

STEFANIA PODGORSKA BURZMINSKI

Stefania Burzminski's face is unlined and her trim figure is enhanced by an erect carriage. A stationary bike takes up a corner of the living room of her spacious apartment in Brookline, Massachusetts, the downstairs of which also serves as her husband's office. Joe Burzminski is a dentist, one of three brothers among the thirteen Jews saved by Stefania. He doesn't participate in the interview because we hadn't been aware of his existence, and he phones repeatedly, asking Stefania to come back down to help in the office. But when we meet him on leaving, he is warm and friendly.

Over a year later, Gay returns to photograph the two of them together, and this time Stefania is warmer and slightly less angry. When Gay asks to see and copy additional wartime photographs, more of the story unfolds, including the root of her bitterness.

Do you think it's nice for me to go back and talk about the war? It was a terrible time, and I have to relive it every time I talk about it.

I was born in 1923, in a small village in Poland. I was the third youngest of nine children. I don't know my exact birth date because we all celebrated our birthdays on Easter. My father was forty and my mother was seventeen when they got married. Father taught us, when we fought with other children, "Fighting will bring nothing good. If you're friends and help each other, that will bring something good." But sometimes the mother of the Jewish children would say to them, "Don't play with the *goyim*."

Once I heard my father say to a man with *payes* [earlock curls], "Why do you wear the yarmulke and the long black coat? That is not religion. That's because you used to live in a hot climate where you needed head protection. It announces to everyone that you're a Jew." The man answered, "My friends would give me trouble if I didn't do it. I don't like it either." I know that these are some of the things which caused pogroms, but I never saw a pogrom myself.

I moved to Przemysl when I was fourteen. It was a larger town and my sister was working there, so I thought I could get work, too. I worked in a bakery for one year and lived with my sister, and then I got a job working for a Jewish woman in a small shop. She was Mrs. Diamant, my husband's mother. I lived in her house, went to the market for her, and did the cleaning and cooking. She had four sons; one was a doctor, one went to dentistry school—that was my husband, Joe—and the other two went to gymnasium. After the Nazis came to Przemysl, the four sons went to live in Lvov because they thought it would be safer there since it was near Russia, and they asked me to take care of their parents. When things got worse the four sons returned. Then it was the time the Germans ordered the Jews to wear the David star, and then the Jews were put into the ghetto.

This confused me. Before the war everyone shopped and talked together and everything was fine. But then there was the segregation and the mark of the Jewish star, and that was confusing for me. One day I saw a Jewish boy on the street, about nine years old, and another boy came up to him and said, "You are a Jew!" and he hit him. A man, just an ordinary worker, saw it and said, "Why would you do that?"



Helena and Stefania Podgorska.

He's a boy just like you. Look at his hands, his face. There's no difference. We have enemies now from another country who say there's a difference, but there isn't." So the boy who hit the Jewish boy looked sad and said, "Oh, all right, I'm sorry."

I listened to him and I came home and I looked at my hands and I said, "No, there is no difference." So, you see, I listened and I learned.

Joe's family had to go to the ghetto. I visited them and they gave me things to exchange for food. After the ghetto was closed I sneaked in through a hole in the fence. It seems like this should have frightened me, but it didn't.

One day I was in the ghetto and I went out through the hole. I looked and I didn't see anybody so I slipped through the hole and then I saw two Gestapo, each with his rifle pointing to my head. Then they moved their rifles and I looked at their faces and like two mummies, they didn't say a word. They hung their rifles on their shoulders and they left. I don't know what happened. Maybe something was in my eyes. What happened? Maybe some invisible man, some force repelled them. I don't know.

Then I decided to get into the ghetto a different way. I made friends with a Polish policeman. I told him to disappear for ten minutes while I go in the ghetto. He said, "Don't be longer than ten minutes." But sometimes I was fifteen minutes and he'd say, "Okay, five kisses." I'd say, "No, three kisses." We all talked together and laughed. This was also not so nice for them to have to stay there and guard. They had Jewish friends, too, and I saw them give bread. I even said once, "I saw you give bread, so if you tell the Gestapo on me, I'll tell on you."

Many things started to happen. My mother and one brother were taken to Germany to work, and that left my six-year-old sister alone. She went to neighbors, but she wanted to come live with me. She begged and begged me until I had to say "yes." It was getting worse in Przemysl, too. There were signs all over the city which said, "Whoever helps Jews will be punished by death."

The ghetto got smaller and smaller. The parents were taken along with two of the brothers. One of them, my present husband, Joe, jumped from the train. He hid in the forest for a time, then he went to the house of someone who was too afraid to keep him, so then he took a chance and came to my apartment. Poor Joe, he was filthy and his clothes were rags. I gave him my nightgown to wear. Joe cried all night, and my sister laughed at him in my nightgown. I explained to my sister who Joe was, that he was a Jew, that Germans wanted to kill him, and that we had to help him.

Whenever my friends came to visit, I hid him under the bed. Joe's brother, Henek, worked on a farm close to the city. I went there to tell him that Joe was safe with me. That night his brother's fiancée, Danuta, showed up at my place. She didn't look Jewish so she could be open, but it was still a dangerous thing to do. After a few days, Henek was sent back to the ghetto. I am still angry with him for what he did next: he sent some stranger, just a street man, with a note telling Danuta to come back to him in the ghetto. This was so dangerous because we didn't know who this man was and it was just an open note. He could be going straight to the Gestapo. So Danuta and Joe said they wouldn't risk my life like that, that they would go back into the ghetto. I went with them, and as soon as I saw his brother I really told him what a miserable coward he had been. He could have come himself, at night, but he was too afraid. So he risked all our lives.

Joe came every two or three days to bring me things to sell for food, and to pick up the food I had for him. Then Joe said to me, "Maybe you'll take a bigger



Joe Burzminski's brother, Henek, with his wife, Danuta, and their child, after the war.



Front row: Stefania's sister, Helena, Stefania, and Judy Shylenger, 1947. Judy's father is behind her, next to his wife. Joe Burzminski is on left.

apartment and you'll hide me and a few more Jews." I didn't like the idea, but I decided I would do it anyway.

I thought, "How can I find an apartment? I don't know where to look." So I started walking all around the town, and I went to one area where the Jews used to live, and it was ghostly. Windows and doors had been taken away and used for firewood. Even the floors were gone. We could have taken a place with no floor, but we had to have windows and doors. I didn't know where to go. Just then—you will laugh, maybe not even believe me—but a voice said to me, "Go farther and you will see two women with brooms. Ask them where you can find an apartment. Go." The voice was strong, a woman's voice. So I went to the next block and I saw the two women with brooms. They looked nice, so I asked them if they knew of an apartment. They said, "Yes, go to this place and you will see an empty cottage." They told me the janitor's name, and when I went there, there was a cottage with two rooms and a kitchen and an attic. It was a good apartment. It didn't have electricity, and the bathroom was an outhouse, but it was okay. I just bought a big can with a cover, and they did their business and I emptied it at night. In three days the apartment was ready. My sister and I worked so hard to clean it up, and then Joe moved in.

Then everyone was crying for help. One woman threatened to denounce us if I didn't take her in. She heard about me from Joe's brother in the ghetto. Her children came to me and cried, "I don't want to die." I didn't know what to do. I saw dead here, dead there. "So all right," I said. "Stay with me. We'll try here." Then John Dorlich, the mailman, came to ask me to hide him. He used to take things to and from the ghetto for me, so he knew where I lived. When he came to ask for help, could I refuse? Then came Mr. Shylenger and his daughter, Judy. Then Manek Hirsch and his wife, Sally. One day I went into the ghetto and I told Henek and Danuta that they must come with me. But Henek said, "Why should I go live in a bunker? Here I have my own apartment and fresh air whenever I want." I told him

I had heard that the ghetto would soon be finished. During the war my ears were very long and my eyes were very wide. But still Henek refused. I went back home and Joe begged me, "Stefushka"—most of them called me Stefushka—"please, you must find some way to make him come." I went back into the ghetto and somehow I convinced him. Only two weeks later the ghetto was empty.

Soon I had thirteen Jews with me, and we lived there for two winters. It was a hard life, always dangerous. I couldn't bring any of my friends to my house. Once a boy became very attached to me and he would come over for one or two hours at a time. I had to figure out some way to make him mad at me or to scare him so he would stop coming. I liked him very much. He was good and handsome, and if I hadn't had my thirteen . . . So I went to the studio of a photographer friend of mine, and I asked her to give me a picture of a German in his uniform. She found one of a very handsome one, and I took it home and put it on my wall. The next time my friend came over to my apartment he saw the picture and asked, "Well, what is that?" I said, "That is my new boy friend. I am dating him and I will stay with him." He couldn't believe it. He said his heart was broken. I wanted to cry, really, because I loved him. But I had to help my thirteen. I had to save them. I wanted to tell him. But my mind told me not to tell him. He just said, "You and an SS man?" He couldn't believe it. And then he finally left.



Stefania with Sally Hirsch.

One day a German hospital was set up in a building across the street from me. The Germans started to take over all the apartments in the area. They came to my apartment and said I must be out in two hours. I thought, *Where can all thirteen of us go in only two hours?* My thirteen people told me to run away and they would stay and fight the Germans. They say they would not die without a fight. My neighbors told me to run away, but I wouldn't. They all said I was crazy. I started to pray. A woman's voice spoke to me again; it was as clear as your voice. She says, "No one will take this apartment from you. Just send the people up to the attic and tell them to be quiet. Then open all the windows and doors," the voice told me, "and start to clean and be quiet and sing and have your sister sing, too." Of course, they all thought we all would die. I did what the voice told me. The SS man came back and said, "It's good you didn't prepare to move because we only need one room, so you can stay in the other room." And do you know what? They stayed there for seven months with thirteen Jews over their heads!

I think this proves that if you have to do something, you will do it. But if you say, maybe yes, maybe no, then you might not. Some people are old at seventeen, and some are young at seventy. I never regretted what I did. Some people are ugly and miserable, but that's human character.

After the war the Jews still stayed in my apartment for a few days more until they could find a place to live. One day I was fixing lunch because they all came home to eat, but Joe didn't come at two o'clock when he was supposed to. By three o'clock I was worried about him because some people still weren't so nice to Jews, so I went to the market to look for him. I didn't find him but I saw Manek Hirsch and Janek Dorlich, and I asked if they had seen Joe. They said, "No, but don't worry, he's all right." I turned to go and when I was about five yards from them I heard them laughing. I turned to see what was funny and Manek was saying, "Now that the war is over, Joe doesn't need his *goyka* anymore."

At that minute I felt so bad, my heart felt like it was being squeezed. It wasn't that I was in love with Joe and wanted to marry him. I absolutely did not, but it hurt

me that they said that about me after they lived in my house for two years. After I walked away, I heard someone say that a Jew had been killed. Violent things were still happening. I was afraid it was Joe.

I went home and at six o'clock Joe finally came home. He was so happy. He had found an apartment for us with water and electricity, and all the things we didn't have before, and he had found furniture, and then when he looked at his watch he couldn't believe how late it was.

About six months later, Joe and I were walking in the park and we saw Manek. He said to me, "Stefushka, are you angry with me? I know you must be." I said, "No, I am not angry. We all make mistakes." He said, "But I said an ugly thing about you that I should not have said. After all, you saved my life. Without you I would not even be alive right now." Then he put his head on my shoulder, and Joe took a picture.

It wasn't long after the war that Joe asked me to marry him. I said, "Go marry a Jewish girl. I'm Catholic and I don't want to marry a Jew." He said, "You fought for my life, now I want to fight for your life."

I fought it, because I had plenty of boy friends, and I hadn't been able to go out with any of them during the war. But Joe asked me and asked me and, well, he agreed to change religions. He became Catholic.

We stayed in Poland until we went to live in Israel for two years in 1958. I didn't like Israel at all, so we came to the United States. We have one daughter and one son, and they live in California.

I wrote my memoirs. I wrote how I struggled to bring food, and everything I did. But publishers refuse. They say they have enough Holocaust books. I said that it is not Holocaust. This is not killing. That was killing but this is saving. You have to show people a good example. Who will teach people humanity if they see only killing and nothing else?

I talked with a rabbi and he said he will give my name to other synagogues. I told him I don't need him to hang my name saying I was good. My story should go to schools to teach youngsters because when there's chaos in a country, it's very easy to be a bad boy or bad girl. But to be good is very difficult. To think separately and not like other people tell you to think, but everyone doesn't think like I do.

I'm sure my book will be published. It took me seven years to write it, and then more years to have it corrected. I had to sit with a person from Boston University and pay her seventeen dollars an hour because my spelling and grammar is so bad that she couldn't know what I wrote. And when I came to the part where the SS man came to live in my apartment, I thought, *I can't finish it*. I went and I lay on the floor and I prayed like I prayed that other time, and this time a man's voice, deep and strong, said to me, "This is no time to pray. You must get up and go finish your writing." And he picked me up and I felt like a feather as I sat down in my chair.

A Christian person helped me to go back to Poland for a visit. A Christian helped me. But where are the Jews? I didn't help Christians. But sometimes I think the Jews are sleeping. I have a medal from Yad Vashem, but I have no tree planted there because I have no money to go to Israel. I think Israel should pay for me to go there to plant the tree.

I work hard all day now, helping Joe in his dentist's practice. Every time I have to do an interview like this, it brings back all the memories and I can't sleep for some nights.



Stefania with Manek Hirsch, after the war. Joe took these photos as Manek apologized to Stefania for calling her a *goyka*.