

# Introduction

On February 1, 1940 a 33-year-old Jewish woman arrived alone in New York Harbor bearing, in her womb, the person who would eventually become me. Ernestyna Goldwasser had left behind her family, steeped in the rich Jewish culture of Krakow, to seek sanctuary from the marauding Germans who had viciously invaded Poland the previous September.

Through a twist of circumstance, Ernestyna's father, my grandfather, Jakob Grunfeld, had, as a young man, sojourned in the USA and succeeded in obtaining citizenship status before returning to Krakow, where he took a wife and raised a family. Jakob's youngest daughter was my mother, Ernestyna. As the child of a father who held US citizenship, Ernestyna enjoyed a special status that became priceless when the war broke out. She, too, was deemed a US citizen and thereby eligible to emigrate out of Poland. Unfortunately, Ernestyna's husband, my father, Chaskel Goldwasser, enjoyed no such status. As his wife, pregnant with their first child, embarked on her journey, Chaskel was forced to remain behind, trapped in the inferno that was soon to incinerate one third of the world's Jewish population.

The decision to separate, made during a family meeting on a frigid December evening, was a heart-wrenching affair. My parents were deeply in love and had recently received the good news that the child they had been trying for more than three years to conceive, would be arriving in May. But as the family observed, with ever-growing dread, the Nazi noose tightening around their lives, it became painfully clear that any Jew who could escape should do so quickly.

My mother, Ernestyna, her sister and her mother, had all received a special dispensation from the German occupying authorities. This bit of “protekzia” allowed them, by virtue of their US citizenship, to be exempt from the fiat that required all Jews to wear a white identifying armband bearing a blue Jewish star. But, of course, given the arbitrary nature of the German authorities, there was no way for our family to know how long their exalted status could be counted on to protect them from the ever-widening list of draconian decrees that were being imposed daily on their fellow Jews.

Since Ernestyna, unlike her sister Gusta, was at this point childless, it made sense for her to venture out first — even though it meant leaving her dear husband, Chaskel, behind. The plan was for my mother to connect in New York with her Uncle Byro who had immigrated to the US shortly before my grandfather Jakob arrived back in the 1890s. Unlike Jakob, Byro (Bernard Grunfeld) did not return to Poland, but instead took up residence in Brooklyn. Following a pattern that had been repeated countless times during the waves of Jewish immigration to the US over the prior six decades, Ernestyna would establish a beachhead in America and immediately set to work bringing her husband, mother and sister over to join her. At least, that was the plan.

My mother entered the US through the “Golden Door” mentioned in the Emma Lazarus poem that graces the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.

### The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “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-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

My mother took comfort in the words that identified America as the Mother of Exiles, a welcoming place of refuge for all “huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.” “Soon,” she thought, as her vessel steamed by the lady with the lamp, “Chaskel will be able to join me. If I start working right away, he may be here by the time the baby arrives.”

What my mother did not know — and what thousands of other Jews with ties to the US and in similar circumstances, failed to understand — is that she was now facing a powerful new adversary, intent on placing insurmountable obstacles in her path. Obstacles intended to insure that no significant number of Jewish refugees would ever arrive on American soil. That adversary was the government of the United States and, in particular, the US Department of State, whose shameful and treacherous policies during the Holocaust succeeded in turning the words on the Statue of Liberty into nothing more than a cynical and hollow sham.

Using tactics less brutal, but every bit as anti-Semitic as those employed by the enemy my mother’s family faced in Poland, these new adversaries employed subtle and insidious tactics — obfuscation, bureaucratic red tape, and sub-rosa “Gentlemen’s Agreements” — to accomplish their objectives. These top-ranking officials made sure that European Jews were afforded no opportunity to escape their doomed destiny by fleeing to the US.

During my mother’s valiant struggle to reunite with my father — a process that stretched for nearly three years — they were able to maintain a lively, albeit heart-

wrenching correspondence. Their letters have been preserved and are presented in this volume as a first person account of their desperate struggle. In addition, I have included letters written by my mother to various government agencies, embassies, politicians, and others as she sought to find the key that would unlock my father's imprisonment...before it was too late.

My notes of introduction serve to place each letter into its appropriate context and to explain and clarify references found in the text. Taken together, these letters form a cohesive chronicle of how the anti-Semitic attitudes that pervaded the highest echelons of the US government during this period, contributed to the slaughter of thousands of European Jews. Men, women and children — “the homeless tempest-tost” — who, had America been a true Golden Door, as Emma Lazarus proclaimed — would have then been able to elude their cruel fate and find safe haven here in the land of the free.

## Chapter One

### A Tree Grew In Krakow

Like many American Jews, our family tree flourished in Eastern Europe until it was cruelly cut down during the Holocaust. Its roots were embedded deeply in the rich verdant soil along the fast flowing Vistula River, at the point where it races through Krakow — today Poland's second largest city. Krakow's history stretches back to the 11th century CE and archival records reveal that Jews lived there even then — from its very beginnings — living through alternating periods of persecution and sufferance by the Polish Catholic population.

In 1335, Casimir the Great — the father of the Polish nation — established the town of Kazimierz, near Krakow, specifically as a community to house its burgeoning Jewish population. This apparent act of benevolence towards the Jews was, according to the folk myth, based on Casimir's love for Esther, a comely Jewish lass who begged him to protect her from the anti-semitic decrees that had severely curtailed Jewish life in Krakow.

From the 14th through the 18th centuries, Jewish life thrived in the area inside of the main city defensive wall and a second wall that served as the demarcation line for the town's Christian residents. This zone was dubbed the "Oppidum Judaeorum" by the church and it became the main cultural and spiritual center of Jewish Poland.

Kazimierz was originally a separate independent city, but during the lifetime of my earliest known ancestor in the late 18th century, it was incorporated into Krakow proper. Its Oppidum remained the Jewish district, however, and became known by its German name: Der Judenstadt.

It was within this world between the walls that our family took root and took shape.

In tracing my family history back to the mid-18th century CE — the earliest period I was able to document — it became clear that my biological parents, Ernestyna and Abraham (Chaskel) Goldwasser held a unique status among the forebears who populate our family tree. Both of my biological parents shared a common ancestor. Mozes Haskiel Goldwasser, born in or about 1766<sup>1</sup>, was both my mother’s great-great-grandfather and my father’s great-great-great grandfather. A look at the family tree chart (see below) illustrates this blood relationship. If we consider Mozes to be the trunk of our family tree, then my parents’ marriage in 1936 represents the conjoining of two of its upper branches into a single bough — from which I and my descendants would eventually blossom.

Our family tree was destined to emerge in an area that was soaked with centuries of Jewish blood. Despite King Casimir’s efforts in the 14th century C.E. to protect the Jews by segregating them into areas such as Kazimierz, church-inspired bloodshed against Poland’s Jews continued to scar its history. In 1454, for example, anti-semitic riots erupted in Silesia thanks to the inflamed rhetoric of the papal envoy and Franciscan friar, John of Capistrano, whose ruthless campaign against the Jews — whom he accused of profaning Christianity — resulted in the death and exile of thousands. Based on his success at ridding Lower Silesia of its “Jewish problem,” John was invited to conduct a similar campaign in Krakow.

Ironically, this period was noted in the history books as Poland’s “Golden Age” or the Polish Renaissance. It saw the construction of Krakow’s Old Synagogue in 1492 which stands today as one of the world’s oldest Jewish house of worship. It is likely that

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<sup>1</sup> This date, and the other dates pertaining to family members, were drawn from the genealogical records maintained by the Mormon Church. These are typically dates when a life cycle event (i.e. birth, death, marriage) was recorded with the authorities and may or may not correspond to the actual dates the occurred. Reporting was often delayed in order to avoid or delay taxation and because the recording of civil dates was of little concern to members of the observant Jewish community.

my earliest known ancestor, Mozes Goldwasser, prayed there some three hundred years later. Sadly, it serves today merely as a museum memorializing the vibrant and vanished Jewish culture that it once anchored.

Or he may have “davened” at the Rema Synagogue, built in 1553 in the Oppidum, named for the famous talmudist, Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserles), considered to be the “Maimonides of Polish Jewry.”

Mozes Goldwasser lived during a particularly turbulent period. Shortly after his birth in the 1760s, the Polish parliament in Warsaw, known as the Sejm, once again took up and debated the “Jewish Question.” They implemented a series of draconian measures that abolished the Jews’ ability to own land or to hold jobs without first obtaining specific permission from the town burghers (Christian citizens). When Mozes was a youngster — around the time of the American Revolution — the Sejm passed legislation that sought to force Jews out of the cities into the countryside. It also voted to gravely restrict the civil authority of Poland’s rabbis.

Those familiar with Poland’s history understand its chimerical nature. The Polish nation has, over the centuries, disappeared entirely from the map, only to re-ascend like the Phoenix. At the time that Mozes Goldwasser entered the world, Poland was divided between Prussian and Austrian sovereignty. Krakow found itself under the Austrian flag where conditions for Jews were only modestly more tolerable than for their brethren living in the Prussian zone. Mozes, no doubt, witnessed the demise of Krakow’s Oppidum which took place in 1782 when Austrian Emperor Joseph II disbanded the kahal (the governing Jewish community council). The walls themselves that defined the Jewish quarter came down forty years later.

In 1789, six years after the official end of the Oppidum’s role as Krakow’s Jewish sector, Mozes and his wife, Ruchel, became the proud parents of their third child, Joseph — my ancestor on both my mother and my father’s side. Joseph was born into the era of

the European Enlightenment that saw increasing levels of civil liberties being extended to Jews. Of course, such expanded rights came at a price. Taxation, regulation and military conscription now began to plague Europe's Jews. Joseph's father, Mozes was no doubt exempt from military service since the edict authorizing the conscription of Jews, adopted the year before, decreed that men with large families need not serve.

The year of Joseph's birth was also marked by the adoption of the Grand Jewish Ordinance of 1789. This had to be a pivotal event in the lives of Mozes and his family as well as all the Polish Jews living under Austrian rule. The Ordinance attempted to bring about social and political equality between Jews and non-Jews. Forced expulsions were discontinued in favor of alternate policies of assimilation and absorption. There was a dark side to this seemingly benign new attitude towards the Jews. Jewish courts, Beth Dins, along with the entire Jewish judiciary system, were summarily abolished. Jewish self-government was outlawed. Jews would be governed just as the burghers were. The Ordinance required that Jews dress in the same fashion as their Christian neighbors and send their children to proper German-speaking schools.

Jews were not to be treated equally in all areas, however. Mozes was still required to pay a special "Jewish Tax," that non-Jews were not forced to pay. This just for the privilege of living as a Jew in a Christian society.

When little Joseph Goldwasser, Mozes' son, was two years old, Kazimierz lost its status as a separate city and became a district of Krakow. It is likely that his family joined the many others and quickly moved out of the Oppidum's over-crowded streets into newer neighborhoods like Podgorze. The district maintained its Jewish character, however, even after this mass exodus as Jews stayed within walking distance of the "old neighborhood" due to the Talmudic restriction against traveling on the Sabbath. It is likely, therefore, as Joseph grew into manhood during the dawn of the 19th century, he

prayed at one of the 120 synagogues and prayer houses located in the Kazimierz Oppidum section.

The close of the 18th century CE saw Krakow swallowed up into the expanding Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1799 all Jewish businesses were ordered closed down by the authorities in Vienna. In the face of dire economic hardship, intentionally brought on by the Jew-hating regime, the Goldwasser family did as European Jews had done for centuries. They hunkered down and waited for times to get better. They did not have long to wait,

The new century saw fresh breezes of reform sweeping through Eastern Europe as citizens of Krakow sought to shake off the yoke of feudalism. In 1809, when Joseph was 20 years old and his father, Mozes was in his mid-forties, Krakow again changed hands and became part of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. This change led to the formation, six years later, of the Krakow Republic. Jews like the Goldwassers were again allowed to live in the Jewish section of Kazimierz while “cultured,” that is assimilated, Jews were permitted to live in the Christian sections.

By the 1830s Krakow’s Jewish population numbered nearly 11,000 and was able to sustain an elementary school. It is eminently possible that some of the children of Joseph Goldwasser and his wife, Chawa Rozl, attended this school. It was within this next generation of Goldwassers that my lineage bifurcated, with the line of one of Joseph and Chawa Rozl’s older children, Abraham Haskel, born in 1818, leading to my father — who became his namesake — and with the line of another of Joseph and Chawa Rozl’s younger children, Gittel, born in 1838, leading to my mother.

Tragedy struck when my mother’s ancestor, Gittel Goldwasser was 8 years old and her older brother, my father’s ancestor, Abraham Haskel, was 28. They, and their siblings, lost both their father and grandfather at the same time. Their father, Joseph, was 57 and their grandfather, family patriarch Mozes, was nearly 80 at the time the Krakow

Revolution broke out in 1846. While the Krakow Republic was afforded a high degree of autonomy, it still remained part of the Austrian realm and was forced to conform to the monarchy's feudal system. In an alliance between the Krakow military and a secret pro-civil rights group known as the Polish Democratic Society, a revolt against the Austrian regime was planned for February 20. Led by several hundred peasants and miners, the rebels were soon joined by the urban proletariat and artisans. The violence spread beyond its initial target, Krakow's Austrian civil servants, as the insurgency directed its wrath against the local aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie.

Within a few days, as the revolution gained steam, it succeeded in driving a large Austrian battalion out of Krakow. The revolt's leaders thereupon issued a Manifesto to the Polish Nation that was widely circulated and succeeded in swelling the revolutionary forces to more than six thousand troops. A large contingent of Krakow Jews, inspired by the Manifesto's powerful rhetoric promoting personal liberty and political freedom, reported for active duty. It is conceivable that Joseph, and perhaps even his elderly father, Mozes, were among them. A series of power struggles within the the revolution's leadership soon took its toll. By early March, and after two pitched battles between the insurgents and the Austrian military, the revolt had been crushed. In its wake, Austrian culture was imposed on Krakow with a vengeance as by November, Krakow was absorbed fully into the Austrian realm. Living conditions for the Jews became deplorable as plagues and disease ravaged the city during this post-revolt period. Given that both Goldwassers, père and fils, succumbed in the pivotal year of 1846, we may safely assume their demise was related to the ill-fated revolt. It is possible that Joseph was killed fighting for liberty against the tyrannical Austrian regime and that his father, Mozes, succumbed due to one of the many diseases that followed in the wake of the revolt.

The 1846 Krakow Revolution, merging the struggle for national independence with the struggle for social reforms was highly honored by the European left. Marx and

Engels referred to the Krakow Revolution in the Communist Manifesto. The quest for social justice, long a cherished Judaic value, and an ideal for which Joseph Goldwasser apparently gave his life, was no doubt passed on to his heirs and descendants.

The Jewish world in which Mozes Goldwasser's grandchildren found themselves was one undergoing tectonic shifts as the effects of the European Enlightenment, as well as the Jewish response to this movement known as *haskalah*, swept eastward across Europe. The city of Krakow was emancipated from feudal rule in 1867. Gittel Goldwasser was 29 and her brother, Abraham Haskel was 49. They and their families were now permitted to settle in Krakow proper as one traditional Jewish institution after another faded from sight. The new leaders of the Jewish Religious Council were assimilationists and called themselves the *Maskilim* or the Enlightened Ones. They were responsible for the opening of the first secular Hebrew public library in Krakow in 1876.

It is safe to assume that Abraham Haskel Goldwasser and his wife, Hanna Lea, sent their son, Izrael Haim Goldwasser, born in 1853, to an elementary school that was part of a diverse and growing network that included traditional Yiddish-language *hederim* (small single classroom schools usually located in the Rabbi's home) as well as secondary schools taught in Polish and German. As Izrael and Gittel were growing up in the second half of the 19th century, the Jews were enjoying increasing acceptance and hence becoming part of Krakow's Polish-German cultural life. By the end of the century, Krakow's Jewish population had swelled to more than 25,000 out of a total population of 91,000.

As it was doing throughout Europe, a growing Jewish nationalism movement was afoot in Krakow during the waning years of the 19th century. Not surprisingly, the calls for a Jewish homeland resulted in a virulent backlash that included the Dreyfus case in France in 1894, the Hilsner case in Czechoslovakia in 1899, and the Beylis case in Russia in 1913. This growing anti-Jewish sentiment was manifested in Poland under the banner

of Roman Dmowski and the right wing National Democratic Party he created. Dmowski's party is considered to be a genuine precursor of Germany's National Socialist (Nazi) Party.

As in many parts of Europe, Jewish assimilation into mainstream society was halted in its tracks by the efforts of such nationalist movements that targeted Jews in order to promote their own ascendancy through the ranks of political power. Throughout Poland, during the 1890s, Dmowski's followers urged citizens to boycott Jewish shops. This won them the support of the petite bourgeoisie and Christian shopkeepers who competed against Jewish merchants. We know from archival records that Izrael Haim, and his wife Malka's son, Mozesz Goldwasser, born in 1883, listed his occupation as a merchant. Since shops were typically handed down from father to son, it is presumable that Izrael Haim was also a shopkeeper and therefore, no doubt harshly affected by the boycott and other onerous anti-Jewish measures.

But it was the future son-in-law of Gittel Goldwasser and her unregistered husband, Wigdor Hirsch, who would be most deeply affected by the rising tide of European anti-semitism. Gittel and Wigdor's youngest daughter, Leah, was born in 1879 and Gittel's death followed less than three months later. Leah would one day become my grandmother, but not before marrying an adventurous and enterprising young man named Jakob Grunfeld, born in 1874. It was the tenacity and courage of Jakob Grunfeld, my maternal grandfather, that would make all the events that followed possible. For Jakob was a unique and singularly tenacious character. Faced with diminishing economic opportunities and increasing political repression in his home country, Jakob, as an unmarried and unemployed young man, joined the massive wave of eastern European immigration flowing across the Atlantic. to America during the 1890s. He remained in the US just long enough to obtain his well-documented American citizenship before returning to Krakow to marry and raise a family. Had Jakob not taken that journey, his daughter,

my mother Ernestyna, would not have been able to escape the engulfing flames of the Holocaust and our entire clan would have perished as our once proud family tree was cruelly cut down in Krakow. Jakob Grunfeld's story is an extraordinary one and keenly worthy of closer examination.

## Chapter Two

### Jakob's Gift

In ancient Judea, the citizens had developed a unique method of determining if an arriving stranger was or was not a member of the Jewish people. The test consisted of handing the stranger an ear of corn and asking him to identify it. If he could correctly pronounce the difficult word “Shiboleth” (שבולת), then he was presumed to be “one of us.” Today, the English word shiboleth has come to mean a custom or ritual observed by a specific group of people and, like many families, ours had its fables, its customs and its cherished shibboleths. When I was growing up and had begun to question my parents about their own mothers and fathers, and started expressing curiosity about that fact that my classmates all seemed to have grandparents while I had none, I recall my mother passing on to me the story of how her own grandmother, Gittel, had died on the last day of Passover. Her death was connected with the birth of her youngest child, my grandmother Leah. Through my genealogical research I discovered that Gittel Hirsch (née Goldwasser) did, in fact, die on April 15, 1879 which was indeed the last day of Passover that year. Gittel, the true matriarch of our family, died from complications brought about by a difficult childbirth some three months earlier. That child, born during the winter of 1879, grew up to become my mother's mother, Leah Grunfeld (née Hirsch). Leah grew up and married a fascinating fellow named Jakob Grunfeld. It was Leah's husband Jakob and his singular actions that made it possible for me to sit here, comfortably in America, and write these words today. His amazing story begins a few years before my grandmother Leah's birth.

Born in Krakow on October 17, 1874 to Joachim Chaskel (or possibly Yecheskel) and his wife, Raizel (née Wiener) Grunfeld, Jakob was the sixth of 11 children. Most of

those children married, raised families and perished into ashes during the Holocaust. Some, like Jakob's younger brother Izak, found sanctuary in America. And one — Jakob himself — died violently before the onslaught.

Poland, in the final decade of the nineteenth century, was a mine field of hazards for young Jewish men. Facing life-long conscription into the Austro-Hungarian army, restricted in their schooling and professional opportunities as ever more severe anti-Jewish policies were being imposed, such as onerous taxation aimed only at Jews, many young men joined the widening flow of immigration from Russia's Pale of Settlement westward towards America's "Golden Door." Jakob Grunfeld was one such young man, determined to seek a better future by saying goodbye to his family and his culture and, like so many others — including one of his brothers — diving in to the massive wave of immigration breaking on America's shores. On August 17, 1893, an 18 year-old Jakob lied about his age in order to book passage in steerage on the SS Gothia, sailing from Hamburg and bound for New York harbor.

The Jakob Grunfeld who stepped onto the pier in New York, after having surely saluted the welcoming Statue of Liberty, was not a particularly striking figure. At five foot six, his fair complexion and regular features allowed him to blend in with the tide of human cargo being disgorged that day. He found lodging near the Williamsburg Bridge, at 114 Lewis Street on New York's Lower East Side, the home of his brother, Izak, who had come to America the year before.

The ensuing years were no doubt challenging ones for Jakob. Listing his occupation as "peddler" — a generic term for those who made their living day to day, hordling and scratching as best they could. Like most young men, Jakob hoped to find not only financial opportunities in America, but also social, or even romantic ones. Sadly, he found neither. Others, facing disappointment and disillusionment as they discovered that New York's streets were not actually paved with gold, often returned to their home

communities in Europe. The phenomenon was not that unusual. Hundreds of Jewish immigrants, mostly young men, decided America was not for them and abandoned their immigrant adventures. Jakob, no doubt, gave serious thought to becoming one of them. Yet, he persevered in New York's hostile streets, scruffling along as best as he could, for one reason only. He understood that America had something of value to offer him if he could only stick it out for five years. It was this decision on the part of my grandfather Jakob — this courageous choice to persevere long enough to become a citizen of the United States of America — that made all the difference. It was this decision that resulted in the future course of our family saga and it must be regarded as our family's critical inflection point for all that was to ensue.

On October 6, 1898 — five years and five weeks after setting foot on American soil — Jakob Grunfeld renounced his allegiance to the Emperor of Austria-Hungary and became a legal citizen of the United States. For several months Jakob attempted to leverage his newly-minted US citizenship into more lucrative employment opportunities. He soon found that his new status did not gain him much in the over-crowded job market that characterized the Jewish immigrant community of New York. He was still living with his brother, who now went by Isadore, at 613 East 11th Street, and had not been successful in any of his romantic initiatives to date. Finally Jakob, now 24, threw in the towel. Just as he had initially found the fortitude to come to America's shores, he now summoned the same courage to leave them. But he would not be returning to Poland empty handed. No, Jakob would carry home a prized imprimatur attested to by the precious green document in his pocket: an American passport.

So it was that exactly one year after Jakob became a US citizen, in October 1899, he and his brother Isadore went to the US immigration office to request permission to leave the country "temporarily." Jakob stated he planned to return to his homeland for about two years before returning to the states. The application was signed by Jakob and

witnessed by Isadore and the permission was immediately granted. As they say, there is nothing more permanent than “temporary.” My grandfather returned to Poland never to set foot in the United States again. Yet, his US citizenship endured and remained valid for the balance of his life.

There is a possibility, given what happened soon after Jakob’s return to Krakow, that he was enticed to come back for romantic reasons. Shortly after his return, Jakob married my future grandmother, Leah, in an unregistered ceremony. Jews of that era often failed to record events such as births, deaths and marriages with the Polish authorities in order to avoid the required taxation. Leah and Jakob did finally record the marriage some years later in 1909.

Jakob found work in what we would today term the financial services industry. Actually he was a money changer, offering to swap local zlotys into foreign currencies and vice versa for a small commission. Leah and Jakob’s first child, a daughter named Gusta, was born in 1902 followed by another daughter, Fany, in 1904, and finally, my mother, Ernestyna in 1906. Thanks to the unusual laws surrounding US citizenship in those days, both Jakob’s wife, Leah, and his three daughters, Gusta, Fany, and my mother, Ernestyna, were legal citizens of the the United States — simply by virtue of their relationship to their husband and father. This legal twist would eventually prove to be my mother’s salvation during the inferno that was to soon ravage European Jewry.

As the girls were growing up not much was made of their special citizenship status. There were much more important matters to attend to, such as putting bread on the table and getting an education. The latter was not as straightforward an affair as one might assume. Young Jewish women who came from traditional or observant families in those days typically received no formal schooling at all. But the winds of change were sweeping through Torah communities in the 1920s and my grandmother, Leah, a true visionary, was quick to embrace the whirlwind. By the time my mother, Ernestyna, was in her

teens, those powerful new forces were beginning to exert themselves in the old Oppidum Jewish sector of Krakow. Foremost among the cultural shifts taking place, was the role of women in Jewish life. Leading the charge and fanning those winds of change was a pioneering and far-sighted Jewish heroine from Krakow named Sarah Schenirer. And one of her devoted followers was my grandmother, Leah Grunfeld.

Sarah Schenirer was the unassuming and withdrawn daughter of Polish Hasidic parents. Working as a seamstress, she moved to Vienna at the outbreak of World War I. It was there that she organized her first Torah class for young Jewish women. The effort soon spread rapidly despite initial resistance. Propelling this growth was Sarah Schenirer's doggedly determined drive and now forceful personality. She soon realized that in order to successfully elevate the educational level of Jewish girls, she would require the endorsement of respected European rabbis. She solicited and received the approval of Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, known as the Gerrer Rebbe, and, most significantly, the blessing of Lithuanian Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan Poupko, the venerated "Chofetz Chaim (trans.: desirer of life)" of the Musak movement.

Armed with these stamps of approval, Schenirer was, in 1923, able to establish the very first Jewish religious seminary for girls in Krakow. She called it Bais Yaakov (house of Jacob) culled from a Biblical verse in the parsha Yitro, and my mother, Ernestyna, was one of its first enrollees. Sarah Schenirer was clearly mindful of the tenuous position shared by Jews in 20th century Europe when she penned the new school's mission statement that read: "to train Jewish daughters ... so they will know that they are the children of a people whose existence does not depend upon a territory of its own, as do other nations of the world whose existence is predicated upon a territory and similar racial background."

By the time of her death in 1935, more than 200 Beis Yaakov schools were teaching Torah to approximately 35,000 observant Jewish girls across Europe. Among them was

another courageous young Jewish woman named Vichna Kaplan who, as a respected Rebbitzin, would export the concept to the new world and found the Beis Yaakov schools for girls in America.

My grandmother Leah's strong devotion to Jewish education, as evidenced by her support of the Beis Yaakov movement, would someday play a part in her ability to survive the Shoah. But for now, it resulted in giving my mother a strong foundation of Jewish learning that she would eventually instill in me and her other children.

Unfortunately, Ernestyna's father Jakob, never had the opportunity of seeing his daughters receive a formal Jewish education. He was struck down, in the prime of his life through a criminal act related to his occupation. As mentioned, Jakob worked in the financial field and soon after the birth of his daughters, he opened a small check cashing establishment in Krakow. The shop would meet the needs of local miners and factory workers who were paid weekly by check but needed cash to spend. Paying my grandfather a small fee, they would line up outside his shop on payday in order to turn their flimsy signed vouchers into hard zloty currency. Perhaps because he wished to somehow associate his business with the security of a local bank, Jakob chose a location right next door to the largest bank in Krakow. He was in no way affiliated with the bank, but if his customers jumped to that conclusion, that would only enhance the image of his establishment. Ironically, it was this same marketing ploy that resulted in his demise. For it was not only the miners and laborers of Krakow who assumed that the little check cashing store was a part of the bank, this misconception also filtered into some of the town's criminal minds.

On one particularly wintry day in 1920, in the early morning before the paychecks were to be distributed, two young gunmen barged into Jakob's shop. Brandishing their weapons they demanded that he hand over the money he surely had on hand in preparation for the coming payroll. Jakob acted without hesitation. He had been prepared for

such a moment and had decided that if guns were shown, he would hand over everything without resistance. He gave the gunmen every bit of cash he had on hand, but this was not enough to satisfy the robbers.

“What is this!?” they shouted, tossing his meager handful of zlotys on the floor. “This is a bank, isn’t it? A bank has lots more than this. You’re holding out on us, you filthy Zjid. Now go get the rest of it. Move!”

“I-I-I am not a b-bank,” my grandfather stammered. “Not a bank. Just a store. That’s all I have. I swear. Now take it and leave me alone.” His words went unheeded as one of the two armed intruders leveled his gun at Jakob’s head and demanded more cash. When none was produced, the killer pulled the trigger and my grandfather, Jakob Grunfeld, age 46, fell to his death.

The story has an epilogue. Both robbers were eventually apprehended and prosecuted by the authorities. They were young men in their early twenties and the mothers of both murderers together asked to meet with the wife of their victim, my grandmother Leah. Leah, a young widow at age 42, agreed. The mothers begged her to speak with the prosecutor and urge him to have mercy on their two wayward sons. Did Leah agree again to this request? The answer to this question has sadly been lost in time. I like to think that Leah tempered her commitment to justice with compassion and agreed to do as she was asked. But one can only guess at this point.

My mother Ernestyna, now orphaned at age 14, continued in her educational endeavors. In addition to her firm belief that young Jewish women should receive the benefits of a Torah education, my grandmother Leah also believed in the then radical notion that women should be skilled in a trade. This belief became poignantly more profound after the tragic and sudden death of her husband Jakob. Leah never remarried yet was able to provide for her children throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

After attending Beis Yaakov, Leah's daughters, including my mother Ernestyna, were all enrolled in a Krakow commercial academy to receive practical career training. Ernestyna learned clerical work such as typing and filing and it was at the academy that she first encountered the dark specter of anti-semitism. Growing up in the insulated Jewish community of Krakow between the wars, a young girl could easily presume that Jews were, if not loved, at least tolerated by the larger Christian society. She soon learned otherwise when she returned to her desk at the academy only to discover that someone had stuck a knife blade into the surface next to the message in Polish: Śmierć na wszystkich Żydów. Death to all Jews! The message was a harbinger of the days to come. Days that would see my mother wed my father, Abraham Chaskel Goldwasser in 1936 and nights that would result in her fleeing Krakow to the safety of American shores borne on the wings of eagles and an American passport made possible by the courage and pluck of her late father.

Jakob Grunfeld may have been regarded during his lifetime as something less than a success. He faced failure in America and was forced to shamefully return home. His business was based on collecting a few pennies for exchanging one piece of paper for another. His death was ignoble and hardly heroic. Yet he succeeded well beyond the scope of most men by virtue of the posthumous gift he bestowed on his beloved Leah and their three daughters. Had my mother not been blessed with this gift, she would have, in all likelihood, gone to the gas chambers with me in her uterus. It was Jakob's gift, given from beyond the grave, that saved my mother's life and thereby precluded my own death. A death that would have likely occurred before I was even born.

## Chapter Three

### A Ray of Hope

My biological father, Abraham (Chaskel) Goldwasser — like his father before him — married a woman two years his senior. While this was not unheard of among the Jews of Krakow in the 1930s, it certainly was not considered common. Chaskel was 28 and my mother, Ernestyna was 30 at the time of their marriage. Growing up fatherless since her early teens, Ernestyna had developed an independent nature that bordered on toughness. Unlike her sister Gusta, who married a prosperous businessman soon after their father Jakob was murdered and immediately began raising a family, Ernestyna decided to pursue a career as a bookkeeper and became known for her resourcefulness and efficiency. It was undoubtedly these qualities, along with her beauty, that my father-to-be found attractive in his second cousin, Ernestyna, when he proposed marriage.

Chaskel pursued numerous careers including the one in which he had been trained, that of a furrier. One of the major attractions of the furrier trade was the portability of the inventory. Unlike lumber or livestock that was difficult to conceal, pelts and hides could be easily stowed out of sight when the tax assessor came to call. Quite simply, if he did not see it, it was not taxed. Chaskel no doubt provided many of the shtreimlech, or circular fur hats favored by Hasidic Jewish men on the Sabbath and holidays. Patterned after the hats worn by pre-Napoleonic Polish and Russian nobility — Peter the Great was known to wear one — the shtreimel was, and still is, worn in order to elevate the status of such special days unto the realm of royalty.

Life in 1930s Poland has been described by some as a “Fool’s Paradise.” As many in England were deluded into believing that Prime Minister Chamberlain had achieved a true “Peace in our time” at Munich, This pervasive Polish false sense of security was the

result of the faith placed by many Poles, such as my father, in similar paper peace agreements such as the Soviet-Polish Non-Aggression Pact. The treaty, signed in 1932 and calling on both nations to resolve disputes via negotiation rather than violence, was intended — along with the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact signed 18 months later — to bolster Poland's position as an equidistant buffer between the two rising military powers on its eastern and western borders. But it was in fact the secret and sinister provisions of a third treaty that would seal Poland's fate and demonstrate the true aggressive designs of both the Nazis and the USSR. Known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and signed during the late hours of August 23, 1939, the Pact provided Hitler with the assurances he needed to brazenly invade Poland without fear of Soviet intervention — effectively nullifying the earlier non-aggression pact. Stalin, deeply concerned about the outcome of battles raging against Japan in the Nomonhan region, was lured into the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact by assurances that Germany would not form a military alliance with the Empire of Japan. Assurances that several years later went up in smoke.

Once the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was in place, the dominos fell quickly. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, meeting little resistance from the weak Polish military defenders. Japan, believing that Germany would not now open a second western front against the USSR, agreed to sign the Molotov-Togo agreement on September 15, thereby ending hostilities between the two powers. On the following day, Stalin, now confident that he would not be required to fight a two-front war, gave the order and on September 17, the Red Army marched into Poland from the East, shredding every provision of the 1932 non-aggression treaty.

The nation that once was Poland was summarily pulled apart between Germany and the USSR like a plump pullet. My family, along with all of Krakow, found itself in the German zone and, as hard as it is to fathom today, this fact brought them some relief. Despite the non-stop anti-Jewish rhetoric spouted by its leader, Germany was viewed by

most Poles as the more civilized and cultured nation of the two. After all, Polish Jews had fought side-by-side with the Kaiser's troops during the Great War, many of them coming home decorated with German medals. Being well-versed in the German tongue and kultur was considered the hallmark of an educated Pole during the time my parents were growing up. But the Russians? Uneducated, anti-semitic barbarians at best. Surely this misunderstanding of Naziism's true mission — to wit, the destruction of European and eventually world Judaism — contributed to my family's failure, as well as the failure of almost all of Krakow's Jews, to foresee and thereupon flee the coming onslaught.

In the end, of course, it was the USSR that emerged as the most naive of nations when, on June 22 1941, Germany invaded Russia under the banner of Operation Barbarosa, effectively shredding all the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement.

During the years leading up to the German invasion, my father, too, lived in a world oblivious to the gathering catastrophe. By his late twenties he had achieved a sufficient level of prosperity to contemplate marriage. Chaskel's concept of married life was no doubt influenced by his own upbringing. His mother, Feige Pessel was known as a powerful woman and a true balabusta in every sense of the word. She was something of a mother figure to her husband, Mojzesz, and that relationship surely colored Chaskel's choice when he finally elected to marry his 30-year old second cousin, Ernestyna. Such consanguineous marriages were not uncommon among the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and in any case, one would need to go back three generations in order to find a true blood linkage between them. My parents were wed in August of 1936 with every intention of raising a family, but problems soon surfaced. Whether due to my mother's age or some other unknown factor, their efforts to conceive a child proved fruitless despite years of trying — years filled with disappointment and frustration.

My mother could not imagine that her husband was the cause of the infertility. Chaskel was in the peak of health and an accomplished athlete. He loved soccer and

showed no outward signs of any medical conditions. “It must be me,” my mother reasoned. She decided to take matters into her own hands, but first, she would need to engage in a bit of well-intentioned deceit.

In the summer of 1939, Ernestyna told her husband that she was going on a vacation by herself to a nearby mountain resort. She needed some time to relieve the stress she had been experiencing on the job. But instead of heading to the mountain spa, my mother secretly traveled to Vienna to consult with a leading fertility specialist. The journey was a precarious one on several levels. Hitler had, just the year before, annexed Austria to the Reich under the bloodless invasion they dubbed the Anschluss (link-up). A Jewish woman, traveling alone at a time when Jews were being increasingly persecuted, entailed an enormous risk. Despite the danger, my mother agreed to undergo a surgical procedure that was intended to unblock her fallopian tubes and allow the free passage of ova into her uterus. The operation proved successful and within a few months Ernestyna announced to Chaskel that she was at long last pregnant. What she could not know at that moment, of course, is that Chaskel would never see that child. And tragically, the child — who was me — would likewise never see his father.

Within a few weeks, in a trumped-up response to alleged raids across the Polish/German border, the world once again stood as mute witness to the marching of German troops as an ocean of Panzer divisions flooded Poland, triggering the first volley of what would become known as World War II. It took only five days for the Germans to reach Krakow, which fell without a shot being fired. More than sixty thousand Krakow Jews — my entire family among them — out of a total population of 250,000, now found themselves trapped in the iron grip of German occupation. On October 26, 1939 Krakow was named as the capitol of the Generalgouvernement — the headquarters of the occupied “rump state” of Poland. As a result, the persecution of Krakow’s Jews intensified

as the authorities issued edict after anti-Jewish edict intended to identify, disenfranchise, isolate, and eventually eliminate every last Jewish man, woman and child in its grasp.

By early December conditions became extreme as the Nazis turned up the pressure on Krakow's trapped Jewish population. A government-sanctioned raid on December 6 — similar to the state sponsored terrorism known as Kristallnacht carried out the year before across Germany — resulted in scores of arrests, deaths, looted stores and fire-bombed synagogues. My parents quickly recognized the nature of the impinging threat to their safety and cautiously sprung into action. On the day after the “aktion” against the Jews of Krakow, my mother marched into occupation headquarters with her US citizenship papers. She walked out with a certificate, valid for sixty days, issued by “Der Stadtkonimissar” of Krakow. The certificate declared that “Ernestyne Goldwasser ist Jude (is a Jew)” and she is of United States nationality. Hence, the document went on to say, she is not required to wear “Der Armbinde mit Davidstern (the armband bearing the Jewish star).”

But what would happen when the sixty day period was up and the certificate expired? What would happen to her “protektzia? (special dispensation)?” How could she be sure it would be renewed? She and my father had struggled to bring a baby into this world and now, after they had finally succeeded, the entire world had gone mad. It was clear that as Jews in Krakow, they were prisoners in an ever-tightening noose with little chance of escape or resistance. But there was one ray of hope. My mother, her sister Gusta, along with their mother Leah, all held a “magic ticket” — their United States citizenship. But could they use it? And if so, what was the best way?

It was these and other similar questions that brought the Goldwasser family together on the especially frigid night of December 23rd, 1939. As they gathered round the kitchen table to once again engage in that timeless Jewish ritual of intellectual analysis

of a clearly hopeless situation, Uncle Shimek's booming voice rose mightily above the general din and clatter.

"They're rounding up all the Jews in the provinces and shipping them to Warsaw," he proclaimed with a look that said "Now what do you think of that?!" Just then nine-year old Raizeleh, Uncle Shimek's precocious daughter, raced into the kitchen, chased by her little brother, Yankeleh. The boy was named after his grandfather, Jakob Grunfeld, just as I soon would be, eight days after my birth the following May.

The American citizenship of Jakob Grunfeld's widow and daughters was a fact known to everyone in the family and was not something that had mattered very much to any of them over the years since Jakob's death. But now things had changed. Now that they found themselves trapped in the vise that was slowly crushing all Polish Jews — with Hitler on one side and Stalin on the other — this gift of transmitted US citizenship was suddenly transformed into a cherished birthright. A key that could unlock the cage into which the Nazis had herded them. How to employ that key was the purpose of the family meeting that night.

The discussion labored on through the night as ice crystals blotted the small kitchen windows. "I told my wife she should go," my father announced bravely. "Go now and then I'll follow. You can get a visa right now. Don't waste the opportunity of a lifetime, I told her." He cited the Torah story of how Jacob divided his estate into two parts in preparation for his brother Esau's feared attack. "Like with Jacob, with the two of us separated, the chances of at least one of us coming through are doubled." Who could argue with such sage Torah-inspired logic?

Aunt Gusta shook her head slowly with an expression of pained condescension. "I should go and leave my kinderlach? Leave my husband who doesn't know how to put on a sock without my guidance?" My uncle Shimek disagreed with her. She also had

the precious imprimatur of US citizenship, he pointed out, and hence she should also get out with her sister. But Gusta demurred.

“You, my darling sister,” Gusta said, “you have all the documents. You have no children yet. You should try to get out of here now. We’ve collected enough money for a ticket on a ship sailing to New York from Genoa in four weeks. You can catch the train tomorrow and be in America by the end of January.”

“But, Gusteleh,” my mother-to-be protested. “I too have a husband. Have you forgotten?”

“And what a husband he is,” she replied. “Once you tell them in America what a talented handsome young man he is, they will let you send for him right away. The Americans are kind people. They will not allow a young family to be broken up for very long — especially with a baby on the way.” The consensus was unanimous. Ernestyna should pack and go while she had the chance.

“This German nightmare will pass over soon,” pronounced Uncle Shimek. “and Chaskel will arrive to your side before the baby does.” Buoyed by the family’s optimistic posture — however tenuous it may have been — Chaskel and Ernestyna agreed to the plan and began making speedy preparations.

On the night of January 8, 1940, my parents slept together for the last time before my mother’s departure. I doubt if they got much sleep at all as they peered into the inky darkness of the night and the vast sea of uncertainty that was their future. The following day, after a tearful farewell that saw my father stoop to give a tender kiss to his wife’s abdomen, my mother, armed with her father, Jakob’s US citizenship papers, her own birth certificate, her marriage certificate and a letter from a Dr. Marja Glebocka certifying her pregnancy, climbed aboard a westbound train for Genoa Italy and rode off to meet her ship and her destiny.

The family had booked passage aboard the Italian cruise ship, Conte di Savoia, departing from Genoa on January 21, 1940. The ship was heavily advertised as offering the “smoothest crossings” of any Atlantic vessel due to the three huge gyroscopes it had been fitted with in the forward hold that purportedly reduced the ship’s rolling action. This feature was no doubt a factor for my family who wished to make Ernestyna, with her fragile pregnancy, as comfortable as possible. The ship met an ignoble end, however. Several years later, on September 11, 1943, the vessel, gyroscopes and all, was set ablaze and sunk by retreating German forces.

As the Conte di Savoia steamed into New York harbor on February 1, 1940, Ernestyna and the other passengers were summoned on deck for a look at the New Colossus, better known as the Statue of Liberty. What thoughts must have crossed my mother’s mind as she listened to Emma Lazerus’s stirring and heralded words inscribed on the base of the statue.

“....”Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. "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-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

After giving birth to me on a lonely Mother’s Day, May 12 of 1940, my mother would spend the next four years pushing against that intractable and immovable “Golden Door” as she struggled to bring my father — trapped in Poland and most assuredly “yearning to breathe free” — to America. In so doing she encountered an adversary more subtly sinister and more devious than any enemy she may have faced in Europe. The United States Department of State.

This is the story of my mother’s struggle. Her heroic attempts to reunite her beloved husband with the son he had never seen. But it is not merely my family’s story.

Documented cases of families in similar circumstances cropped up throughout the US during the war years, each one bearing a legitimate link to US citizenship. Each one denied entry and abandoned to a doomed fate as Europe turned into an inferno and as the American government turned its back to the flames.

It is the sacred memory of those denied Holocaust victims that prompted me to write this book. Those who, but for the intransigent culture of anti-Semitism that pervaded the US State Department during those years, would have found refuge from their “teeming shores” beneath the lady with the lamp, beside America’s “Golden Door.”

In the following chapters I have presented actual excerpted correspondence between my parents and between my mother and various government agencies written during those tumultuous years. These letters, when read in chronological order, document her highly heroic struggle in a unique and intimate fashion. I feel this is the most compelling and approachable method of telling their amazing story.

At times, when I think back to my mother’s efforts during those desperate years, I picture her as a little girl standing on the sidewalk in front of her burning home, trying mightily to flag down one of the steady stream of fire engines barreling down the street that uniformly ignore her time and again. It is to her enduring memory, as well as to the memory of the man she strove to save, that this book is dedicated.