

The Polski Trilogy

A historical fiction novel explores unusual activity at a Polish hotel during the Holocaust **By Leisah Woldoff**

HOW WILL today's actions affect the lives of our grandchildren? How can a seemingly insignificant moment change the fate of multiple families? Is it possible to successfully take on a new identity?

These are all issues addressed in "The Polski Trilogy," a work of historical fiction by Leon Gildin, inspired by the true story of a hotel in Warsaw, Poland, used by the Gestapo in 1943 to house Jews bearing citizenship papers of neutral countries.

Most of these papers were forged documents prepared by the neutral countries' consulates in Europe, without the knowledge of their home governments, according to the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum's Shoah Resource Center. The plan was to exchange the Jews for German citizens imprisoned by the Allies. Many Jews risked their lives by coming out of hiding to obtain these documents.

The experiences of those Jews who found their way to the Hotel Polski intrigued Gildin, who was a New York attorney in 1982, when he first heard about the hotel. That year, one of his clients, author Avraham Shulman, gave Gildin a signed copy of his new book, "The Case of the Hotel Polski," which included research about the unusual activity at the hotel and interviews with survivors.

Gildin later used the research documented in Shulman's book to create characters based on elements of the survivors' stories for his first novel, "The Polski Affair" in 2009. The book won the International Book

Awards for Historical Fiction in 2010 and was translated into Hebrew and sold in Israel.

"The Polski Affair" is the first book in the "The Polski Trilogy" and is followed by "The Family Affair" and "The Final Affair." The trilogy chronicles the lives of two couples, which were changed forever at the Hotel Polski and explores how their secrets impacted their children and grandchildren.

In the first book, the reader meets four individuals, who lost loved ones at the hands of the Nazis and came to the Hotel Polski in a desperate quest for survival.

Gildin draws the reader into the characters' lives, both their past and present, in the first few pages as we meet Anna Adler, a woman living in Israel, who comes across an announcement in the newspaper about a reunion for Hotel Polski "guests." This discovery sparks her struggle to reconcile her past with her present, and sets her off on a mission her loved ones don't understand.

In the opening chapters, we learn about Anna's past as Rosa Feurmann, a woman who joined the partisans and used her background as a chemistry teacher to teach others how to make bombs. After her husband and children were taken by the Nazis, she lived first in the forest on the outskirts of Warsaw, then in the Jewish cemetery next to the ghetto. She arrives at the Hotel Polski posing as a Polish maid reporting for duty, so she can investigate the rumors she was hearing about the hotel. She is assigned as a personal servant and companion to a Ge-

stapo colonel and does what she needs to do to survive.

Although the details of the characters' actions, dialogue and situations are fictionalized, they are based on true stories from the narratives and research of Shulman's book, as are the details of the settings in Warsaw.

One of the factual elements of the story is the method that Germany used to transport foreigners out of the country. "They did in fact round them up and start the business of sending foreigners out of the country, first from Poland to Vittel, France," Gildin said. An internment camp housed at a resort in Vittel, located near the German border, "was used as a staging point."

Vittel was known as an exclusive tourist resort for the very rich, and the Nazis chose a French spa as an internment camp for the British and American citizens, "probably in the hope that the United States and Great Britain would reciprocate and treat their German nationals similarly," Shulman wrote. Those who were sent to Vittel from the Hotel Polski were separated by a barbed-wire fence from where the "real" Americans and British were interned.

Gildin noted that one of the characters in the book, Berel Rabinowitz, was based on a real person. David Guzik, director of the Joint (the Joint Distribution Committee), sat in the hotel legalizing documents, helping people acquire foreign passports and adding the names of those without papers to those of others to form artificially fabricated families.

The 2011 sequel, “The Family Affair,” opens in 1972 Tel Aviv, and the secrets kept by these couples unfold with consequences in their new life in Israel. Anna’s son Sholom sets out on his own journey into his family’s history, making a discovery that shocks everyone involved and jeopardizes his relationship with his mother.

Gildin said he wasn’t satisfied by the ending of the sequel, so he wrote a third book to tie up the unresolved issues from the first two books. This third book, “The Final Affair,” was released in 2017 as the concluding portion of “The Polski Trilogy.”

The trilogy takes readers on twists and turns of the characters’ lives, sharing the impact that a single, seemingly inconsequential, action can have on other people’s lives. It feels natural to have all three stories in one volume since it reads like one continuous story.

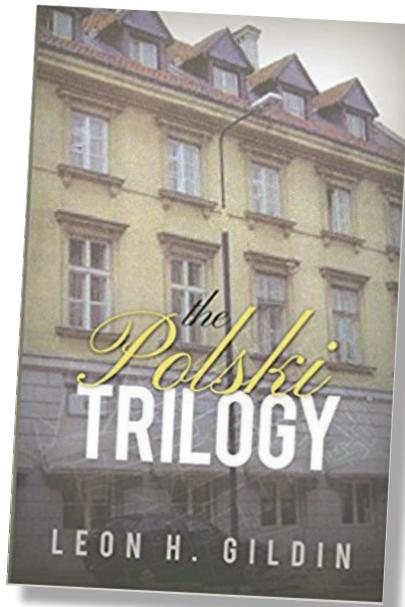
Choices that Anna made in her younger days in Poland impact her family in ways she doesn’t discover until her later years. It’s a reminder we can bring to our own lives, that actions have consequences, some that we may never see and some whose results aren’t revealed until years later.

Gildin says that to him, the most important part of all three books is the lesson “that life is nothing more than a series of fortuitous events.”

The origin of “The Polski Trilogy” has its own fortuitous storyline, as well.

While practicing law in New York for more than 40 years, Gildin served as general counsel to actors, writers and composers; produced on and off-Broadway shows; and collaborated with authors and musicians in the development of scripts and musical material for the stage.

When Shulman first gave Gildin a copy of “The Case of the Hotel Polski” in 1982, Gildin stuck it in his desk drawer and disregarded it. When he eventually read it, he was so struck by this largely unknown part of history that he attempted to write a play about it. The play never came to fruition,



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but the story lingered in his mind for more than two decades.

After he retired in 1996 and moved to Arizona, Gildin wrote his first book, “You Can’t Do Business (Or Most Anything Else) Without Yiddish,” a collection of popular Yiddish words, jokes and cartoons accompanied by Gildin’s comments and observations, in 2000. In 2015, between the second and third books of the trilogy, he also wrote a book of translated Yiddish poems, “The Poems of H. Leivick and Others: Yiddish Poetry in Translation.”

Although the reunion of the “guests” of the Hotel Polski that occurs in the first book was fictional, a real reunion was held after the book’s publication, on the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Hotel Polski.

On April 18, 2013, about 50 people gath-

ered at the Hotel Polski at 29 Dluga Street in Warsaw to unveil a plaque commemorating the event 70 years earlier. The ceremony was conducted primarily in Polish, except for the reading of Psalm 130 and the *El Malei Rachamim* prayer by a local rabbi, according to an article on *tabletmag.com*. The group included “descendants of the survivors, local Warsaw community leaders, a few passersby, Polish men in military regalia and a guest of honor”: Josef Atlasowicz, who was an old occupant of the hotel and a survivor. Three generations of the Atlasowicz family traveled from London and Israel to be there.

According to the Yad Vashem Research Center, about 300 Jews living at the Hotel Polski were deported to the Vittel camp and another 2,000 to 3,500 were sent to Bergen-Belsen. The final group of 420 Jews was taken to the Pawia prison in Warsaw and killed. The reports of the number of Jews who were saved by their documents vary between 250 and 350. Most were exchanged for Germans imprisoned in Palestine.

Gildin’s fictional characters come alive in this historical setting, and the reader not only learns about this unusual piece of history but is reminded of the struggles survivors face as they live with the memories of their past.

As Shulman concludes his book: “We are still left with the mystery of the Hotel Polski affair. Was it a Nazi trap, diabolically conceived and efficiently managed? Was it the product of an impossible dream by terrified human beings grasping at a last straw? Or was it a genuine rescue effort which, for reasons beyond the control of its engineers, ended in failure?”

It’s fortunate that Gildin was inspired to tell the story of the Hotel Polski to remember those who walked through the hotel’s doors and to publicize these tragic events. ■

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