

THE LIGHT IN HIDDEN PLACES

A Novel Based on the True Story of
Stefania Podgórska

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

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**While inspired by real events and historical characters, this is a
work of historical fiction. The author has tried to be accurate
in portraying people, places, and events, but some elements
have been fictionalized by the author. Some names have
been changed for the sake of privacy.**

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-35593-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 20 21 22 23 24

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, March 2020

Book design by Abby Denning

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PRZEMYŚL, POLAND NOVEMBER 1942

Someone is out there. In the dark.

I open my eyes.

And the dark is the same as always. A blank page. I can smell the cabbage Emilika boiled two floors below us. Feel the sigh beside me that is my sister's sleeping breath. But the dark has also changed. There's an echo inside it. A sound my ears have missed.

Someone is here.

Now I am awake.

I fold back the blanket, quiet, listening, stretching my legs to the floor. A mattress spring pops like a gunshot. My sister breathes, but she doesn't stir.

If someone is here, they are not in this room.

I tiptoe, barefoot, across the boards, and put a finger to the edge of the rug I've nailed over the window. The streetlights glare, hard bits of snow glinting like dust as they fall through the light. But the sidewalk below my building is deserted, the windows across the street rows of dead eyes, dark with curtains and dresses and rugs. Like mine are.

In Przemyśl, light is like a candy poster. And it's not smart to hang signs showing where the sweets are.

I let the rug fall back into place and go to the door, pressing an ear to the wood before I turn the lock. The empty hall outside our

room stretches to the other empty rooms of the empty apartment. As it should. Everything is as it should be.

And then a noise shoots through the silence. Louder than a gun. A grenade of fear inside my chest. And I know the sound I have missed.

Someone is knocking on my front door.

They know. They know. They know.

The words beat with my blood.

Another mattress spring pops, and I feel Helena coming up behind me. She doesn't speak. She is six years old and doesn't have to be told that this is not the time for questions.

The knocking comes again, louder, this time with a whisper through the cracks.

"Stefania?"

It's a trick. The Gestapo want me to open the door without a fuss. So they don't have to break it down. So they can give a nice, unblemished apartment to some nice German officer and his law-abiding wife with clean hair and mended stockings.

Maybe this means they will shoot us outside, like Mr. Schwarzer.

The whisper comes again.

"Open the door! Fusia!"

The Gestapo do not know me by that name.

I run for the door, hands out, fingers already searching for the newly repaired lock. I know it isn't him. It can't be him. But I fumble and twist at the lock anyway, then fling open the door. Helena gasps. Or maybe the gasp comes from me. Because the bare bulb hanging in the hallway has shown me that it's not him. It's not who I thought it would be at all.

"Max!" I whisper.

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1936

My life before Przemyśl was full of chickens. And horses. Clean air and trees and long brown fields that curved with the hills like patches on a wrinkled blanket. I ran the winding roads to school in the spring and fall, ate rye soup and bread in our steamy kitchen when the snow was too deep. And every Sunday, snow or not, I rode to Mass in the village of Bircza, piled in the back of a hay wagon with brothers and sisters who eventually reached a total of eight. It was a perfect childhood.

And I hated it. The pigsty stank, and so did the outhouse, the refuse pit, and the field workers plowing in the sun. I hated the piles of manure purposely hidden in the grass to spoil my shoes. The redness of my mother's hands after scrubbing the laundry or delivering another woman's baby. And I hated the irritating and incessant *cluck, cluck, cluck* of our chickens. They never stopped. I was sure they never slept. Except for the rooster, who was insane, crowing again and again to the rising moon rather than the sun.

I didn't mind plucking the chickens.

I made my first bid for escape when I was eleven. Mama took me on the mail cart to see two of my grown-up sisters, who had taken jobs in the city. A treat, she'd said, for my birthday, which was the holy week of Easter. We all had our birthdays on Easter, all nine of us, or at least, that's when we celebrated them. Mama didn't have time to remember our real birthdays. Or our real names. I was

never Stefania. I was Stefi. Or Stefusia. Or Stefushka. But mostly, just Fusia.

If I had nine children, I wouldn't remember their names, either.

Mama paid the driver of the mail cart, then took my hand in hers. Her skin was rough and scratchy. Mama took good care of me, mostly, and so did my *tata*, when he was alive. They took good care of all of us, but I didn't want to hold her hand.

Sometimes I miss her hands now.

I pulled and squirmed the rest of the way into Przemyśl, and then I forgot all about the embarrassment of hand-holding. Wagons rumbling by on the paving stones, automobile horns bleating like sheep. A train screaming steam into the sky. And the clamor of the farmwives shouting the prices of their goods in the square was so much nicer than chickens. It was music. A brass band. A symphony.

We went shopping in open-air booths and stores with glass-fronted windows. A dress for Mama, shoes for me, and a bonnet for baby Helena. I fingered red silk ribbons and the shiny silver wrapper of a chocolate bar. My sisters gave us an elegant lunch—meaning our meat came from a tin instead of the slaughter shed—on a clean tablecloth in the apartment they shared three stories above the street. Mama was gasping before we got there, but I wanted to run down the stairs just to climb back up them again.

Mama and my sisters sipped tea while I pressed my nose to the window glass, drinking in the comings and goings of the street, and when it was time to go I cried. Begged. Stamped. Threatened and pleaded to be left behind. I would sleep on the floor. I would sleep below the stairs. My sisters wouldn't mind. I would be no trouble. Only I was being nothing but trouble. I was dragged to the mail cart by Mama's rough hands.

It was eighteen months before she let me go back. And this time when I stepped into the noise of Przemyśl, I was nearly thirteen. Older. Wiser. I had outgrown the bust of my dress. And I knew how to play Mama's game. I had a whispered conversation with my sisters, bolstered by the letter I'd sent the month before. I wiped the corners of my mouth after lunch, crossed my legs, drank the tea, and listened while Mama talked. And when it was almost time to catch our cart, I told her I wouldn't be catching it.

Mama begged. She pleaded. She even cried a little. She did not stamp her foot. I told her that Marysia had a job for me. "It's true, Mama," said Marysia. "Mrs. Diamant has been looking for a girl. Just a few blocks away." That Angia had made up a cot behind the sofa. "Two blankets, Mama. And Mass every week," Angia said. I explained how I would give part of my wages to my sisters so they could feed me. How I would send even more back home to the farm so Mama could pay another farmhand. Or buy more chickens. "Wouldn't that be such a help, Mama?" Marysia smiled.

"But, Fusia, what about your education?" dithered my mother.

I smoothed my dress. "Przemyśl will be my education, Mama."

She got on the mail cart without me.

I skipped to my first day of work at the Diamants' shop, putting the pigeons to flight, peeking in little alleys that tunneled between the buildings, staring in the window of a photography studio, and playing with a wandering cat. The cathedral bells rang across a sky that was a deep, perfect blue.

When I pushed open the door to the shop, a much smaller bell tinkled, and a woman looked up from her perch behind a counter. The air smelled like fresh bread, apples, parcel paper, and string,

and I saw rows and rows of wrapped chocolates living behind glass. The woman looked me up and down while I bounced on my toes. Her bottom hung over both sides of her chair.

“So,” she said. “Look at what the sunshine has brought to me. You are the Podgórska girl. What is your name, my *ketzele*?”

“Stefania.” I thrilled at the sound of my real name.

“And I am Mrs. Diamant. Do you read, Stefania?”

“Yes, Mrs. Diamant.”

“Do you write?”

I nodded. The farm wasn't that far away from the rest of the world.

“Good. Very good. Then you will please make a count of the items on my shelves.”

I stowed my coat and my lunch of bread and cheese in a corner behind the counter, and Mrs. Diamant handed me paper clipped to a board, a little stub of a pencil tied to one end. My shoes made a sharp *clip, clip* across the creaking floor, which sounded important and made me smile. I wrote the inventory in big, clear strokes. Mrs. Diamant worked rows of numbers in her book, observing, and when I scooted over a bottle of soda water, there were two brown eyes staring at me from the other side of the shelves.

“Do you always sing while you count?” a voice said. A boy's voice. A deep one.

I clutched my clipboard to my chest and flushed. I had been singing. To myself. Like a little girl.

I was a little girl. I just didn't know it yet.

The eyes crinkled between the water bottles, and then they were gone. And then they were above the shelves, peering over the top. A tall boy, still thin from growing, two dark brows reaching for a mess of black and curling hair. He grinned.

“Don’t stop now,” he said. “You’re my morning entertainment. What’s your name?”

“Stefania.”

He cocked his head. “Nobody calls you that, do they?”

They didn’t.

“So what do they call you? Stefi?”

“Stefushka.”

He waited.

“And Stefusia,” I added. “And Fusia. But I’d rather be called—”

“Stefi, Stefushka, Stefusia, Fusia.” The boy shook his head. “Too late. It’s Fusia. Sing me another song, Fusia. *Mame* might start selling tickets . . .”

“Izio!” shouted Mrs. Diamant from her chair. “Leave the child alone, *bubbala*. It is her first day. *Nemen deyn tukis tsu sbule*.”

“*Mame . . .*”

“Go to school!”

He shrugged and ran off, joining two more boys waiting for him at the shop door. One was taller and one was shorter, but they had the same dark hair. And all three were older than me.

Brothers, I thought. I knew brothers. With brothers, it was best to give as good as you got.

I turned back to my work, made a check mark on my paper, and at full voice, began singing a tango that my mama switched off every time it came on the radio. Which of course meant I listened to it every time I could.

*Your words send me into the storm clouds,
Your laughter is a cold and wet spell . . .*

I felt the room go tense with anticipation.

*I don't want your windy words. I don't want
your dripping laughter.*

I just want you to go to . . .

Only I didn't say the next word of the lyrics. I inserted the word "school" instead. Laughter burst out from behind my back, and I held in my smile while arms jostled one another and feet ran out the door, setting the shop bell tinkling. When I snuck a look at Mrs. Diamant, she was shaking her head, but her eyes were crinkly, just like her son's.

And that became our ritual. Every morning, Izydor Diamant, more often known as Izio, would stick his head in the shop and say, "Sing to me, Fusia!" and I would make up a rude song that told him to go away. Within a week, everyone on Mickiewicza Street called me Fusia.

I learned the other brothers' names. Henek, the youngest, who had no time for me, and Max, the next step up from Izio, who had already started an apprenticeship and smiled more often than he talked. There was another brother, Chaim, a physician studying in a town in Italy I'd never heard of; a sister not far away in Lwów; and Mr. Diamant, who stayed at home, recuperating from something that had to do with his blood. I learned that I would not work on Saturdays because the Diamants were Jewish and that Mrs. Diamant made excellent *babka*.

I swept the floors and wrapped parcels and dusted the shelves, and Mrs. Diamant said I was a quick learner. Before long, she was sending me on errands to the market square, where the real business was done, and it was there that I saw my first fight. Two boys pummeling each other into the late summer dirt of the street gutter.

This was not like the match-flare temper of my brothers or the boys at my school in Bircza. This was something ugly.

A policeman squashed his cigarette on the sidewalk, watching, and then a man with dirty pants and a smear of grease on his cheek broke through the circle of observers and pulled the two boys apart by their shirt collars, both of them still hissing and spitting like cats. He shook the one in his right hand until I thought I heard teeth rattle.

“What is wrong with you, Oskar?” the man said. “Why are you fighting in the street like a criminal?”

“He hit me!” Oskar managed.

“Oh, ho, he hit you, did he? He hit you for nothing?” The man looked to the other boy, and so did the crowd.

The boy picked up his hat and wiped the blood from his nose. “He called me a dirty Jew.”

The man shook his head, then shook Oskar again. “What is the matter with you? Look at this boy . . .” If Oskar could look, it was with his eyes crossed. “He has arms and legs and blood in his veins. What do you care if his family follows Moses? Now, shake this boy’s hand. Do it! Before I tell your mama.”

The boys shook hands, though they didn’t look as if they wanted to, and when they parted ways and the crowd began to melt, I heard a woman behind me mutter, “Dirty Jew.”

I got a good bargain on plums for Mrs. Diamant. And when I ran back to the shop, I slipped through the door to the toilet and stood there, looking in the mirror. I touched my face, the skin of my arm, and my brown hair. People hated that boy because he was a Jew. Could the Diamants hate me because I was a Catholic?

That afternoon, I coaxed Mrs. Diamant down from her chair and into the exercises I’d seen the students doing outside the

gymnasium. Some of the pretty wrapped chocolates went toppling from the shelves to the floor, and Mrs. Diamant laughed and laughed, mopping between the folds of her neck.

“Sometimes, my *ketzele*”—I had discovered this meant “little kitten”—“the sunshine you bring is hot!” Then she handed me a chocolate, her soft face dimpling as she unwrapped another for herself.

And suddenly I knew that Mrs. Diamant had been lonely before I came to the shop, and that she wasn’t lonely anymore. That I had been lonely on the farm, surrounded by brothers and sisters with lives of their own, a mother with too many cares, and a pen full of chickens. And I wasn’t lonely anymore, either.

That Sunday, at Mass with Angia, I thanked God for the Diamants. Moses was in my Bible, too, after all, and I felt certain that God had liked him.

My education had begun.

Izio taught me rude songs in Yiddish, and I decided not to bring tinned-ham sandwiches to the shop, even though Mrs. Diamant said she didn’t mind. When the winter blew in and the dark came early, I ate my suppers around the corner in the Diamants’ apartment, full of mostly grown boys talking medicine and Mr. Diamant asking questions like, “Which is better? A good war or a bad peace?” And we would listen to their arguments while Mr. Diamant sat back and smoked cigarette after cigarette. Izio would walk me home on those nights, in deep, cold snow lit golden by the streetlights.

Mrs. Diamant did her exercises with me every morning. She had to take in her dresses. I had to let mine out. I learned how to smile at a boy so he would buy two chocolates instead of one, and to smile even prettier when he put the second chocolate into my hand.

Then, as soon as the shop bell tinkled, I would slip the chocolate back into the display, the coins into the register, and this made Mrs. Diamant chuckle. I pinned my hair into curls and borrowed my sister's lip rouge, humming while the radio blared the news that Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia. And when Angia went to Kraków and Marysia wanted to take an apartment on the far side of the city, Mrs. Diamant just clicked her tongue, crinkled her eyes, and said, "So you will live with us, my *ketzele*."

The Diamants did not have an extra room in their apartment. So they made me one, at the end of the hallway, with a cot and table with a lamp on it, a mirror hung above that, and a maroon curtain strung from wall to wall for privacy. I propped my picture of Christ and the Virgin on one wall and hung my rosary on the bedpost, and Mrs. Diamant kept a secret stash of blintzes under my bed, because Mr. Diamant didn't eat during Yom Kippur. It was a soft red lair in the lamplight.

But there was no window in my lair. And so when the nights were hot, I crept out to the living room, where the window stayed open, letting out the stale smoke. I sat on the sill with the lights switched off, bare feet wedged against the frame, listening to the trains coming and going at the station, a sleepy apartment on one side, a long, dark drop into the city on the other.

I didn't know, then, that fear comes with the dark.

Izio would come to me at the windowsill, sprawling in a chair or hands behind his head on the rug. He whispered about his new university classes, the parts of the world he most wanted to see (Palestine and Turkey), the parts of the world I most wanted to see (America). And he wanted to know my opinion on things, like if I thought Hitler would invade Poland. But wars were not the first, second, or even third thoughts in my mind on those nights.

Izio had turned eighteen. He'd filled in. Grown up. And his eyelashes curled like soot smudged against his lids.

Max came to the windowsill, too, sometimes, that very last summer. He was smaller and quieter than his brother, but when he did talk, he made you think long, serious thoughts about your life. Or told jokes so terrible it made your ribs hurt. Izio wrapped his arms around his middle, trying to hold in the laughter so he wouldn't wake his mother.

I loved it when Max made Izio laugh.

But after a while, Max didn't come to the window anymore. It was just Izio and me while the rest of the world slept.

I think Max knew before I did.

Summer cooled to the final autumn, and when the leaves blew yellow past the windowsill and the air smelled like coal smoke, Izio reached out and held my hand in the dark. We promised not to tell a soul. And two weeks after that, the first German bombs fell on Przemyśl.