat Henry off the roof with a rake and he lost his leg. She was really upset, and she said, "You know, if Sammy Davis Jr. or Ralph Bunch wanted to move next to me, then it would be all right." (Laughs) And I said, "You know, I don't know if they would want to live here."

The idea of fair housing testing was that somebody white would accompany, or would go first if there was a house that is available, and inquire if it's available, they [owners or landlords] would say it is. Then you went to tell the Black person who was interested to go there, and then the landlords or homeowners would say, "Sorry, it's not available." But you would have a witness.

According to Mia, Myron and Shirley Blumberg, cofounders of the Fair Housing Foundation (FHF), had come up with this tactic, recruiting "testers" to pose as potential tenants or homebuyers. Mia did not say if she or Jan posed as prospective tenants or buyers, but she told how several of their neighbors indicated their disapproval of their lawn sign and her anger at having eggs thrown on their car. Years later Mia shrugged at the encounter, but it was at the time quite scary to have their home and family, including a child, so maliciously targeted. On a positive note, the campaign also connected the Truskiers with like-minded people in the area.

Work with the FHF was Mia's family's first step into organized leftist and progressive political movements in Southern California and in subsequent years this campaign was followed by work in several causes, including freeing two wrongfully accused members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), Paul Skyhorse and Richard Mohawk, many demonstrations against the War in Vietnam, and, ultimately, in support of antiwar Vietnamese refugees. Even though Mia and Jan became more involved in the 1960s, they were already progressive activists when they arrived in America. One need only recall their involvement couriering messages between Polish diplomats in the Vatican and members of the Polish resistance during World War II to verify their willingness to stick their necks out in the service of justice. Nonetheless, it was Andy who introduced his parents to some of the era's most well-known activists, including radical lawyer Leonard (Lenny) Weinglass, journalist Bob Scheer, Tom Hayden, and others. In the case of Skyhorse and Mohawk, Mia and Jan participated in fundraising events to free the AIM leaders. Mia explained how she and her husband got involved.

It was through somebody who knew Andy that we met at this party. I think he was Irv Sarnoff who knew about him [Andy] already from someone else and he had a lot of respect for Andy. At that party he came to us and told us about what happened to these two, and we volunteered that we would like to help. And that was very rewarding, that they were really nice young men. We sent a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, calling for the release of Paul Skyhorse and Richard Mohawk, who had been framed by

the Ventura County law enforcement and jailed on bogus charges of kidnapping.

For Mia it was another case of injustice and one simply had to do something about unjust actions. The Ventura County sheriff's department was cooperating with FBI informers whose sole interest was to jail AIM activists one way or another. The perpetrators of the crime, according to several eyewitnesses, turned state's evidence and implicated Skyhorse and Mohawk, again in contradiction to the eyewitness accounts. After a year-long trial, the two AIM activists were set free. The real purpose, as with the COINTELPRO campaign, was to exhaust the resources and the resolve of the Indian activists, and in that they were entirely successful.[17]

The backdrop to every event from the mid-1960s until 1975 was the War in Vietnam, with the antiwar movement overshadowing and intersecting with every other political movement of the time. Andy Truskier was intensely involved in student politics at UC Berkeley, while his younger brother, Peter, was becoming similarly active at Wilson High School in Long Beach. While drawn into the general resistance to the increasingly unpopular war, not surprisingly Mia directed her focus toward work with refugees, especially the small Vietnamese population in Southern California who opposed the US role in their homeland.

By the end of two decades in America, Mia had chalked up a remarkable set of accomplishments. She had another child, worked as a designer in department stores, had been employed as a drafter in an engineering firm, earned a college degree, garnered considerable notice for her puppetry workshops and teaching methods, and had become steadily active in civil rights and antiwar movements. Mia and Jan's sons, Peter and Andy, had excelled academically and had become active in social justice campaigns. Over the next more than quarter century, Mia's life took several turns, including the excitement of welcoming grandchildren, the pain of tremendous personal loss, relocation to the Bay Area, and the consolidation of a firm and enduring commitment to assisting refugees through the East Bay Sanctuary.

Notes

1. Peter Truskier has the several-time-reincarnated Ciapcius. He was handed down to Peter and over the years underwent more than one reconstruction. Mia always made the puppet's suits red from a material that she could buy in a store so as not to have to dye it, as she did for the original Ciapcius in resource-scarce postwar Italy.

2. Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 108–09.
3. Pizza had entered the US with Italian immigrants in the early twentieth century, but it grew in popularity after the war as returning GI's looked for it in existing Italian-American neighborhoods or, similar to Mia, improvised as best they could to introduce it to their families and friends. More than once, Mia made excellent pizza for me in her apartment in Berkeley in the little pans she still used sixty years later.
4. Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 126–27.
5. Susan Porter Benson, "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880–1940," *Radical History Review* 21 (Fall 1979), 199.
6. Jan Whitaker, 128.
7. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 19–20.
8. In 1948, the Dow Corning Corporation patented an elastomer variant of silicone rubber that could be twisted and formed into many shapes before it hardened. Giving it the descriptive name *Silastic*, Dow marketed it widely for use in manufacturing and construction materials, especially medical devices, prosthetics, and tubing. It also found a place among artists' tools, which is how Mia discovered it, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silastic.
9. Mia's daughter-in-law, Mary, a nurse practitioner, has speculated that Mia's long battle with the blood disorder, polycythemia, and Andy Truskier's death from leukemia at an early age might have been related to the fumes Mia inhaled in the process of making artistic designs. Not until years later was the public made aware of the dangers of acetone and other chemicals such as *cel*, a transparent cellulose acetate, she used in Rome and with *Silastic* in Nebraska.
10. "Historical Census of Housing Tables," United States Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, www.census.gov.
11. Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 61–67.
12. *Lincoln Journal Star*, May 22, 1955, 40.
13. In Polish: *Równo, sztywno, z bukietem w ręk*.
14. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu describes the relationship of a group of Berkeley radicals headed by Robert Scheer and including Andy Truskier with Eldridge Cleaver when he was in Algeria. *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 122–24.

15. "Strained Bedfellows: Pagans, New Agers, and 'Starchy Humanists' in Unitarian Universalism," by Richard Wayne Lee. *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 56, no. 4 (December 1, 1995): 379–96.
16. Quoted in "Good Neighbors Come in All Colors: The Social, Political and Legal History of the Fair Housing Foundation of Long Beach," by Julie Saunders (May 13, 2005), p. 6. Paper available on FHF webpage, http://www.fairhousingfoundation.com/.
17. The Skyhorse-Mohawk case stretched from the first murder accusation in 1974 until the final acquittal of the two young men in 1978. COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) began as the FBI internal surveillance of the Communist Party, or those seen to be communists, in the 1950s and has ended, according to the FBI. There are many references to this program, but it is also described on the FBI website, www.vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro.

CHAPTER 9

"Don't Give In, Don't Give Up!" Refugees and the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, 1968–2014

As I sat in the sanctuary of St. John's Presbyterian Church on the late morning of May 17, 2014 waiting for Mia Truskier's memorial service to begin, I reflected back on the hours I had spent sitting with Mia at her dining room table listening to her tell me of her childhood in Warsaw between the wars, the cast of characters in the Pensione Milton in Italy, the anxious years waiting for a visa and the excitement when it came, the wonder of arriving in New York, of marveling at a city and traveling through a country untouched by war, and all the stories of happiness, sorrow, and rewarding struggle. On this day, Mia's face with the cobalt blue eyes peered from the cover of the memorial brochure. I remembered the first time I met Mia and how struck I was by the blueness of her eyes. They were not remarkably large, just so very blue. They became intense when she recalled a particularly tragic or unfair event, animated at the remembrance of acts of kindness, and twinkled with mischief as she related some act of clever subterfuge or an audacious statement she managed to pull off. Once I looked up "deep blue" because I wanted to be able to describe Mia's eyes, and I came up with "Prussian blue," which seemed kind of ironic for a Polish Jew.

The eyes, she told me, were from her domineering Grandpa Wladzio, who according to family lore had died of a heart attack in a last act of resistance to an ordered deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka death camp. Although I have never been able to verify the story, stranger things have happened than precipitating a heart attack by resolutely resisting such a

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4_9

diabolical command. Mia displayed a determined rejection of injustice, which may well have been inherited from her stubbornly defiant grandfather, along with his piercing blue eyes, and wicked sense of humor. I chuckled remembering a time when my daughter Claire and I were visiting Mia:

> *(Phone rings)*
> *Mia answers: "I'm sorry; she is not available at this time." She repeats it more firmly. "She's not available at this time!"*
> *(Hangs up)*
> *Claire: "Who was it?"*
> *Mia: "Someone asking for money."*
> *(We laugh)*
> *Mia: "Well you know you have to defend yourself!"*

The Memorial Service

The next pages of the memorial brochure contained a brief summary of her life beginning in Warsaw in 1920 with a selection of photos showcasing events, places, and people who punctuated Mia's circuitous journey from Warsaw to Berkeley. Looking at the photographs, I was reminded that Mia was once average height, not the diminutive woman she had become in her nineties. My first impression in meeting her in 1975, in addition to the blueness of her eyes, was of Jan and her hospitality. I do not recall anything unusual in their stature; I think they were near the same height. Then in her mid-fifties, Mia had a lot of hair with a streak of white beginning to move from her brow to the crown of her head. Over the years, the white consumed her entire head, the hair jutting out like snowy straw standing on end, making it hard to know where her head ended and the hair began. She was proud of her hair, I knew that. Once she told me "I used to say I don't want to outlive my hair, but then, I don't want to outlive my teeth, and now I just don't want to outlive my money." Whatever the state of the other two, she didn't outlive her hair.

She became tiny. The osteoporosis bent her spine and curled her neck; bones jutted from her shoulders and her legs and arms were as narrow as the elegant legs on the Danish modern table where we spent many hours. The few times I was outside with her I wondered if a good gust of wind could sweep her away, like Dorothy on her bicycle in a Kansas tornado. Despite her gnarled arthritic fingers, Mia's hands stayed remarkably nimble. She would often take a piece of paper to demonstrate a paper sculpture that she had made in Italy or Nebraska, folding and twisting it into a flower, an animal, or a figurine,

always giving me the impulse to look under the table or around her back, the way you do with a magician, trying to find the trick. Mia would say, "It's just paper. It will take the shape you want it to."

The memorial service began with a procession of her grandchildren and great grandchildren down the center aisle and then fanned out in the front of the chapel. They each introduced themselves by holding up a treasured toy or figure that Mia had made—a puppet, a SpongeBob look alike, a favorite character from a story book—and describing how it reminded them of her. As an indication of Mia's sense of the real world combined with whimsy, her grandson Matt showed off a baby seal. He and Mia had named the seal "Clubby" because, Matt explained, she wanted him to know how horrible it was that the Arctic seals are clubbed to death for their pelts. This woman, beloved for her child-centered teaching and storied reputation for connecting with children, did not shy away from letting her grandson know his responsibility to value all living things.

The last paragraph of the brochure set the tone for the service: "Mia was extremely intelligent, and an accomplished artist who devoted her energy and talent to the people and causes about which she was passionate." Most of the people who came forward that afternoon to share memories of their experiences with Mia harkened back, not to the Storyworld constructed from her memories of Poland, the flight to Italy, or immigrating to the US, but to her social activism. They spoke of her support of refugees from the 1960s in Long Beach to her pride of place as the "oldest refugee" of the East Bay Sanctuary until her death in 2014. Some counted themselves among the refugees who had worked with her for years.

The memorial service demonstrated the breadth of Mia's commitment to social justice and passion for refugee and immigrant rights. Granted, a memorial service is generally not the platform for a critical appraisal of the life of the deceased, at least in any truly honest and profound way. Mia was a very good person, as many people remarked, but she was not a saint. On the other hand, the attendees reaped no special benefit from over-praising a person like Mia. She was not famous, rich, or influential. Besides, a memorial service for a woman in her mid-nineties would not draw a large crowd of devoted friends, since most of her contemporaries are dead. We can probably assume that the large number of people who came wanted to honor her actual accomplishments, and that their laudatory remarks were genuine.

Encountering the Sanctuary Movement

St. John's Presbyterian, the site of the memorial service, was one of the original religious institutions in the Bay Area to join the sanctuary movement that originated in the early 1980s in Tucson, Arizona. Under the leadership of Reverend John Fife, a group of clergy and laity associated with the Tucson Southside Presbyterian Church began to rescue and protect thousands of men, women, and children then crossing the Arizona desert in desperate flight from the death squads and armies terrorizing their homelands. They were denied asylum because the administration of Ronald Reagan was arming the militaries and backing the governments from which people were fleeing. Reverend Fife organized the rescue and delivery of refugees to safe houses and congregations in the US and Canada where they were protected from deportation, and a certain death if they should be returned to their home countries. By the late 1980s over 500 congregations and whole cities across the US had vowed to protect over 60,000 asylum-seekers and refuse to turn them over to immigration authorities.

Fig. 9.1 Mia and Jan Truskier. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Mia's encounter with the refugee rights and the sanctuary movement began with the Unitarian Church in Oakland that she and Jan frequented after they moved to the Bay Area in 1979. When Jan died in 1988, Mia asked the Unitarian minister to conduct a service, comfortable in the understanding that this church was a space that would appropriately commemorate her lifelong companion and lover. Although they were not formal members, they were associated with the Unitarians since Long Beach, and had attended services, social and political events at the Oakland church. Mia thought it was a logical choice for Jan's memorial service.

There was an interim minister because the head of the church was in El Salvador. When he came back in November, he did a very nice service for Jan at the church. People came who knew us through the social action committee at the church and from other places like work and the community.

Jan's sudden death in October 1988 was a cruel shock to a woman who had already borne so much grief: losing family and friends in the Holocaust, her son Andy to leukemia in 1976, and then her husband when he was only 71 years of age. Mia and Jan had a partnership in marriage; they were inseparable, mutually supportive, and politically likeminded. Jan always encouraged Mia in whatever course she chose to follow whether in her career as an artist, puppeteer, engineering assistant, or in finishing her college degree and teaching credential in her late forties. Mia pointed out that "Andy and Peter both got from Jan a tremendous respect for women. Jan was always very generous and treated women well. He thought women should have education and careers."

The Oakland Unitarian Church was Mia's entrée to work with East Bay Sanctuary.

After the service for Jan, I decided to join. It was New Year's 1989, and at that time there were two women who presented to a meeting at the Unitarian Church about the EBSC [East Bay Sanctuary Covenant]. Then we got to know each other on the Social Action Committee of the UC in the department of "Refugee Rights." They found out that I lived in Berkeley, and they asked me if I would be able to take the position of representing the church at the EBSC. They lived far away in Contra Costa County and I lived right here in Berkeley. (This was before Sister Maureen was involved.) I had the two women and the department administrator then, whose name was Irene, to my house for dinner. And we met and discussed the work. I joined what was then called the Steering Committee. And they then formed a Board.

In their sanctuary declarations, St. John's and the other Bay Area churches cited the moral obligation of religious institutions to provide safe harbor to those suffering persecution, as mandated in the 1951 and 1967 United Nations Conventions on asylum and rights for refugees. Their statement read:

> This is not the first time religious people have been called to bear witness to our faith in providing sanctuary to refugees branded 'illegal' in their flight from persecution. The slaves who fled north in our own country and the Jews who fled Nazi Germany are but two examples from recent history. We believe the religious community is now being called again to provide sanctuary—support, protection, and advocacy—to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees who request safe haven out of fear of persecution upon return to their homeland. We do this out of concern for the welfare of these refugees, regardless of their official immigration status. We acknowledge that legal consequences may result from our action. We enter this covenant as an act of religious commitment."[1]

Although the covenant statement was couched in religious language, its basic outlook, which alluded to Blacks escaping slavery and Jews fleeing the Nazis, was very appealing to Mia. Mia later explained to me the origins of the EBSC and how she got involved in it.

Well, you know it started with five churches in 1982. Then a lot of people got involved. How it works is that most of the policy comes from the top, it is like a pyramid, and then it comes down to the people. But in this case, it was kind of unique, because when the churches joined together—and there were maybe thirty something, different congregations [in the Bay Area] representing different religions—and people from those churches got involved and every church would develop their activities and then they would come together. At that time it was called a Steering Committee and every church would have one or two representatives and then they would talk about policies, but they represented people at the bottom of the pyramid. A lot of people who were involved weren't religious. There are people who are atheists and whatever, it doesn't matter. Anybody is welcome.

But religion was important, absolutely, because you know these five Bay Area churches, I mean they openly, publicly, defied the law because at that time the government didn't recognize these people who were coming from Guatemala and El Salvador as refugees because they [the US government, but specifically the Reagan Administration] were supporting their

governments. How could they say, "You are fleeing persecution and we are supporting your government" so they wouldn't accept them. These five ministers got together and they said that they are going to openly support and protect and advocate on behalf of these people because the law of the country is wrong and they have to obey a higher law. So it was, you know, based on very religious principles. And you know some people defied the law and some people went to jail, but that inspired other congregations to get involved.

Some synagogues were involved but there aren't any anymore. There were a few years ago. There were a lot of churches too, but some of them also dropped back. You know how it is, they kind of get tired of being involved in one cause all the time, and maybe this is not such a hot issue any more, and people find other issues. You know the Sanctuary now helps people from all over the world and it's not just war and political persecution. They help women who are escaping domestic violence, or forced marriages or genital mutilation. There are a variety of situations.

EBSC Resident Artist

I became very involved and from the beginning I became the resident artist. Whenever there was a need, I always did the art work. Then I got very involved with the Sanctuary's Haiti Support Committee. We have now the Haiti Education Program, where we send money to Haiti and support the schools. And I did the poster, "Trees for Haiti," and brochures to raise money for the Haiti project.

You know I just really felt I was a part of it, from the beginning. And it's the same way with Sister Maureen. You know, Mary [Mia's daughter-in-law] once said, that Sister Maureen and I are on the same page even though we speak a different language when it comes to beliefs and religion. I just feel so close to her, you know, and it's just amazing how. … If anybody told me some years ago that a nun would be one of my very dearest, best friends, I would have been surprised. I would have thought that was crazy! Because you know in Poland, the Church was very anti-Semitic and the Church they were telling children that the Jews killed Jesus … I think I told you.

I asked Mia about her views on religion, in the context of being Jewish and joining the Unitarian Church in this country. She felt there was a role for organized religion, in support of social justice movements, as evidenced in the work of EBSC and in her close friendship with Sister Maureen, but claimed

to have no beliefs herself. She was not raised in Jewish religious culture, and I'm not sure she even knew the holidays and rituals. When I asked about her beliefs, she would just shake her head dismissively. I had the impression she was an agnostic, maybe an atheist.

My role with the Sanctuary is to make art and work on posters and things like that. But sometimes people didn't take the care I wish they had with some of the things I made. For example I made a bus [paper sculpture], which was sort of like the buses that rescued the migrants in the desert. We used it a few times as a thing for the table at events. And one time I was taking it home and this friend she said she would store it at her house. And then at some point I asked what happened to the bus and she said she was sorry, "My dogs ate the bus." It was just cardboard and paper. Oh well. It was all three dimensional and it was quite beautiful. And you know that poster of the Trees for Haiti? It was ruined after an event, so I don't have the original. What I do have is a photograph of some people in Haiti holding the poster.

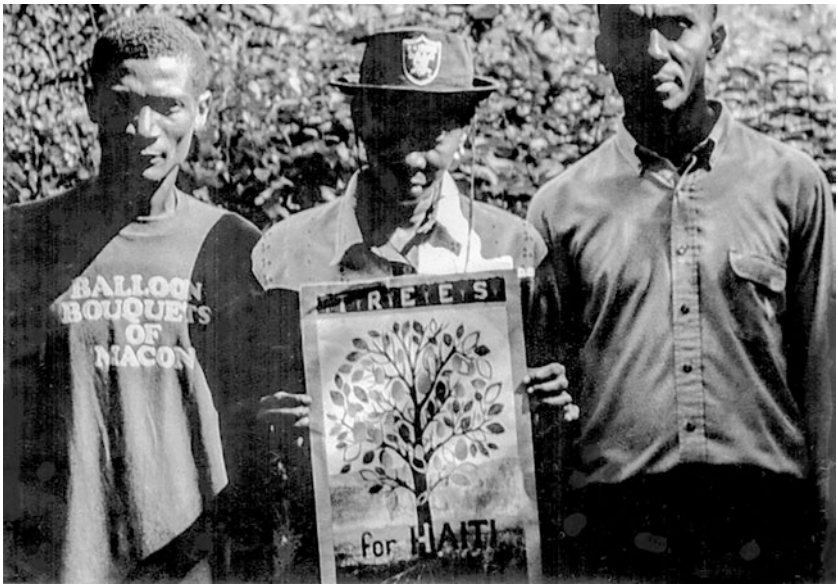


Fig. 9.2 Field hands in Haiti holding the 'Trees for Haiti' poster. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Her longtime ally and EBSC political compatriot, Sister Maureen Duignan, described Mia as "always having Haiti in her heart." She was very concerned with refugees from Haiti and spent many hours working with the Haiti support group. At Mia's memorial service, Pierre LaBossiere, Cofounder of the Haiti Sanctuary Action Committee, spoke of her dedication to his homeland.

Pierre LaBossiere

We worked very, very closely with Mia. She was a staunch, dedicated, wonderful, generous member of the Haiti Sanctuary Committee of the East Bay Sanctuary. Mia did so much for our fundraising with her artwork that we sold as cards for solidarity with the people of Haiti. One of her especially beautiful pieces of artwork was a huge heart in the colors of the Haitian flag. It said "Our hearts are with the people of Haiti" and with that image we made some cards that we were selling to raise funds after the January 2010 earthquake. She had so many beautiful pieces of artwork, like the "Trees for Haiti" poster.

Mia was a passionate and firm believer in justice. She connected with the Haitian refugees and immigrants, just as she connected with all people in need, with all refugees and immigrants from all over. One of our favorite stories that I used to share with Mia was when I found out she was from Poland. "And I said, Mia, did you know about the Polish soldiers that Napoleon drafted to his army to restore slavery to Haiti back in 1802?" And she was fascinated by this and I said, "You're from good stock, from great stock because the Polish soldiers when they got there they saw they were on the wrong side and they joined with the Africans and they turned their guns against Napoleon's army. And their descendants are in Haiti today!" And she used to love that story and we used to talk about it a lot.[2]

My daughters liked to visit with Mia. They liked the way Mia talked with them. They were young children, eight or nine years old, and they really enjoyed her. Mia connected with them in a way that made them feel so good about themselves and gave them value. And I saw that and I thought I have to try harder to be that way. Mia has a spirit that makes us elevate ourselves to try to make this ideal world that we dream about. We need to make that world happen. Mia Truskier *Presente*!

The terror of having escaped Poland with Jan, Regina, and Ryszard when it was under Nazi occupation only to get stuck in Italy as not just illegal

aliens, but "illegal enemy aliens," when Italy joined the Axis, stayed with Mia her entire life. Many years passed, however, between being a refugee herself in 1940 and advocating for refugees through the EBSC, caught up as she was raising children and working full-time. Mia and Jan made time when they could to participate in various struggles for social justice, including, as we have seen, the fair housing campaign in Long Beach, racial and political rights for Native Americans, and in the movement to end the War in Vietnam. As their sons, Andy and Peter, grew to adulthood and engaged in the turbulent protest era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, they influenced Mia and Jan, who pitched in to participate in fundraising events. But despite her growing involvement in various social justice activities in California, joining the sanctuary and refugee movements fully completed her turn to social activism.

Mia always claimed that refugees could speak for each other. It was the unique condition of the refugee that drew them together. The late historian Gerda Lerner, whose experience fleeing from Nazi-occupied Vienna as a young woman in 1938 was akin to Mia's flight from Warsaw a year and a half later, universalized the plight of the refugee: "The refugee lives from day to day, from hour to hour and throws out lines across the fog: pipedreams, fantasies, bragging tales, long-range plans. All for nothing, for the only skill worth learning is adaptability. Learn to travel light is the basic refugee wisdom."[8]

Manuel de Paz, Mia's close colleague at EBSC, shared with her the refugee experience. His family fled El Salvador during the height of the US- backed military war against the popular movement for social change in the 1980s. Manuel's family was not involved in the guerrilla army nor took a leading role in the above-ground opposition, but that was no insulation from violence. In a country where the Fourteen Families held political and economic power, it was dangerous to attempt to practice even the most timid opposition. When Manuel's father was unable to meet a payment from his landlord, he was killed; Manuel's brothers met the same fate when they joined a trade union. After seeing his sister raped and killed, Manuel escaped from his small town in hopes of reaching the US. Moving on foot, sometimes getting rides, always hiding and moving clandestinely for fear of being apprehended, Manuel crossed Guatemala, Mexico, and the border into the US where he made it to a the home of a relative in Los Angeles. Eventually, he connected with Sister Maureen at the EBSC and began the process of obtaining asylum. Decades later, Manuel is the Outreach Coordinator at EBSC.

Both Mia and Manuel used their personal experience as refugees to counsel and guide those escaping from the perils of countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. They expressed similar views toward the

contradictions of life in America, adding meaning to Mia's declaration that "regardless of when, where, or under what circumstances they have to flee their country, all refugees have so much in common, they are entitled to speak on each other's behalf."[4] *Manuel and Mia understood the hoops through which all outsiders are forced to leap and sympathized with the difficulties of settling in a foreign, sometimes hostile, land. On the one hand, the US is a country with a legal structure through which the refugee can sometimes find safety, but it exists alongside a powerful police force that bears down unhesitatingly on the back of the asylum seeker. It is, as de Paz emphasized, what "many people born in the luxury and stability of America forget."*[5] *In talking to Manuel, one understands how much at home Mia felt working in the Sanctuary. At the memorial service, he spoke of the martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, invoking the prelate's call for peace and social justice which likewise guides the efforts of the EBSC. The sanctuary movement was born on March 24, 1982, the second anniversary of the assassination of the Archbishop, a man who was killed because he preached the necessity of uniting a political program with the struggle for human rights.*

Fig. 9.3 Manuel de Paz, showing Mia a photograph of himself as a boy in El Salvador in his memoir, ca. 2011. (Credit: Photo by author)

Day-to-Day Advocacy for Refugees

In addition to providing the artwork for events, publicity, and fundraisers, Mia edited and authored articles in the Exodus, the EBSC newsletter. Echoing Romero's sentiments, Mia's articles succinctly linked politics and human rights. In 2007, she published a long piece commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the EBSC. In it she briefly summarized the history of the sanctuary, stated the principles on which the movement was founded, outlined future goals, and especially thanked the supporters while gently encouraging their continued financial and moral support. Excerpted here, it states,

> We have always maintained a double focus of responding to the needs of refugees in our country and supporting and protecting the rights of people suffering and resisting human rights violations in their homelands. … We try to inform and educate our society about the complexities of the immigration issues and counteract the hostility against those seeking refuge among us. … Seeing [the refugees'] plight as a part of a larger picture, we are lobbying to change our government's foreign and economic policies to help create conditions promoting peace with justice and respect for human rights. … Our doors will always be open to these refugees, but we realize that "open doors" are nothing but empty words when those who desperately need our help are prevented from reaching us and from telling the truth about their suffering.

In the strongest sense an insider to the refugee experience, Mia's concern for human rights was decidedly political, and her criticism of domestic and international agencies was sharp. Mia's comments signal the depth of her commitment.

While the international laws are being violated in Iraq, we are witnessing the most tragic and paradoxical human rights violation in our own hemisphere: tragic and paradoxical because the violence that is right now taking place in Haiti is being perpetrated by no others but the United Nations Peace Keeping Force. Instead of keeping peace, the UN forces [the US, France, and Canada] have become an occupation army waging war against democracy in Haiti.[6]

As she did in her hours of conversation with me, Mia had a particular gift for drawing a picture with words. This article in the newsletter informs the reader of the insidious logic the US government used to deport asylum-seekers, many of whom had spent years contributing to their adopted country.

We are witnessing the suffering of people who are already here, have been a part of our communities; have been contributing to our society. People whose labor protects many sectors of our economy from collapse, but still they are being persecuted, rounded up like cattle, their families torn apart in raids, as some of their members are being summarily deported. They are being targeted by a campaign officially called '"Operation Return to Sender," as if they were an unsolicited package.[7]

In another newsletter piece, she contrasts a promotion for tourism in the Arizona desert from the June 2003 San Francisco Chronicle travel section, to the reality of refugees desperately trying to reach safety:

A large color photograph of Arizona's breathtaking Monument Valley attracts my attention … scenes offered to nature lovers of the West's beautiful mountains, forests, and deserts. … At the same time, I come across other stories of how some people experience nature that seem to be coming from a parallel universe. These are stories of people walking through miles and miles of scorching heat. … Most will make it, many will be arrested, some will die, most of dehydration or exposure. … Today, an average of one migrant per day dies trying to cross the southern border… Some of them ultimately end up in EBSC's office. The legacy of the sanctuary movement lives on in many forms, with many dedicated people still working hard to help those who come north to this country in search of safety and a better life.[8]

As the refugee population has grown over the last decades, EBSC has seen the increase in people displaced as a result of the wars in the Middle East. Migrants from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine are now asking for asylum, including citizens of the occupied territories of Israel. Never having been attracted to the Zionist movement in prewar Poland, Mia was pessimistic about the future of the present Jewish state.

But you know I feel very strongly about the government of Israel and how it evolved. Because at the very beginning when people started going to Palestine, the Arabs were actually very friendly to them, and they could live together. And then later, well you read about what is happening in Gaza and in the West Bank and people say, "Okay, the Jews were so persecuted and so many millions died and all that." And then they do things that are very similar to what the Nazis did!

It's a really horrible occupation [of Palestine]. I mean there are all these walls, and people cannot cross, and the officials block supplies that are sent. It is horrible. I'm really appalled. And it's funny because whenever anybody criticizes Israel, Jews say "Oh it's an anti-Semite." But you know

you cannot say that about me. But I'm just ashamed and appalled. It's just beyond words to treat people like that.

I'm very pessimistic. US leaders were hoping Iraq would be this amazing democracy after they liberated them, and this whole thing with Iraq was such a sham. Such a lie. At first it was the weapons of mass destruction, and then it was Saddam because he is this terrible ruler and this tyrant that we have to get rid of. Well, how many people are like that in the world? Are we going to go everywhere?

Mia grew up in the post–World War I nexus of competing imperialisms. She remembers her father's hostility toward the Russian Tsar, and later, along with members of her family was forced to flee German aggression. On settling in the US and encountering the experience of other refugees, it is not surprising that she was outspoken in her opposition to imperialism.

Over the course of the service, several speakers recalled Mia's passion for justice and her outrage at politicians for ignoring, or causing, so much suffering in the world. She was remarkably up-to-date with the news, ready to quote Rachel Maddow or Chris Hayes of MSNBC on world events; she read The Nation cover to cover, even underlining passages she wanted to remember or discuss. When I complained about a mundane or inconsequential problem in my life, I had to be prepared to hear a lament or denunciation of war, powerful nations hoarding resources, the impossibility of military solutions to the world's problems, and more. She did not shrink from drawing out the larger picture. I remember once telephoning her in the middle of January and venting my frustrations at a particularly bad Upstate New York winter with mountains of snow, freezing temperatures, and hazardous driving conditions. Whereas many of my California friends and relatives listened patiently, maybe sympathized (maybe didn't!), or offered appropriate sounds of incredulity, Mia instead launched into a diatribe about climate change as the cause for worsening and erratic weather conditions. She went on to denounce the stupidity of science-deniers, "and of course our Republicans don't believe that humans contribute to climate change … like it's a natural thing that happens, so we push more and more oil and don't develop alternative sources of energy." I learned to allow plenty of time for Mia to lecture on the root causes of my woes. She was passionate.

Revisiting the Sixties Era: Personal and Political Impacts

At the start of this book, I referred to the fact that my husband, Andor Skotnes, introduced me to the Truskiers—Jan and Mia, their son Peter and his partner, Mary—on my first trip to California in 1975. In his remarks at the memorial service, Andor placed Mia's life in the context of the Sixties era of heightened political and cultural upheaval.

Andor Skotnes

I met Mia and Jan and Peter and Mary, I believe it was 1967. I was a student at Cal State Long Beach and, as Mia liked to tell the story, right around that time she was also a student at Cal State Long Beach. We were students there together, but there were twenty-seven years between us. That didn't really matter much to her. When I met them, the context I met them in, the Sixties, had to do with the social movements. I was working with various antiwar and civil rights groups, and the circles I was involved in tended to be young people, though not completely. I never bought into the "Don't trust anyone over 30," slogan, which was a good thing because I'm well over 30 by now. All the same, I didn't find very many older people who were compatible with, understanding of, and in solidarity with the kind of anger, the kind of commitment, the kind of radicalism that many of us who were younger were finding necessary in the face of racism, in the face of the imperial adventure in Vietnam, in the face of so much else in those years. Jan and Mia were two of the older generation with whom I really connected and in some ways they changed my attitude toward older people. Jan and Mia became something of a stabilizing factor at that time. Over the years I saw them, and then after Jan passed, Mia alone.

From the beginning the thing that impressed me when I met Jan and Mia was their commitment to social justice, to humanity, and to being involved in that struggle decade after decade, or for Mia, decade after decade after decade. I've learned more recently about her work with the Sanctuary, although I knew something about it, when I've had a chance to talk with her in recent years. What I think is special about Mia, and was about Jan before he died, is that they remained steadfast. This is not the kind of country in which it's easy to stay committed to social change, to stay involved over the long haul. Many of us get defeated; many of us drop

back, many of us become disillusioned. But one of the things about Mia—and I know she had her rough times and she had her complaints, and there were things especially about our youth culture that she found very strange—but she didn't quit. She kept pushing and she was truly in solidarity with humanity. So that's the kind of example, I think, I hope to follow.

Andor's comments underline arguments made in the last chapter about how the antiwar movement, as well as all the social issues of the Sixties, shaped Mia's later involvement with EBSC. While Mia became fully consolidated as a social activist in the sanctuary movement beginning in the late 1980s, it is worthwhile to look more deeply into the particular and often decisive ways her activism stemmed from her connection to the Civil Rights and Peace Movements. It is especially important in this regard that her early opposition to the War in Vietnam involved welcoming into her home a small group of Vietnamese students who had joined the antiwar movement while studying on California campuses.

The War in Vietnam on the Home Front

Tran Kim Ánh (referred to as Ánh Tran, or just Ánh) spoke about this at Mia's memorial service. Despite her halting words, her emotional tie with Mia came through.

Ánh Tran

I knew Mia for over thirty years, along with my husband Do Ba Phuoc [whose Anglicized name was James]. We met her in Long Beach when my husband was in graduate school at Cal State, Fullerton. When Mia and Jan moved to Oakland in 1979 we used to see them there because my work was not far from their house. Mia and I shared many stories from our past—she from Poland and me from Vietnam—having to do with war. We were both exiles from our homelands. I remember a particularly important conversation with her after I came back from visiting my village in Vietnam [after the war had ended] and talking about the things that are lost because of war. My son, Anh-Minh Do, was born in California and we called him "Andy" in memory of Mia and Jan's son Andy, who was such an important person in opposing the War in Vietnam. Before we gave our son his name, we visited Jan and Mia to ask their permission. They were very special to my husband and to me because we were able to talk to

them about politics and we could not talk to our own parents. It was a very difficult time in our lives and so Mia is very special to me.

A year after Mia's memorial service, I contacted Ánh and spoke in greater depth with her at her home in Walnut Creek, California, where she spends part of the year. I also met her in late 2020 at the children's school she administers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The Greenleaf Learning Center, a unique school and daycare center that follows a child-centered curriculum uncommon in Vietnam. Ánh credits Mia with teaching her this approach. When her son Minh/Andy was very young, Ánh watched how Mia talked to him, played with him, created learning and play situations centered on his level. This approach contrasted sharply from the highly structured and disciplined Vietnamese educational philosophy. Ánh told me she implemented the "Mia Truskier method" in Vietnam and has since 2001 been the main organizer of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) training program which has reached over 5000 teachers and childcare providers throughout the country.[9]

Ánh's relationship with Mia stretched over many years, beginning in 1972 when Jan and Mia met the Vietnamese students through the southern California antiwar movement, an indication that the US–South Vietnam mutual agreement had gone terribly awry. Beginning in 1968, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) selected forty high-achieving Vietnamese students for scholarships to study at a number of California State University campuses, as a feature of the "Vietnamization" program.[10] *Since the students came from families known to be loyal to the South Vietnamese government, USAID planned for the students to promote a pro-war stance among university students on college campuses, after which they were to return to Vietnam with academic credentials and full of praise for US culture and expertise. The program did not work out that way. In fact, it ended up doing quite the opposite. The students began to learn of racism, of the civil rights and antiwar movements from American and other international students on the California college campuses.*

Ngô Thanh Nhàn, a friend of Ánh and James from the USAID program, is currently a professor at New York University. Nhàn described what happened when he arrived at San Jose State University in the fall of 1968. He was assigned a teaching assistant to tutor him in English and to introduce him to the ways of American college students, which she did, if not in the way USAID anticipated.

Ngô Thanh Nhàn:

She talked to me about Angela Davis, who was leading protests on the campus, and took me to antiwar rallies. We [the Vietnamese students] started to oppose the war and we participated in antiwar activities locally, and exchanged ideas through zines in Vietnamese. After a while, several of us got together and went down to Cal State Fullerton and began to talk about forming an organization. I think it was at that time that I met Mia.

Nhàn was a founder of the Union of Vietnamese in the United States (UVUS), a prominent antiwar organization that began in 1972 at California universities and spread throughout the country in subsequent years.[11] *Mia and Jan's house "was a place we could go to talk, to socialize with each other, and to eat wonderful food. Mia and Jan Truskier showed us a lot of hospitality at a time when most of us could not talk to our own parents about our opposition to the war." The Vietnamese students' recollections of finding "refuge" at the Truskiers' house—freely talking, exchanging ideas, having a good time while enjoying a meal—was reminiscent of how Mia described her friends and family meeting around the Tłusty dining room table when she was a teenager in Warsaw. Those memories had cropped up in the testimonies of childhood friends writing from hiding in Poland, in Soviet work camps, and after finding refuge in the West after World War II. Similar fond memories arose in conversations with Vietnamese students who had been forced into a kind of "ideological exile" in California.*

The US government targeted the Vietnamese students for supporting a negotiated settlement to the war, making it abundantly clear that freedoms of speech, assembly, press, or any other Constitutional guarantees would not apply to those students who questioned US policy toward Vietnam and the conflict there. Nguyen Thai Binh, one of the most important student leaders of UVUS, was secretly extradited and then killed on July 2, 1972 when he landed at Tan Son Nhat airport outside Saigon. The assassination only served to spur on the Vietnamese students' support of the "seven-point peace plan of the NLF [National Liberation Front]—basically, that the United States should leave Viet Nam, that it should set a date to withdraw all its troops, and that the internal affairs of Viet Nam be resolved by the Vietnamese." As Nhàn has written, and as he explained to me when I visited him in New York, "many of us were tried in South Viet Nam for treason in absentia. The RVN [Republic of Vietnam—the South] government revoked our passports, and supposedly for that reason, the US withdrew our visas."[12]

Left stateless, the former students ended up in various parts of the country. Nhàn came to New York and began to study at NYU because "they didn't

know anything about our organization and everyone there was antiwar. They admitted me even though I had no passport."

In California, life changed profoundly for Ánh and James. They had a child and began their careers but continued to do what they could to assist in the rebuilding of their war ravaged country after 1975. In a long email to her son, Minh, Ánh describes the motives behind the political stance she and Minh's father adopted and the importance of Mia and Jan in offering them refuge.

[Note on language: In the Vietnamese language a person is addressed according to age and familiarity in relation to oneself, with advanced age carrying respect. Ành refers to Jan and Mia as "Grandpa" and "Grandma" as though they are Minh's grandparents, circa the age of Ánh's parents. The use of "uncle" for Professor Cooperman indicates that he warrants respect, was close to Ành, and could be the age of one of her siblings, or Minh's uncle.]

Ánh Tran:

Years passed. Your father and I went back to Vietnam in December 1982 with Uncle Ed [Cooperman]. You were born on August 29, 1984, and on October 13, 1984 Uncle Ed died too. It was a joyful but also a very sad year for us. We couldn't share with your grandparents or with your father's siblings anything about our activities in supporting Vietnam, but only with Grandpa Jan and Grandma Mia and our old friends.

Ánh describes one of the most publicized events that occurred during a wave of repression and even outright terror at the hands of the US government and pro-war Vietnamese: the murder of physics professor Edward Cooperman in his office on the campus of California State University, Fullerton. Minh Van Lam, one of Cooperman's students, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter after two trials in which the conservative, expatriate Vietnamese community called for his exoneration. Critics of the verdict told the Los Angeles Times "that the professor was assassinated by right-wing Vietnamese extremists because of his ties to the Communist government in Vietnam."[13] *Until Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning book, The Sympathizer, the back story of duplicitous skullduggery among Vietnamese refugees and those hoping to prolong the war on all sides was not widely known.*[14] *But its impact was real. Notably, Ánh and James had met Mia and Jan as a result of their support for Cooperman's humanitarian fundraising for Vietnam.*

Years later, in 2017, Ánh wrote a long email to her son, about these matters, and subsequently shared it with me.

Ánh Tran:

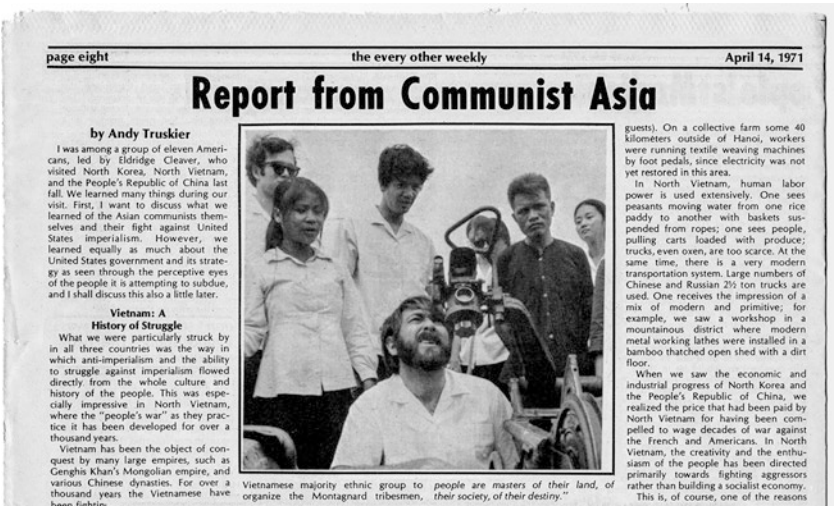
Uncle Ed died on October 13, 1984. We came down to Fullerton to be with Auntie Klaaske (his wife), Francois and Yvonne (their two daughters). I stayed only a day and had to come back up because I left you with friends for a day. Your father stayed for a few days down there but didn't attend the memorial service since your auntie and others advised your father not to come. Your father's name, phone number, our name, and other things were in Uncle Ed's office [where he was shot].

Grandpa Jan and Grandma Mia were our very good elders, who we have known since we were single. After we got married and lived in the same area, we had a tradition of seeing each other before Christmas Day. Yearly when you were little we came to their place for lunch or dinner on Dec. 21 or Dec. 22 and often in the summer. Both Grandpa Jan and Grandma Mia were caring thoughtful folks who had experienced hardship and war, but were wonderful people with generous hearts, even they didn't have much like other rich folks. Yearly they saved their money and supported our organizations with their $100 pledge each year. I have kept this in mind so that yearly now, even as we spend for gifts and other stuff for relatives, I saved some money to support organizations that were formed by your father. He devoted a lot of time to help build for the better and younger generation as well. Grandpa Jan passed away in 1988 when you were four. Grandma Mia passed away in April 2014.[15]

The significance of Ánh's description of her relationship with Mia cannot be overstated. She learned childrearing techniques that she followed in raising her own son and eventually in establishing a school in postwar Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City. Secondly, Ánh stresses the importance of having Jan and Mia's house in which to take real refuge from the reactionary Vietnamese vigilante forces in California, who had shown on several occasions that they would not hesitate to physically harm or kill exiles who held to antiwar sentiments. The Truskiers' experience with the Vietnamese students adds a new, and seldom considered, dimension to providing refuge to people here in the United States who are running from hostile forces aligned with the US. It likewise adds another insight into Mia's activist development.

Andy Truskier and International Solidarity

One very particular and deeply personal way that the Sixties impacted Mia and Jan was through their sons, Andy and Peter, especially their eldest, Andy. Andy Truskier's role in the antiwar movement as a student at the University of California-Berkeley, his work as a radio and print media commentator, including writing for Ramparts, one of the foremost New Left magazines in the country from 1962 to 1975, and as a member of the Red Family radical collective, left a mark on the Berkeley political scene. In their small family, the Truskier sons' involvement in various antiwar and civil rights' activities drew Mia and Jan increasingly into the activist milieu that flourished in California in the 1960s and 1970s. Andy's premature death from leukemia at thirty-two years of age in 1976 was a devastating blow to his family and to many members of the Bay Area left. As Mia concluded, "Andy had such a short life, but what a life!" The speakers at his memorial service summarized some of what he packed into that life.



page eight — the every other weekly — April 14, 1971

Report from Communist Asia

by Andy Truskier

I was among a group of eleven Americans, led by Eldridge Cleaver, who visited North Korea, North Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China last fall. We learned many things during our visit. First, I want to discuss what we learned of the Asian communists themselves and their fight against United States imperialism. However, we learned equally as much about the United States government and its strategy as seen through the perceptive eyes of the people it is attempting to subdue, and I shall discuss this also a little later.

Vietnam: A History of Struggle

What we were particularly struck by in all three countries was the way in which anti-imperialism and the ability to struggle against imperialism flowed directly from the whole culture and history of the people. This was especially impressive in North Vietnam, where the "people's war" as they practice it has been developed for over a thousand years.

Vietnam has been the object of conquest by many large empires, such as Genghis Khan's Mongolian empire, and various Chinese dynasties. For over a thousand years the Vietnamese have

Vietnamese majority ethnic group to organize the Montagnard tribesmen, *people are masters of their land, of their society, of their destiny."*

guests). On a collective farm some 40 kilometers outside of Hanoi, workers were running textile weaving machines by foot pedals, since electricity was not yet restored in this area.

In North Vietnam, human labor power is used extensively. One sees peasants moving water from one rice paddy to another with baskets suspended from ropes; one sees people, pulling carts loaded with produce; trucks, even oxen, are too scarce. At the same time, there is a very modern transportation system. Large numbers of Chinese and Russian 2½ ton trucks are used. One receives the impression of a mix of modern and primitive; for example, we saw a workshop in a mountainous district where modern metal working lathes were installed in a bamboo thatched open shed with a dirt floor.

When we saw the economic and industrial progress of North Korea and the People's Republic of China, we realized the price that had been paid by North Vietnam for having been compelled to wage decades of war against the French and Americans. In North Vietnam, the creativity and the enthusiasm of the people has been directed primarily towards fighting aggressors rather than building a socialist economy.

This is, of course, one of the reasons

Fig. 9.4 "Report from Communist Asia," by Andy Truskier, *The Every Other Weekly* supplement to the *Daily Californian*, April 14, 1971. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Andy became active in the early 1960s in the civil rights movement. He was for ten years an activist, organizer, and leader in the antiwar movement. Through his writings and news reports he kept millions of people informed about the war in Indochina. As a journalist and political activist, Andy traveled in North Vietnam, North Korea, China, the Soviet Union, and Algeria. Despite his illness, he remained politically active, speaking and writing when he could. His political commitment was deep and continuous; it lasted until his death.[16]

When I asked Mia about her feelings regarding Andy's travels in July 1970 to North Korea, China, and North Vietnam, as well as trips to Algeria and the Soviet Union with Eldridge Cleaver, one of the most well-known leaders of the Black Panther Party, she stated: "We were supportive of him. We agreed with what he was doing." She never mentioned cautioning Andy about the consequences of his defiance of US travel bans at the time to Communist countries and other places, nor did she say they were uncomfortable with his interaction with some of the most prominent political opponents of the US government.[17] *After their own involvement with the campaign to free the AIM leaders, Mia and Jan were accepting of Andy's activism and were not surprised that his younger brother followed a similar path. Nonetheless, Mary and Peter remember some fairly heated conversations around countercultural issues, including the conduct and lifestyles of hippies, drug use, sexual liberation, and youth practices that seemed to Mia and Jan disrespectful, or just too wild. It was an oppositional culture they found hard to accept, and in this particular way their views were not different from those of large numbers of parents of their generation. The generation gap that frequently disrupted familial interactions in that turbulent era had a place, but comparatively a rather small one, in Mia's interactions with her sons.*

The distressing impact of Andy's death on January 13, 1976 extended beyond his family, as was apparent at his memorial service. On February 1, 1976 friends and acquaintances gathered at the Julia Morgan Theater on College Avenue in Berkeley to share their memories of Andy with his family. Ironically, the theater designed in 1908, which bears the architect's name, was originally the St. John's Presbyterian Church, which is now housed in a similar structure across the street.[18] *The symmetry of Andy's service in 1976 in Morgan's theater, and Mia's memorial celebration thirty-eight years later in the nearby replacement church (also in the Morgan Arts and Crafts design) is striking. Both Truskiers were remembered for their generosity, passion for social justice, and unceasing dedication to improving the conditions of the world.*

From the time Andy learned of the cancer diagnosis in May 1974 until he died twenty months later, he threw himself into learning as much as he could

about the disease and possible treatments, combating the illness with a zealous, but rational, attention to science. As remarked by one of his surgeons, Andy showed "courage in the face of almost insurmountable odds."[19] *He died at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, the largest cancer treatment center in the US and one of the foremost in the world.*

The memorial service hosts, Linda Morse, Jan Austin, Tom Hayden, Robert Scheer, and members of the Association of Vietnamese Patriots in the US, gave short eulogies, read poems, and were led in song by folk song activist and recording artist Holly Near.[20] *The hundreds of attendees left handwritten letters for Mia and Jan, and for Andy's partner, Vickie Steinheimer and her children, Matt and Libby, with whom Andy had lived during the previous four years. The comments varied in length from a few sentences to over a page. Several, such as Steve Talbot who Andy trained at Internews, went on to work in film, radio, and television, namely, Frontline on the Public Broadcasting Service. Talbot was grateful to Andy for helping him "prepare for my trip to Vietnam" and for the "long political talks, often late at night in the house, that enhanced my visit to Vietnam immeasurably and helped me to see things that I would have missed and to appreciate what I did see at a much deeper level."*

Others remarked that Andy was a sympathetic ear and thoughtful communicator. Actor Jane Fonda, who met Andy through their work with the Indochina Peace Campaign and as comrades in The Red Family political collective in Berkeley: "What I remember most and think of first about Andy was his gentleness. I came late into political awareness and so often left intellectuals made me feel stupid or inadequate. Andy always took my questions seriously and always took the time to help me understand." Fonda and others found Andy's attitude toward his illness truly remarkable, dealing with it "scientifically, directly, without pity, the same way he confronted all social phenomena." Elizabeth Farnsworth, who went on to a career in television news, ultimately as an anchor on the News Hour with Jim Lehrer, traced her beginnings in journalism to what she learned working with Andy in Bay Area alternative news circles.[21] *Andy's disease overcame him when he felt he had so much left to do with his life. Mary told me that she remembers talking with Andy in the hospital toward the end and "he was saying that he wishes he could live longer so that he would have been able to contribute more to the cause. And that's completely genuine."*

At a time when male leaders in left circles were criticized for their sexist behavior, Andy was held as an exemplary, respectful comrade. In "Radicals on the Road," Judy Tzu-Chun Wu quotes Ann Froines who traveled with him on the US delegation to North Vietnam. She reports some examples of

embarrassing, domineering behavior from some of the American men toward other participants, especially the women, as well as toward their Asian hosts. In contrast, Andy and Alex Hing were reportedly "soft spoken, respectful … I thought of them as … men who could really sit around in a group that was majority women and participate in talk and not dominate."[22]

A Mother Remembers

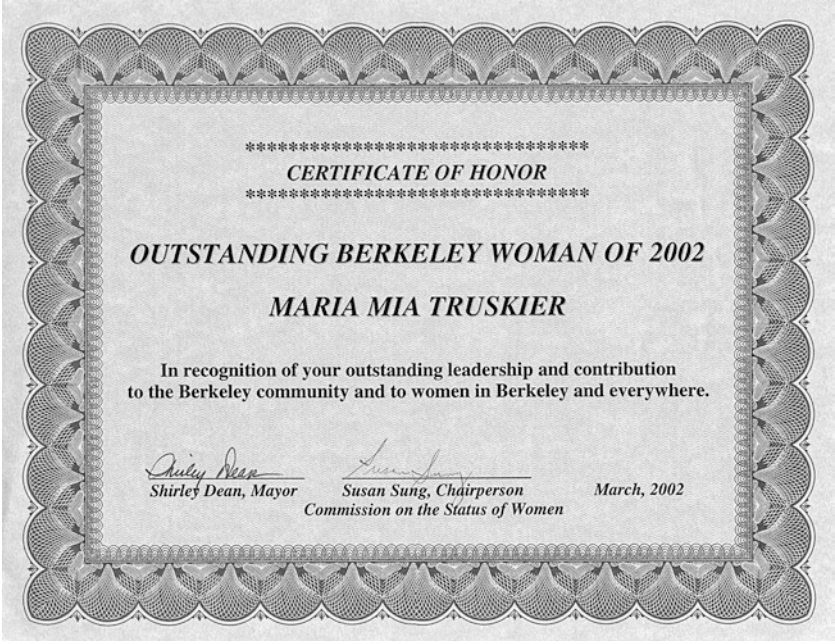
They say no one ever gets over losing a child, which is of course true, but I always thought one never gets over losing anyone who is very close: a spouse/partner, a sister, brother, parent, lifelong friend. I ran across a particularly poignant short essay among Mia's writings that helped me to comprehend the unique pain that comes from the death of one's own child. It was a two-page, typed, replay of a day in June 1995 when Mia was preparing a meal for Peter's family. The essay began with the enumeration of some minor spills and casualties that occurred during the dinner preparations, including deciding to throw out a turkey roll she planned to cook because it struck her as smelling badly of preservatives, substituting chicken breasts instead. After that she dropped a glass that shattered into tiny pieces all over the kitchen floor. While sweeping it up, she began to worry that her youngest, very energetic grandson who explored the world with zeal barefooted would cut his foot on a shard of glass. So many little things seemed to be going wrong, as Mia wrote:

> And I don't mean the nasty turkey surprise and the silly accidents with things slipping out of my hands, and jumping off the shelf. I don't even have to ask myself why I am so tense that things that would usually make me shrug and laugh are making me swear and cry. Because I know that there is only one thing wrong with this picture. It is that I have to say, 'Today would have been my son Andy's fifty-second birthday.' And now that I have written it down, tears flow again as they have, visible or invisible, all during these past nineteen years since the day when I had to say for the first time, 'Today would have been Andy's birthday.' Journal Entry, Friday, 6/23/95.

Andy died in January 1976, and the following June 23 would have marked the first time Mia commemorated his birthday when he was no longer reachable. No letter, no phone call, no in-person hug, just three words: "would have been." There is something especially weighty about the passage of your own child that is different from the loss of any other person, even a life partner. We chart our own life in step with the entirety of our children's existence, often referring to their ages, grades in school, or stages of maturity to keep track of events from the intimate and familial to newsworthy and worldwide. It is not the birthday

alone that causes the emotional reaction, but what would have transpired on that day because it is a day a parent celebrates the lifelong connection to their children. To lose a child is like losing your own lifeline. A part of one's own growth, one's own maturation, is ripped away from deep inside. I have lost siblings and parents, and the sorrow is profound, but when I read Mia's journal, I began to grasp the enormity of what it means to lose one's child.

Andy and his younger brother Peter, who was also involved with radical news services in the Bay Area and continues to work in publishing, were lucky to have a compatible relationship with their parents, which was definitely not the case with many of the Sixties generation. A comparison of Andy's memorial service and Mia's, held nearly forty years but less than a block away, points to several enduring qualities that Mia, and her husband, Jan, passed on to their children, grandchildren, and for Mia, great-grandchildren: a sense of fairness, a belief in equality, pride in yourself combined with generosity toward others, a sense of humor, and the fortitude to keep on going.


CERTIFICATE OF HONOR

OUTSTANDING BERKELEY WOMAN OF 2002

MARIA MIA TRUSKIER

In recognition of your outstanding leadership and contribution to the Berkeley community and to women in Berkeley and everywhere.

Shirley Dean, Mayor

Susan Sung, Chairperson
Commission on the Status of Women

March, 2002

Fig. 9.5 Certificate of honor, "Outstanding Berkeley Woman of 2002 Maria Mia Truskier," March 2002. (Credit: Truskier Family Collection)

Final Thoughts

Until embarking on this book, I had never delved into absorbing, reflecting upon, and conveying the very personal and intricate details of someone else's life. I only began the project because I thought Mia's experiences and her reflections on the meaning of her life, had something to convey. I found talking with her, interviewing her, and engaging with her so historically enlightening, meaningful, and seductive, that I had to continue. She was not famous, but she was involved with and shaped by events, contexts and cultures over more than nine decades in four countries, engaging some of the most important realities and issues of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She vividly described, even relived for me, those experiences in the hours of oral testimony as well as through her personal archive of documents, letters, photographs, and other artifacts that came together in her Storyworld.

My collaboration with Mia introduced me to the interior of selected historical processes through her retelling of her own life. Sometimes it was painful, especially talking about the loss of her son, her husband, her father and mother—and the interview stopped as we both wiped tears from our eyes. At other times it was depressing as we went over a particular act of betrayal or gross opportunism, pausing to reflect on how small and mean are the impulses of human nature. And because so much of Mia's life was about war and the effects of war—physical and emotional destruction, displacement, loss of country and pride—we were frequently torn between fear and disgust on the one hand, and admiration for particular acts of heroism and generosity, on the other hand.

Not to be forgotten were the times we found ourselves laughing hysterically as Mia explained one character or another (the woman who wanted the Marie Antoinette wig and costume in the middle of the war, comes to mind). My daughter, Claire, felt compelled to sit with her computer taking down the "old Polish sayings," as Mia's eyes twinkled and Claire held her sides in laughter. How could we ever forget, "It is good luck to step in horse manure," or "It is not a big deal to kill a raven but it is quite an achievement to smother a hedgehog with your bare bottom." What on earth?! She loved to use that one, although I was never sure what occasion warranted it, nor what it meant. When we asked, she shrugged, shook that head of gorgeous white hair, and smiled dismissively. Who knew?[23]

To be a refugee is, to use the noted historian Gerda Lerner's words, "to be helpless and without a foundation of rights and recognized status. It is not only a matter of being suddenly de-classed; it is a matter of suddenly being a non-person."[24] *Mia's road from Polish exile to California activist was comprised of stations on the way to claiming personhood, intrinsic to which was her identity*

as a citizen. Her journey was scattered with "all these visas," as she often marveled: bogus Bulgarian ones, twenty-four-hour Italian transit visas; a Turkish visa held in reserve if things went terribly wrong and they faced deportation back to Poland, and a number of documents purchased from consulates in Italy attesting to an Aryan birth and Polish legitimacy. The only real identity document Mia and her family carried from Europe to the US was a paper bearing the stamp of the International Red Cross that was issued to people stripped of their national passport. It was issued to the Poles and other refugees who could not or would not return to their home country.

Although Mia and her family immigrated with a Red Cross passport and her husband's relatives were there to welcome and attest to their legal status, they could not erase the history that had brought them to that point. They had been rendered, not just stateless persons, but, juridically speaking, nonpersons. No matter how exuberant Mia felt as the ship entered New York harbor, she had not left her homeland over ten years before by choice. She chose, for the rest of her life, to identify with refugees, because she would "never forget what it was like to be a refugee." She did what she could to make other refugees welcome in their new strange land, by actively and firmly insisting on their personhood.

Fig. 9.6 Mia and Peter Truskier, 2011. (Credit: Photo by the author)

Chris Carlisle, Mia's Polish language partner, commented at the memorial service that "one of Mia's most common Polish sayings was "nie daj sie" which means, don't give in or don't give up. And that was sort of her Polish life."

It was actually the slogan of her entire life.

Notes

1. Kat Jerman, "Berkeley's Sanctuary Movement: Historical Essay." Paper copy obtained from Mia Truskier's papers. Available online at http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Berkeley%27s_Sanctuary_Movement.
2. Poland entered an alliance with France in 1772 in hopes of gaining protection against the invasion of the Austro-Hungarian armies. Not only did French assistance prove futile but, worse, Polish soldiers were drafted into Napoleon's army. In 1803, the French army, bolstered by 5200 Polish troops, invaded the colony of San-Domingue to restore slavery. Upon seeing that they were being used to re-enslave the Haitians who had just succeeded in overthrowing their colonial masters, and considering themselves as slaves to foreign powers in their own homeland, the Polish regiments joined the forces of General Jean-Jacques Dessalines to help drive out the French. After the Haitian victory, nearly a thousand of the surviving Poles remained on the island and were granted the right to farmland, despite a clause in the new Haitian Constitution of 1805 that prohibited whites from owning land. The Poles settled in a town they named "Kay Zalewski" (place of Zalewski—a common Polish surname) which is today Cazales. Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 294–95.
3. Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 122.
4. Mia Truskier, "From Once Upon a Time to Here and Now," *Exodus* (The East Bay Sanctuary Newsletter), 1
5. Mike Rosen-Molina, "Sanctuary from the Storm," *The East Bay Monthly*, vol. 38, no. 3 (December 2007).
6. Mia Truskier, "EBSC's 25 Years: Speaking Truth to Power," *Exodus*, March 2007, 1–3.
7. The US government has not shied away from the occasional, offensive titles for its policies. In 1954, "Operation Wetback" was the official name for the Immigration and Naturalization Service program that deported millions of Mexican migrants, many of them documented US citizens, who had been brought to the US in the Bracero Program of World War II or had crossed the border legally.

8. Mia Truskier, "Stories from a Parallel Universe," *Exodus*, June 2003, 1–2.
9. Ánh Kim Tran is a cofounder of the Pacific Links Foundation and serves as Treasurer of the Board. Her profile and a short description of the ECCE training programs and other initiatives are described on the Foundation webpage: https://www.pacificlinks.org/.
10. "Vietnamization" was a strategy of the US military to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese government. In principle, it was supposed to arm and train the South Vietnamese army while at the same time pacifying the civilian population with consumer goods, aid packages, and intense instruction in anticommunism. The policy failed in Vietnam and, as the case of Ánh and her husband, James, and other Vietnamese students brought to California showed, in America as well. See also, Ngô Thanh Nhàn, "Some Thoughts on US-Viet Nam Diplomatic Normalizations and Changes in the Politics of the Vietnamese-American Community," NYU *Asians in America Conference 1996* (March 22–23, 1996).
11. Ngô Thanh Nhàn, "Union of Vietnamese in the United States," in *Many Bridges, One River: Organizing for Justice in Vietnamese American Communities*, thaun nguyen and Vy Nguyen, eds. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2017), 6.
12. Nhàn remains active in the campaign for reparations for victims of Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant that has killed and left disabled over three million people in Southeast Asia, as well as thousands of US servicemen. See Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign (VAORRC), www.vn-agentorange.org.
13. *Los Angeles Times* (March 30, 1985).
14. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2015).
15. Ánh Tran to Anh-Minh Tran Do, January 12, 2017, e-mail message.
16. Program of the Memorial Service for Andrew J. Truskier, February 1, 1976, Julia Morgan Theater, Berkeley, CA.
17. Elaine Brown, the former chairwoman of the Black Panther Party who knew Eldridge Cleaver well, describes the relationship of Andy Truskier, Jan Austin, Bob Scheer, Ann Froines, and other activists, with Cleaver and their travels on the Asian Peace Delegation, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 218–25.
18. For a description of the Julia Morgan Theater in Berkeley, see https://www.theatreinsanfrancisco.com/theatre/julia-morgan-theater/18/. For information on Julia Morgan, see https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/obituaries/julia-morgan-overlooked.html.
19. Letter to Vickie Steinheimer and the Truskier Family from Ernest H. Rosenbaum, M.D. and Isadora Rosenbaum, San Francisco Hematology-Oncology Associates (January 15, 1976).

20. Bob Scheer worked with Andy on *Ramparts* and later became a well-known columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle*. Scheer organized the trip to China, North Korea, and North Vietnam. Tom Hayden (1939–2016) was a founder of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and author of the *Port Huron Statement*. Among many political activities, he was a defendant at the Chicago 7 trial after the 1968 Democratic National Convention and later a member of the California legislature. He and his partner at the time, Jane Fonda, worked with Andy on the Indochina Peace Campaign and lived in the Berkeley Red Family collective. Jan Austin was a writer for *Ramparts* and traveled with Andy, Scheer, and Cleaver on the Asian Peace Delegation. Linda Morse was an organizer for the peace demonstrations at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968 and was a member of the Red Family. Holly Near is a political folk singer and activist who performed on the FTA tour to Vietnam with Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland and worked with Andy on the Indochina Peace Campaign. See Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).
21. These handwritten notes from the memorial service, or sent to Andy's family, are archived with the Truskier Family Collection in the possession of Peter and Mary Truskier, Oakland, CA.
22. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, 175.
23. Chris Carlisle wrote to a researcher in Poland who did some investigation into the hedgehog "Old Polish Saying" and discovered that it is from a "frivolous poem" by Aleksander Fredro and that was a favorite of Poland's national hero, Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935). Piłsudski, the leader credited with winning Poland's independence in 1918, apparently created his own variation on the Fredro poem. It translates as "It's not an art to kill a raven or to hit the head of an owl, but it's a fresh art to sit on a hedgehog with your bare ass." Source: Carlisle, Administrative Manager at English Studies Institute, Berkeley, CA. Website: www.esi.edu.
24. Gerda Lerner, 122.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

T. A. Meade, *We Don't Become Refugees by Choice*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84525-4