



# HEAR, O ISRAEL, SAVE US

An 18-year-old girl, terrorized by the Nazis, kept a secret journal. Read exclusive sections from it here, presented in English for the first time

BY RENIA SPIEGEL; TRANSLATED FROM  
POLISH BY ANNA BLASIAK AND MARTA  
DZIURSZ

*A traditional Polish vest that once belonged to Renia Spiegel (Claire Rosen)*

## SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE | November 2018

*From the Editors: Translated from Polish for the first time, the diary of Renia Spiegel presents us with a striking first-person narrative of life as a young Jew during World War II. To learn the backstory of Spiegel's life and how her words found their way to our pages, we invite you to read "How An Astonishing Holocaust Diary Resurfaced in America" by Robin Shulman. Along with the diary excerpts below, we've added red type with contextual dates of the history of how World War II came to Poland, as the Nazis invaded from the west and the Soviets from the east, deporting, imprisoning and murdering Jews in cities like Przemsyl, where Spiegel lived and perished.*

### January 31, 1939

*Why did I decide to start a diary today? Has something important happened? Have I discovered that my friends are keeping diaries of their own? No! I just want a friend. Somebody I can talk to about my everyday worries and joys. Somebody who will feel what I feel, believe what I say and never reveal my secrets. No human being could ever be that kind of friend.*

*Today, my dear diary, is the beginning of our deep friendship. Who knows how long it will last? It might even continue until the end of our lives.*

*In any case, I promise to always be honest with you. In return, you'll listen to my thoughts and concerns, but you'll remain silent like an enchanted book, locked up with an enchanted key and hidden in an enchanted castle. You will not betray me.*

*First of all, allow me to introduce myself. I'm a student at the Maria Konopnicka Middle School for Girls. My name is Renia, or at least that is what my friends call me. I have a little sister, Ariana, who wants to be a movie star. (She's been in some movies already.)*

Our mother lives in Warsaw. I used to live in a beautiful manor house on the Dniester River. I loved it there. There were storks on old linden trees. Apples glistened in the orchard, and I had a garden with neat, charming rows of flowers. But those days will never return. There is no manor house anymore, no storks on old linden trees, no apples or flowers. All that remain are memories, sweet and lovely. And the Dniester River, which flows, distant, strange and cold—which hums, but not for me anymore.

Now I live in Przemyśl, at my grandmother's house. But the truth is, I have no real home. That's why sometimes I get so sad that I have to cry. I miss my mamma and her warm heart. I miss the house where we all lived together.

*Again the need to cry takes over me  
When I recall the days that used to be  
The linden trees, house, storks and butterflies  
Far... somewhere...too far for my eyes  
I see and hear what I miss  
The wind that used to lull old trees  
And nobody tells me anymore  
About the fog, about the silence  
The distance and darkness outside the door  
I will always hear this lullaby  
See our house and pond laid by  
And linden trees against the sky...*

But I also have joyous moments, and there are so many of them. So many! Let me introduce some of my classmates to you.

My best friend, Nora, sits next to me. We share all the same thoughts and opinions. At our school, the girls often get "crushes" on our teachers, so Nora and I have a crush, a real one (some girls do it just to butter the teachers up) on our Latin teacher, Mrs. Waleria Brzozowska, nee Brühl. We call her "Brühla." Brühla is the wife of a handsome officer who lives in Lwow. She goes to see him every other Sunday. We tried to get his address through the address bureau, but we didn't succeed because we don't know his actual name. (We call him "Zdzisław.")

The next girl in our row is Belka—fat and stocky like 300 devils! She has an exceptional talent for academics and an even more exceptional talent for earning dislike. Next comes Irka. I don't like Irka and it's in my blood. I inherited this hatred: My mamma didn't like Irka's mother much when they were in middle school. I started disliking Irka even more when she began undermining me at school. That—combined with her disgusting sweet-talking, lying and insincerity—made me genuinely hate her.

We've been planning a party for months now. We've fought and disagreed, but the party is on for this coming Saturday.

## February 5, 1939

I'm so happy. It was a great party and everyone, especially Brühla, had a wonderful time. But for the umpteenth time, I thought, "I wish Mamma were here." Irka's mother, Mrs. Oberhard, was all over Brühla, sweet-talking her as much as she could, which, of course, would be sure to benefit Irka and her younger sister in the near future. Oh, dear diary, if you could only know how hard it is to want something so badly, to work so hard for it and then be denied it at the finishing line! What was it actually that I wanted? I don't know. Brühla was quite nice. But I'm still not satisfied.

## February 11, 1939

It's raining today. On rainy days, I stand by the window and count the tears trickling down the windowpane. They all run down, as if they wanted to drop onto the wet, muddy street, as if they wanted to make it even dirtier, as if they wanted to make this day ugly, even uglier than it already is. People might laugh at me, but sometimes I think inanimate objects can talk. Actually, they're not inanimate at all. They have souls, just like people. Sometimes I think the water in the drainpipes giggles. Other people call this giggle different names, but it never even crosses their minds that it's just that: a giggle. Or a trash can:

*A page came clean  
From a film weekly magazine.  
"They only bought me yesterday  
and I'm already in the trash, no way!  
At least something you have seen.  
At least in the world you have been.  
You led a peaceful life when you were  
at a newsagent's bound  
While I had to run around  
In the streets, shouting all the time.  
It's better to be a weekly  
Than a daily that passes quickly."*

## **MARCH 15, 1939**

German troops invade Czechoslovakia, showing that Britain's strategy of appeasement had failed.

## March 28, 1939

God, I'm so sad, so very sad. Mamma just left and who knows when I'll see her again. I've been on the outs with Nora for several days so I need to hang out with Irka, which is not helping.

And then there are the memories. Even though they break my heart, they're memories of the best time in my life. It's springtime already! Spring used to be so good there. Birds were

singing, flowers were in bloom; it was all sky, heart and happiness! People there would be thinking of the holidays now. So tranquil, warm and friendly; I loved it so much.

On the night of the Passover Seder, I used to wait for Elijah. Maybe there was a time when this holy old man came to see happy children. But he has to come now, when I have nothing. Nothing apart from memories. Grandpa's unwell. Mamma's very worried about me. Oh! I'm so unhappy!

### **MARCH 31, 1939**

France and the United Kingdom pledge to defend Poland's borders from Nazi attack.

### **April 2, 1939**

I'm learning French now and if there's no war I might go to France. I was supposed to go before, but Hitler took over Austria, then Czechoslovakia, and who knows what he'll do next. In a way, he's affecting my life, too. I want to write a poem for Ariana. I'll be really happy if it comes out well.

### **June 18, 1939**

It's my birthday today. I don't want to think about anything sad. So instead I'm thinking about all the useful things I've done so far in my life.

*A VOICE: "None."*

*ME: "I get good grades at school."*

*VOICE: "But you don't work hard to earn those. What else?"*

*ME: "Nothing. I really want to go to France."*

*VOICE: "You want to be famous?"*

*ME: "I'd like to be famous, but I won't be. So I want to be happy, very happy."*

Tomorrow's the end of the school year, but I don't care. About anything. Anything. Anything.

### **AUG. 23, 1939**

Germany and the USSR sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, pledging to remain neutral toward each other and to divide Europe between them.

### **August 25, 1939**

My summer vacation is almost over. I went to see my aunt in the countryside, I went to Warsaw, I saw Mamma and now I'm back. But you don't know about any of that. You were lying here, left on your own.

You don't even know that the Russians have signed a treaty with the Germans. You don't know that people are stockpiling food, that everybody's on the alert, waiting for war. When I

was saying goodbye to Mamma, I hugged her hard. I wanted to tell her everything with that silent hug. I wanted to take her soul and leave her my own, because—when?

### **SEPT. 1, 1939**

Germany invades Poland, the spark that will ignite World War II in Europe.

### **SEPT. 3, 1939**

Britain and France, having issued ultimatums to Hitler to withdraw troops from Poland, declare war on Germany.

## **September 6, 1939**

War has broken out! Since last week, Poland has been fighting with Germany. England and France also declared war on Hitler and surrounded him on three sides. But he isn't sitting idly. Enemy planes keep flying over Przemysl, and every now and then there's an air raid siren. But, thank God, no bombs have fallen on our city so far. Other cities like Krakow, Lwow, Czestochowa and Warsaw have been partially destroyed.

But we're all fighting, from young girls to soldiers. I've been taking part in female military training—digging air raid trenches, sewing gas masks. I've been serving as a runner. I have shifts serving tea to the soldiers. I walk around and collect food for the soldiers. In a word, I'm fighting alongside the rest of the Polish nation. I'm fighting and I'll win!

## **September 10, 1939**

Oh, God! My God! We've been on the road for three days now. Przemysl was attacked. We had to flee. The three of us escaped: me, Ariana and Grandpa. We left the burning city in the middle of the night on foot, carrying our bags. Granny stayed behind. Lord, please protect her. We heard on the road that Przemysl was being destroyed.

### **SEPT. 17, 1939**

The Soviets invade Poland from the East.

## **September 18, 1939**

We've been in Lwow for almost a week. The city is surrounded. Food is in short supply. Sometimes I get up at dawn and stand in a long line to get bread. Apart from that, we've been spending all day in a bunker, listening to the terrible whistling of bullets and explosions of bombs. God, please save us. Some bombs destroyed several tenement houses, and three days later they dug people out from the rubble, alive. Some people are sleeping in the bunkers; those brave enough to sleep at home have to wake up several times each night and run downstairs to their cellars. This life is terrible. We're yellow, pale, from this cellar life—from the lack of water, comfortable beds and sleep.

But the horrible thoughts are much worse. Granny stayed in Przemysl, Daddy's in Zaleszczyki and Mamma, my mamma, is in Warsaw. Warsaw is surrounded, defending itself bravely, resisting attack again and again. We Poles are fighting like knights in an open field where the enemy and God can see us. Not like the Germans, who bombard civilians' homes, who turn churches to ashes, who poison little children with toxic candy (contaminated with cholera and typhus) and balloons filled with mustard gas. We defend ourselves and we're winning, just like Warsaw, like the cities of Lwow and Przemysl.

Mamma's in Warsaw. I love her the most in the world, my dearest soul, my most precious. I know if she sees children clinging to their mothers in bunkers, she must be feeling the same way we feel when we see it. Oh my God! The greatest, the one and only. God, please save Mamma, give her faith that we're alive. Merciful God, please make the war stop, make all people good and happy. Amen.

**SEPT. 22, 1939**

Soviet troops enter the city of Lwow.

## September 22, 1939

My dear diary! I had a strange day today. Lwow surrendered. Not to Germany, but to Russia. The Polish soldiers were disarmed in the streets. Some, with tears in their eyes, just dropped their bayonets to the ground and watched the Russians break their rifles. I feel such grief, such great grief. Only a small handful are still fighting. Despite the order, defenders of Lwow are continuing their heroic fight to die for their homeland.

## September 28, 1939

Russians have entered the city. There are still shortages of food, clothing, shoes, everything. Long lines are forming in front of every shop. The Russians are especially eager to buy things. They've been organizing raids to get watches, fabrics, shoes, etc.

This Red Army is strange. You can't tell a private from an officer. They all wear the same grayish-brown uniforms. They all speak the language I can't understand. They call each other "Tovarishch" ["Comrade"]. Sometimes the officers' faces are more intelligent, though. Poland has been totally flooded by the German and Russian armies. The only island still fighting is Warsaw. Our government has fled the country. And I had so much faith.

Where is Mamma? What's happened to her? God! You listened to my prayer and there is no war anymore (or at least I can't see it). Please listen to the first part of my prayer, too, and protect Mamma from evil. Wherever she is, whatever is happening to her, please keep an eye on her and on us and help us in all our needs! Amen.

**SEPT. 28, 1939**

Warsaw surrenders to the Germans.

**SEPT. 29, 1939**

Polish President Ignacy Moscicki resigns and transfers power to a Polish government-in-exile in Paris.

**October 27, 1939**

I've been back in Przemyśl for a while now. Life has gone back to its everyday routine, but at the same time it's different, so sad. There is no Mamma. We haven't heard from her. I had a terrible dream that she's dead. I know it's not possible. I cry all the time. If only I knew that I would see her in two months' time, even a year, as long as I knew I would see her for sure. No, let me die. Holy God, please give me an easy death.

**October 28, 1939**

Polish women riot when they hear people saluting Stalin. They refuse to join in. They write secret messages saying "Poland has not yet perished," even though, to be honest, it perished a long time ago. Now we're under the rule of communism, where everybody is equal. It hurts them that they can't say "You lousy Yid." They still say it, but in secret.

Those Russians are such cute boys (though not all of them). One of them was determined to marry me. France and England are fighting with the Germans and something's brewing here, but what do I care? I just want Mamma to come be with us. Then I can face all my trials and tribulations.

**NOV. 1939**

Under Stalin, Jews in Lwow are stripped of their jobs and business licenses.

**November 1, 1939**

There's a new club here now. Lots of boys and girls have been going there. I don't have a crush on Brühla anymore. I finally told Nora about it, and she told me she feels the same way. Now, according to the stages of a girl's development I should "fall in love" with a boy. I like Jurek. But Jurek doesn't know about it and won't ever figure it out.

The first day at the club was fun, but today I felt like a fish out of water. People played this flirting game and I didn't get even one card. I'm embarrassed to admit it even to you. Some boy named Julek (not Jurek) supposedly likes me, but why? Maybe because I'm so different from my girlfriends. I'm not saying that's a good thing—it could even be a bad thing—but I'm very different from them. I don't even know how to laugh in a flirtatious way. When I laugh, it's for real. I don't know how to "behave" around boys. That's why I miss the old days, when Mamma was still with me, when I had my own home, when there was peace in the world, when everything was blue, bright, serene.



Germany and the USSR annexed Poland in 1939, reducing its territory (inset). Nazi occupiers soon confined Polish Jews in hundreds of ghettos. In July 1942, Renia was detained in the Przemysl ghetto; Nazis killed most of its residents or sent them to death camps. Illustration by Lauren Simkin Berke. Source: [holocaustresearchproject.org](http://holocaustresearchproject.org))

\*\*\*

## JAN. 1940

Students in Przemysl are transferred to co-ed schools; Soviets oppose same-sex education as bourgeois.

### January 9, 1940

We've moving out of our school. Now we're going to be at a school with boys. Ugh, horrible. I hate everything. I still live in fear of searches, of violence. And now this whole thing of going to school with boys! Well, let's wait and see how that works out. The torture starts on the 11th. Bye, my dear diary. Keep your fingers crossed for me. Let's hope it goes well!!!

## January 12, 1940

The boys are such innocent young things; they don't know much and they're very polite. They aren't particularly attractive, with the exception of one very cute Ludwik P. and sweet Majorco S. You know, I go through these different phases where I choose different husbands. I must have had about 60 of those phases in my life already. Bye, kisses, Renia

## February 17, 1940

Daddy came here (he brought us provisions) and now he's gone again. A letter from Mamma arrived. She might be in France already. I've enrolled myself in piano lessons.

Meanwhile, I'm not in love with Ludwik anymore. Which doesn't mean I don't like him, but I also like Jurek Nowak. Irka has started going after Ludwik in an impossible way. Since I sit right near them, I can see and hear everything. For example: "Irka, stop pinching me or I'll pinch you back hard." They flirt with each other like crazy. Our class is the best class in our school, though our attendance is terrible. We've already skipped out on physics three times.

Mamma said in her letter that she thought of us all day long on her birthday. She said she was sorry she hasn't been getting any of my poems. I haven't been writing any; I'm so awful. Granny and Grandpa are good to me, but it's so hard being left on my own with my own thoughts.

## March 1, 1940

Wednesday was a beautiful day, so our class played truant at 11 a.m. and escaped to the castle. We threw snowballs, sang songs and composed poetry. I wrote a poem that's already in the school paper. Our class is really nice and sweet. We've become really close.

## March 16, 1940

Nora and I have decided that ten years from today, wherever we are, whether we're still friends or angry at each other, in good health or bad health, we're going to meet or write to each other and compare what's changed in our lives. So remember: March 16, 1950.

I've started liking a boy named Holender. We've been introduced to each other, but he's already forgotten me. He's well-built and broad-shouldered. He has pretty black eyes and falcon-like eyebrows. He's beautiful.

## **SPRING 1940**

The Soviets begin deporting 7,000 Jews from Przemyśl to labor camps in Russia and Siberia.

## **April 24, 1940**

Terrible things have been happening. There were unexpected nighttime raids that lasted three days. People were rounded up and sent somewhere deep inside Russia. So many acquaintances of ours were taken away. There was terrible screaming at school. Girls were crying. They say 50 people were packed into one cargo train car. You could only stand or lie on bunks. Everybody was singing "Poland has not yet perished."

About that Holender boy I mentioned: I fell in love, I chased him like a madwoman, but he was interested in some girl named Basia. Despite that, I still like him, probably more than any other boy I know. Sometimes I feel this powerful, overwhelming need...maybe it's just my temperament. I should get married early so I can withstand it.

## **May 1, 1940**

I would never have thought a year ago that I would be marching not on May 3 [Poland's Constitution Day] but May 1 [International Workers' Day] instead. Only two days apart, but those two days mean so much. It means I'm not in Poland but in the USSR. It means everything is so...I'm so crazy for Holender! He's divine, adorable; he's amazing! But what does that matter, since I don't know him? Tell me, will I ever be contented? Will I ever have happy news to report to you about some boy? Oh, please God. I'm always so disgruntled!

## **JUNE 14, 1940**

Trains carry 728 Polish prisoners to Auschwitz—the first inmates transported to the Nazi extermination camp in Poland.

## **June 17, 1940**

It's my birthday tomorrow. I'm turning 16. This is supposed to be the best time in my life. People always say, "Oh, to be 16 again!" But I'm so unhappy! France has capitulated. Hitler's army is flooding Europe. America is refusing to help. Who knows, they might even start a war with Russia?

I'm here on my own, without Mamma or Daddy, without a home. Oh, God, why did such a horrible birthday have to come? Wouldn't it be better to die? Then I'd have a long, sad funeral. They might cry. They wouldn't treat me with disdain. I'd only feel sorry for my mamma, my mamma, my mamma...Why are you so far from me, so far away?

## **JULY 1940**

Stalin continues to deport Polish Jews to Siberia and to Birobidzhan, a Soviet town near the Chinese border that was the administrative center of a Jewish autonomous state formed in 1934. Residents were subjected to hard labor and harsh conditions throughout the war.

## July 6, 1940

What a terrible night! Horrible! Dreadful. I lay there with my eyes wide open, my heart pounding, shivering like I had a fever. I could hear the clanking of wheels again. Oh, Lord God, please help us! A truck rolled by. I could hear a car horn beeping. Was it coming for us? Or for someone else? I listened, straining so hard it felt like everything in me was about to burst.

I heard the jangling of keys, a gate being opened. They went in. I waited some more. Then they came out, taking loads of people with them, children, old people. One lady was shaking so much she couldn't stand, couldn't sit down. The arrests were led by some fat hag who kept yelling in Russian, "Sit, sit down now!" She loaded children onto the wagon. The whole night was horrific. I couldn't wait for the dawn to come.

Some of the people were crying. Most of the children were asking for bread. They were told the journey would take four weeks. Poor children, parents, old people. Their eyes were filled with insane fear, despair, abandon. They took whatever they were able to carry on their slender backs. They are being taken to Birobidzhan. They will travel in closed, dark carriages, 50 people in each. They will travel in airless, dirty, infested conditions. They might even be hungry. They'll travel for many long weeks, children dying as they pass through a supposedly happy, free country.

And how many will reach their destination? How many will die on the way from illness, infestation, longing? When they finally reach the end of this deportees' route somewhere far into Asia, they will be stuck in rotting mud huts, hungry, exhausted, ironically forced to admire the happy workers' paradise and sing this song:

*A man stands as the master  
Over his vast Motherland*

## August 8, 1940

Our visit to Daddy has been put off day after day. Now we don't have much summer vacation left, but we're still going.

What does it matter that they have torn lands apart, that they have divided brothers, sent children far away from their mothers? What does it matter that they say "This is mine" or "The border is here"? The clouds, the birds and the sun laugh at these borders, at human beings, at their guns. They go back and forth, smuggling rain, blades of grass, rays of sunshine. And no one even thinks of banning them. If they even tried, the sun would burst out with bright laughter and they'd have to close their eyes. The clouds, birds, and wind would follow. So would one small human soul, and plenty of my thoughts.

## **AUGUST 21, 1940**

About a third of the residents of Horodenka, a town of about 9,000, are Jews. Germans and Ukrainians will shoot most of them; only a dozen or so will escape.

## August 21, 1940

Daddy came to pick us up from Horodenka. We had to ride four hours in a horse-drawn cart. I've missed him so much. You can't call it anything else but longing. I've been pining for somebody close! I'm engulfed by this strange tenderness.

## August 22, 1940

I spent half the night crying. I feel so sorry for Daddy, even though he keeps whistling cheerfully. I told him, almost crying, "I know, Daddy, that you had the best dreams, but this is not your home."

## September 21, 1940

I met a boy named Zygmunt S. today. Nora admitted she liked him, but since she knew he was my type, she let it go. Nora has cute, sweet Natek and Irka has Maciek. And? I don't know how it's going to go and I don't really have much confidence in myself.

## OCTOBER 12, 1940

Germans decree that a Jewish ghetto be erected in Warsaw.

## October 12, 1940

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Yesterday everybody left the house; I was on my own with burning candles on the table in a huge, brass candleholder. Ah, a single moment of solitude. I was able to think about all the things that get lost in the daily whirlwind.

I asked myself the same question I asked last year: Mamma, when will I see you again? When will I hug you and tell you about what happened and tell you, Bulus [Renia's nickname for her mother], how terrible I'm feeling? And you will tell me, "Don't worry, Renuska!" Only you can say my name in such a warm, tender way.

Mamma, I'm losing hope. I stared into those burning candles—Mamma, what are you doing there? Are you thinking about us, too, about our torn hearts?

We see the boys out in town. We're close. We see Maciek almost every day. Zygmunt walked back from school with us today. He looked right at me. He has very powerful eyes and I went red in the face and didn't say anything. We're planning to go to a party soon—will I have fun? Nora is more likely to have fun than I am, since someone is in love with her. I don't believe in anything. Unless Bulus comes?

## October 19, 1940

We sat opposite each other at the Russian club this week. He stared at me, I stared at him. As soon as I turned my eyes away from him, I could feel his eyes on me. Then, when he said two words to me, I felt crazy, filled with hope. I felt as if a dream was coming true, as if the goblet was right by my lips.

But the goblet's still far away. A lot can happen before lips touch lips. So many things can happen to stop them from touching. This is the closest I've ever experienced to real love, because my victim is actually looking at me and saying two words. (By the way, Holender's getting married!! Well, I'm not interested in him anymore. I haven't been for a while.)

## October 23, 1940

This is a competition week, so I'm thinking about that more than about Zygyus. I haven't been lucky with him, but if all else fails, I'll always have you!

## OCT. 31, 1940

The exiled Polish-government official Jan Stancyk states that "Jews as citizens of Poland will, in a liberated Poland, be equal with respect to rights and responsibilities with all Poles."

## NOV. 1940

Construction is completed on the ten-foot-high wall around the Warsaw ghetto. An additional foot of barbed wire will eventually crown the wall.

## November 6, 1940

I won first place in the competition! Zygyus congratulated me. He was simply beautiful. All my hopes reverberated in me. Oh, what a triumph.

Then I went to that wretched party. I stood there on my own while Nora was dancing. I left. I walked through the wet streets, trying not to cry loudly. I thought: "This evening I won on the spiritual level, but I lost in life." I vowed I would never go to a party again. But no, I will! Shy or not, I need to win in this other arena. Even if it means my soul will lose, let life win!!!

## November 18, 1940

Today I'm under the spell of a film called *Young Pushkin*. Pushkin is my new hero. I'm starting to wonder if maybe it's better to be famous than happy after all.

When Pushkin was in high school, he didn't study at all. He went on rendezvous with the other kids, went on moonlight walks on fragrant nights, picked white waterlilies for his lover. He pined, dreamed, loved. Pushkin! One utters his name with reverence.

But I could never become famous like that. I've been like a street urchin for four years now. All I see are gray, cracked cobblestones and cracked, thirsty lips. I don't see the sky, because the sky is just a moldy, dusty scrap of clouds. All I see are ashes and soot that choke, that corrode the eyes, that stifle breathing. No revolution will ever be able to fix this. Nothing will.

### ***Later that day***

My romance seems to be over. What a stupid, crude, arrogant idiot. He likes playing with me. But you know what? He's not worth writing about.

### **November 20, 1940**

I've had my revenge today. I wrote him an offensive poem. He got annoyed. Now he'll leave me alone. I can't stand him. "Rhymester" is what he called me today. I wish I were dead! No, it doesn't matter. I'm so low...so very low.

### **DEC. 1940**

A report from the Polish government-in-exile estimates that 410,000 people have been locked inside the Warsaw ghetto.

### **December 8, 1940**

Suddenly, I love him like crazy. Just think, everything was about to go dormant and today it sprung back to life. Nothing happened—but still so much! He played with my hood, stroked it, came closer! Wonderful Zygus, wonderful, so wonderful!!!

*Hey, let's drink our wine  
Let's drink from our lips  
And when the cup runs dry  
Let's switch to drinking blood  
Wanting and yearning  
Inspiration and love burning  
Let them start a fire  
Let rage burn like pyre  
But remember, girl, that flames  
travel in your veins  
that blood can burst you from inside  
Wanting and yearning  
Inspiration and love burning  
Let them start a fire  
Let rage burn like pyre  
Both wine and lips are red  
One life before you are dead  
Our hearts are hungry, young, on fire  
Only for each other beat.*

*Remember, girl, that flames  
travel in your veins*

## **December 10, 1940**

You know, when I see Zygus, I have this blissful, pleasant feeling that's unpleasant at the same time. Something paralyzes me. Ah, that idiot, if he only knew how much I love him. There's an invisible thread connecting us. It can break, but no...If we could really be together, it would be wonderful and terrible at the same time! I don't know. I have no idea what's happening to me.

## **DEC. 18, 1940**

Hitler signs Directive 21, the first order to invade the Soviet Union. The directive emphasizes the need to "crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign" and avoid being drawn eastward into the USSR's vast interior. The invasion does not take place until June 1941.

## **December 25, 1940**

It was your birthday yesterday. Bulus. This was the second birthday of yours that we didn't spend together. When will this torture finally end?! My longing gets stronger, I feel worse and worse. Sometimes I feel so empty that it's like my life is almost over—when, in fact, my life is just beginning. I can't see anything ahead of me. There's nothing, just suffering and fighting, and it's all going to end in defeat. I laugh during the daytime, but it's just a mask (people don't like tears).

## **December 28, 1940**

Zygus is going to be in the variety show! In fact, he and I are going to be in the same scene, reading from the same page. Irka says he listened admiringly when I sang couplets. (I thought the opposite, but oh well!)

When we headed to class, he took my hand! It felt like my hand didn't quite belong to me. Or it did, but it felt totally different from my other hand. Some very nice shivers went up and down it. Earlier, when he was standing there reading his part, I couldn't tear my eyes away from his wonderful red lips, I'm embarrassed to admit.

## **December 31, 1940**

New Year's Eve! We put on the variety show. I got a great response from the audience. Backstage, Zygus took my cape off and untangled my hair. He's so wonderful, divine, so charming. When I was about to leave, he ran up to me and asked if I would go to a party with him tomorrow. It was so exciting; I told Nora everything. But she and Maciek aren't so close anymore, so she envies me. I feel sorry for her.

Today is the last day of 1940. Tomorrow is the beginning of a new year, which will bring new regrets, new laughter (perhaps), new worries, new struggles. My dearest wish is to get my poor beloved mamma back. I also wish for good political relations and for “something” to happen with Zygyus. I want this new year to be cheerful and happy.



*Nazis forced Jews living on the German side of Przemysl to cross the railway bridge over the San River and relocate to the Russian-occupied side.*

*(Illustration by Lauren Simkin Berke)*

\* \* \*

## **January 3, 1941**

So how was the party? Everything was sweet. What was the best moment? Was it when he spoke to me while we were dancing? Or when he draped his arm around me as I stumbled during a waltz? Or when he smiled wonderfully and asked, “Renia, why are you running away from me?” He smelled so amazing! And when he touched me...brrr...ah...so great! So sweet, so good! We sat and talked together. What an evening.

It's been snowing all day long. But I'd go through any blizzard, snowstorm, hurricane, downpour with him—as long as we were together. My wonderful, my golden boy, my lover. I have to finish a paper to turn in tomorrow, but I just want to see Zygus. I'm going crazy. And at the same I don't want to see him, because I'm so scared that something will go wrong, that this wonderful, sweet, fragrant memory will get spoiled.

## **January 9, 1941**

Today a ball hit my wonderful, dear Zygus on the jaw; it was so bad he crouched down in pain. My poor darling! Afterward, I told him I'd been upset during the match. He asked, "Why?" I said, "Just because." He persisted: "Why?" I said, "I was just upset. Let me be!"

He was upbeat the whole time, mumbling something in Yiddish. He's planning to study medicine and he said, "Renia, what are we going to do next year? You'll come to Lwow and we'll study together." If only Mamma were here—I could easily count these days as my happiest so far. (He's only just slightly naughty, not like other boys, who are vulgar.)

## **February 20, 1941**

I dreamed about Mamma all night long. Zygus and I were rescuing her, looking for her in Warsaw. Today I remembered all those painful, burning things. I'm worried about the weekend; things always go wrong then. Help me, God Almighty. Help me, my one and only true friend, my wonderful, distant and close Mamma...

## **February 26, 1941**

I shouldn't doubt him anymore. Didn't he ask me today, so sweetly, if I was going to the club? Didn't he come only because I was going, too? Didn't he carry my school bag and help me down the stairs? Didn't he wait outside the school? When I shared my halvah with him, he took a piece without asking—it was so intimate. But do you know what I like thinking of the most? A sweet moment when my Zygus bought me a bagel and put a piece of it into my mouth. Apart from the sweetness, there was something so masculine about it, so husband-like.

Mamma and you, wonderful God, lead me.

## **March 7, 1941**

Today after class, he pushed me (gently) against a wall and brought his lips close to mine. He said, "What shall I do with those eyes?" I told him to get me sunglasses. He asked why I was so evil. I said, "What, Zygus? I am evil?" He took my hands and repeated sweetly no, no, no! And he asked about my plans for tomorrow.

I feel strange. I might go to his place. Will it all work out, at least a little bit? I pray to God and Bulus. I ask you earnestly to take care of me.

## March 18, 1941

Zygyus picked me up at 6 p.m. today. First we went to the Socialist Club, then to Irka's, then back home. It felt as though there was something hanging between us, something elusive, something unspoken. I kept thinking about an unfinished symphony.

I'm barely able to control myself. I'm boiling, I'm broiling, I can barely stop myself from...ah, I'm so shamelessly vulgar! Z. said, "I forget about everything when I look into your eyes." He made a little pout with his wonderful lips—so, so, so sweet! Will the symphony ever be finished?

## March 19, 1941

I'm feeling guilty. I can feel something powerful swelling up inside of me. I need to confess it to somebody or I'll go crazy. All my senses are churning:

*I feel so fierce, so fierce with love  
hot blood is boiling in my veins  
I am so drunk with closeness  
hot-headed, dazed with desirous flames  
my senses send me writhing  
they're tying me, entangling  
I know I'm like a beast  
My self-respect has decreased  
I despise, I degrade myself so much  
But still I understand that like a dog,  
like a wounded lynx, I can't budge  
My heart twitches, I howl inside, agog  
in no time I will jump up and go savage  
shake everything off and snort and bellow.  
Those red lips will by my lips get ravaged.  
I'm in a frenzy, my urge and fear are not mellow  
I'm alive now, I'm not gone  
and I want...  
I can't go on...*

This is disgusting, repulsive, animalistic.

## March 28, 1941

Today we went for a long walk. It was so good—we just talked, talked, talked. He told me we would go to the Riviera together one day, somewhere far away from other people, with "azure sky"—to which I added, "and azure sea"—and he finished, "and azure eyes." A long, friendly walk like this is perhaps even better than...But what do I know?

## **APRIL 1941**

The death rate of Jewish prisoners in the Warsaw ghetto exceeds 2,000 per month for the first time. It will peak in August at 5,560 deaths.

### **April 27, 1941**

Mamma, I'm so low. You know, sometimes I find excuses for Zygus. For example, he didn't come to see me and I said it was just because he was feeling shy (he is easily embarrassed!). Today, poor, dear Granny made a clumsy attempt to help me feel better, but instead she only lacerated my already bleeding heart. It will take a while for it to heal. I don't know why this day feels so dirty.

## **APRIL 1941**

Axis forces move deeper into Eastern Europe, conquering the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and dividing it among themselves.

### **April 30, 1941**

I am the unhappiest of unhappy people. Why did Zygus arrange to take Irka to a party? Why does he want to spite me? You know, I'm going to go anyway. I'll let myself be tortured. I can't just give up altogether.

### **May 10, 1941**

Long live May! I'm feeling it again. We went to the movies and sat closely entwined. Zygus likes to study my poems. He threatens that he's going to get them published. He's generally marvelous and I love him! So much it chokes me up.

### **May 13, 1941**

My whole life is swelling up in me, all 17 years of it. All my emotions are piling up into one heap of dry leaves, and May is like fuel poured on that heap. And it's growing, growing, just one spark and it will erupt, flames will burst high in the sky. Let the heart, brain, mind, body catch fire, let there be only conflagration and heat—and desire for burning, red-hot lips...

Have I lost my mind? There are only three days left until the end of term! I'm wandering around, daydreaming, ruminating. I'm not studying for my exams at all. I just can't! Zygus's eyes are green, but his lips are the most beautiful. Such amazing lips!

### **May 18, 1941**

I've had the most wonderful May evening. We climbed up high into the hills, along the paths. The San was flowing—powerful, glimmering, red in the sunset. Our spirits were so connected that I'm not sure any physical contact could have brought us closer. It's hard to even

remember what we talked about. I only know that when I mentioned something about his reputation, he replied, "So you wouldn't want a famous husband?"

I'm really at a loss for words, so just picture silence, greenery, May, sunset and fireworks, and the two of us, in love.

You will help me, Bulus and God.

## **June 11, 1941**

Zygyus passed his final school exam today! He was so wonderful today! Very, very tender and very darling.

## **June 20, 1941**

We had another wonderful evening. The stars started to emerge, and the moon floated up, and we sat next to each other and talked. When we left, it was dark; we couldn't find the way. We got lost. It was all so sudden and unexpected and sweet and intimidating—he said, "Renuska, give me a kiss," and before I knew it, it happened. He wanted more later, but I couldn't, I was shaking all over.

Z. said, "We can do this again now, or tomorrow." I feel so strange and nice. It was so light, elusive, ethereal, delicate. How did it happen? No more now, I need to think and dream.

## **June 21, 1941**

I love those green eyes. We kissed for the second time today. It felt so nice, but you know, it wasn't fiery or wild, but somehow delicate and careful, almost fearful—as if we didn't want to extinguish something that was growing between us. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## **June 26, 1941**

I can't write. I'm weak with fear. War again, war between Russia and Germany. The Germans were here, then they retreated. Horrible days in the basement. Dear Lord, give me my Mamma, save all of us who have stayed here and those who escaped the city this morning. Save us, save Zygyus.

I want to live so badly. I'm humbling myself before you and begging on behalf of us all. Tonight is going to be terrible. I'm scared. I believe that you will hear me, that you won't leave me in this awful hour. You saved me before, save me now. God, thank you for saving me.

I don't know what's going to happen to us. Almost the whole city is in ruins. A piece of shrapnel fell into our house. These have been horrific days. Why even try to describe them? Words are just words. They can't express what it feels like when your whole soul attaches itself to a

whizzing bullet. When your whole will, your whole mind and all your senses hang from the flying missiles and beg: "Not this house!" You're selfish and you forget that the missile that misses you is going to hit someone else.

Dear diary! How precious you are to me! How horrible were the moments when I hugged you to my heart!

And where is Zygyus? I don't know. I believe, fervently, that no harm has come to him. Protect him, good God, from all evil. All of this started four hours after the moment he blew me the last kiss up to the balcony. First, we heard a shot, then an alarm, and then a howl of destruction and death. I don't know where Irka and Nora are, either, where anyone is.

That's it for tonight; it's getting dark. God, save us all. Make it so Mamma comes and let there be no more misery.

### **JUNE 30, 1941**

German forces capture Lwow and its surroundings from the Soviets. Jews are ordered to wear armbands emblazoned with the Star of David.

### **JULY 1941**

The Ponary massacres begin in Vilna, a predominately Polish Jewish city. Nazis and Lithuanians together will ultimately kill 70,000 Jews there.

### **July 1, 1941**

We're all alive and well. All of us, Nora, Irka, Zygyus, my friends, my family. Tomorrow, along with all the other Jews, I'll have to start wearing a white armband. To you I will always remain the same Renia, but to others I'll become someone inferior: a girl wearing a white armband with a blue star. I will be a Jude.

I'm not crying or complaining. I've resigned myself to my fate. It just feels so strange and sorrowful. My school vacation and my dates with Zygyus are coming to an end. I don't know when I'll see him next. No news about Mamma. God protect us all.

Goodbye, dear diary. I'm writing this while I'm still independent and free. Tomorrow I'll be someone else—but only on the outside. And perhaps one day I'll greet you as someone else still. Grant me that, Lord God, I believe in you.

### **July 3, 1941**

Nothing new so far. We wear the armbands, listen to terrifying and consoling news and worry about being sealed off in a ghetto.

He visited me today! I thought I'd go mad with joy, and...confusion. He's working at the clinic, dressing wounds. He's sweet and wonderful, as always. It's a shame he can't go to university

now. He'd be an excellent doctor. But he'll be one anyway, you'll see. We've arranged to meet tomorrow at the clinic. It seems a little strange, but why not? Even now that we're wearing these armbands—the thing is to be with him.

I want Bulus to come with my whole heart. God, bring Mamma, let her be with us for better and for worse. Zygmunt's wonderful. You will help me, Bulus and God!

## **October 9, 1941**

I was just with Mamma and it seemed so wonderful, so extraordinary. For other girls, it's natural to spend time with their mothers. But then again, my mother is also different. She's like a friend, a peer. Now I'm back on the other side, longing for her again.

I believe in God, in you and in Mamma. I believe it will be like Zygmunt says. We'll survive this war somehow, and later...ah, will it really be like he says?

I'm just one of millions of girls walking through this world—uglier than some, prettier than others, but still, different from all of them. Zygmunt is also different from everyone else. He's so subtle and sensitive. Mamma, why do you tell me I shouldn't drown in his green eyes? Can't you see I've already drowned?

## **OCTOBER 15, 1941**

Nazis begin deporting Austrian Jews to ghettos in occupied Poland.

## **FALL 1941**

In Przemysl, the Nazis declare an area called Garbarze to be the official Jewish district. It's bordered on three sides by the San River and on the other by railway lines. Authorities ultimately compel Jews from other neighborhoods to move there.

## **November 7, 1941**

Ghetto! That word is ringing in our ears. We don't know what will happen to us, where they'll take us. We were ordered to leave our apartments before 2 p.m. with 25 kilograms of possessions. Maybe there will be a ghetto, but it seems that we will definitely have to move out of the main streets either way.

At 10:30 last night, suddenly the doorbell rang, and who was there? The police! I pressed my hands to my face then and I called you, oh God, and you heard me. It was a policeman from our old village and he let himself be bribed. I reminded him of the good times, the friends, the revels, and somehow it worked. And now I'm asking you, oh Great One, I'm asking you—I, a speck of dust, I, without a father or mother here...listen to my call!

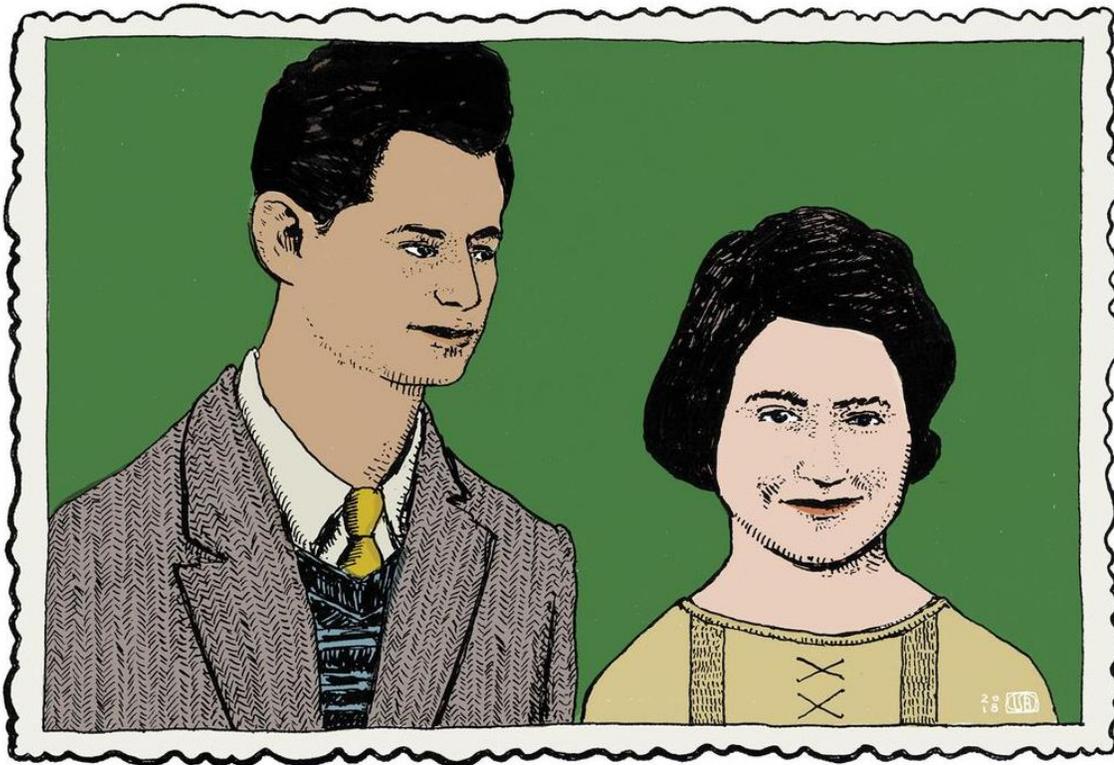
## November 24, 1941

Bulus came on Friday and left today! She doesn't like Zygyus, maybe because she'd rather he were Aryan. She warned me not to take this relationship too seriously. It's strange but after those lectures, I feel that I'm growing apart from him, that I just don't like him and am afraid of him. Sometimes Bulus is wrong, and she doesn't know him. But sometimes she's right! Because won't his assertive nature—which I find so attractive now—torment me one day? Won't he do whatever he pleases with me and with himself? Won't some Halina or Lidka poison my life? It would be all over then. I'd only have one more home to look forward to: the grave.

Why am I so angry, really? Is it because of what Bulus said? No, I do still want him to be my husband. Mamma says you mustn't want anything that much because you might not get it. I think perhaps God will listen to my heartfelt, girlish request. Yes, may it happen! God, may my dreams keep coming true. I'll be so appreciative. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## November 26, 1941

After Bulus left, I dreamed I had an all-night argument with Zygyus. I don't even know what I was angry about. Z. was very sweet and tender today and I was annoyed with myself. Or maybe it's like Mamma says. Maybe I will be unhappy. But am I ready to give up on my dream?



*Renia with Zygmunt Schwarzer. "I'm now called Mrs. Schwarzer all the time, even in front of Zygmunt," she wrote happily in 1941. (Illustration by Lauren Simkin Berke)*

## January 19, 1942

It was his birthday today. I gave him a collection of poems and he was so touched! I didn't know it would please him so much. I asked him what he'd like me to wish him. He said for us to survive this war without splitting up. Do I want that, too? I don't want us to ever split up at all. As Z. put it, the poems connect us. How good that he understands this. Poems connect souls and elevate love. God, thank you and may my dreams come true.

## March 25, 1942

They are closing our quarter; they are moving people out of town; there are persecutions, unlawfulness. And on top of that—there's spring, kisses, sweet caresses, which make me forget about the whole world.

## April 20, 1942

Today is the Führer's birthday. I want to scream with all my might.

How can you be in love for 18 months? Everything is real, pulsating, seething with life and love and youth. I feel as though I were riding a chariot or racing into the wind and rain. I can't catch my breath, I can't find words. I might dissolve in my own tenderness, my own affection. Today I was really ready to strangle him, but what would I do then? Zygus, I'm really writing this for you and you only! I've opened my heart to you and you're so very dear to me! I'm happy, happy and light and...Dreams! Stupid, mad, wonderful dreams!

## **MAY 1942**

Some 375 miles from Przemysl, in Treblinka, Nazis order the construction of an extermination camp. In the two years Nazis operate it, 870,000 to 925,000 people will be killed there.

## May 11, 1942

I spent the day with Nora today. Her attitude toward love is light, while mine is serious. She says that will make me unhappy. Perhaps, but I know I can't do it any other way. After our conversation, I was exhausted and had a headache. And this ghetto, this situation, this war....You will help me, Bulus and God.

## May 12, 1942

Some kind of fever has taken over the city. The specter of the ghetto has returned. I'm glad I'm crying now, when nobody can see me. I shouted today, "Oh, God, I want the moment to come already when they take me away!"

No, I don't want that! Lord, forgive me. But my soul was so embittered that I felt like maybe that would be for the best. Mamma writes us that children are being taken away into forced labor. She told me to pack. She wants to be with us and at the same time she wants to send Daddy an official letter asking for divorce.

They will never patch it up. Mamma will remarry and I will never, ever again come to the door of my parents' home. Her husband will be a stranger. And Daddy wrote to me that he was not sure if he would ever see me again! Daddy, you are an unlucky Jew, just like me, locked away in the ghetto. Holy God, can you save me? Can you save them? All of them. Oh, please, work a miracle!

Life is so miserable. But my heart still fills with sorrow, when I think...will I die? What awaits us in the future? Oh, God Almighty! So many times, I've asked you and you've listened to me—please bring an end to our misery. I feel better now; it's so good to have a cry. People say now food's the most important thing. I had a good, filling dinner—and I feel so terrible. I'm not hungry, but I'm hungry for somebody's caring protection.

And Zygus? Yes, that might be why I don't want to say goodbye to life. Mamma, don't hold it against me. You're going to have your own life now. You might even have more children. I didn't really count on us having a home together in the future; I just had this timid, naive dream. I'm not really disappointed, I just looked around at the world and it scared me with its emptiness.

And Mamma, so dear, will be with some man who is a stranger to me. I'm not crying anymore. The man I will be with will be a stranger to her. Life brings people together and then separates them.

## **May 20, 1942**

Yesterday Z. came to pick me up from my job at the factory and we walked out holding hands. Orchards are in blossom, May is shining with its blue skies and I'm shining, too, with joy. I feel like his little daughter and I like it oh so much!

## **May 23, 1942**

Something has been bothering me terribly the last few days. I know Nora is thinking about what it's going to be like when my romance ends. She's accusing me of taking it too seriously and (does she have a clearheaded view of it?) she makes my heart ache. I know she doubts whether Z. really loves me. I know it; I can feel it.

And Zygus sometimes says something without realizing it and it hurts me so badly. Sometimes, when it bothers me too much, I think about running away. But when I hold him tightly, when he's near, so very near, I feel I wouldn't be able to part with him for all the treasures in the world. That would mean giving up my soul.

Nora, you are wrong. You're different, but I'd be left with nothing.

When Z. is good to me, everything is good and bright and full of sunshine. Such a shame the month is about to pass. The nights are filled with stars. They're so infatuating and I dream so much, I dream, I dream.

## June 2, 1942

Now I know what the word ecstasy means. It's indescribable; it's the best thing two loving creatures can achieve. For the first time, I felt this longing to become one, to be one body and...well...to feel more, I could say. To bite and kiss and squeeze until blood shows. And Zygus talked about a house and a car and about being the best man for me.

Lord God, I'm so grateful to you for this affection and love and happiness! I'm writing these words differently, whispering them in my mind so I don't scare them away or blow them out. I don't want to think about anything, I just want to desire so badly, so passionately like...you know. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## JUNE 3, 1942

Nazis kill all Jewish residents in Przemysl's Zaszanie quarter, on the west side of the San River.

## JUNE 1942

Some 5,000 Jews from several other Polish towns are deported to Przemysl.

## June 6, 1942

I desire with every tiny bit of my body, my thoughts, my imagination. Even the most innocent book stirs me up. Ah, I struggle with such disgusting dreams. I haven't seen Zygus today, he's overworked, tired and weak. It's very lucky, because right now I'm brimming with energy. My greed for life makes me fierce. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## June 7, 1942

I'm at peace. Nora and I went for a long walk deep into the quarter and we talked. She was the first person I told. I realized that burden was what had been tormenting me. I felt at peace.

Wherever I look, there is bloodshed. Such terrible pogroms. There is killing, murdering. God Almighty, for the umpteenth time I humble myself in front of you, help us, save us! Lord God, let us live, I beg You, I want to live! I've experienced so little of life. I don't want to die. I'm scared of death. It's all so stupid, so petty, so unimportant, so small. Today I'm worried about being ugly; tomorrow I might stop thinking forever.

*Think, tomorrow we might not be  
A cold, steel knife  
Will slide between us, you see  
But today there is still time for life  
Tomorrow the sun might be eclipsed*

*Bullets might crack and rip  
And howl, pavements awash  
With blood, with dirty, stinky slag, pigwash  
Today you are alive  
There is still time to survive  
Let's blend our blood  
When the song still moves ahead  
The song of the wild and furious flood  
Brought by the living dead  
Listen, my every muscle trembles  
My body for your closeness fumbles  
It's supposed to be a throttling game, this is  
Not enough eternity for all the kisses.*

## **June 14, 1942**

It's dark, I can't write. Panic in the city. We fear a pogrom; we fear deportations. Oh God Almighty! Help us! Take care of us; give us your blessing. We will persevere, Zygyus and I, please let us survive the war. Take care of all of us, of the mothers and children. Amen.

## **JUNE 18, 1942**

The Gestapo rounds up more than 1,000 Jewish men in Przemysl and sends them to the Janowska labor camp. Agents murder numerous members of the prisoners' families.

## **June 19, 1942**

God saved Zygyus. Oh, I'm beside myself. They were taking people away all night long. They rounded up 1,260 boys. There are so many victims, fathers, mothers, brothers. Forgive us our trespasses, listen to us, Lord God! This was a terrible night, too terrible to describe. But Zygyus was here, my sweet one, sweet and loving. It was so good; we cuddled and kissed endlessly. It really was so delightfully pleasant that it was worth all the suffering. But sometimes I think it isn't worth it, that a loving woman has to pay too high a price. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## **June 23, 1942**

Yesterday there was a kind of pogrom in our quarter. Bulus wrote and told me to leave the city with Zygyus. She wrote "together." "Together"! It would be so delightful, so sweet! Though it's absurd for now. But nowadays even the biggest absurdity can come true.

## **June 27, 1942**

Good, peaceful, quiet, blessed Saturday evening. My soul has calmed down. Why? Because I snuggled against him, he caressed me and made me feel like his tiny little daughter. I forgot

everything bad. It's a shame that Zygyus is gone now. I could lie snuggled against him for a long, long time.

## June 29, 1942

Zygyus tells me bad things. He tells me sweet things, too. I'm always prettier afterward—with shining eyes, with burning lips and flushed cheeks. Zygyus is also at his most beautiful then. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## JULY 1942

The Gestapo establish a *Judenrat*, or Jewish Council, to carry out Nazi orders in Przemysl's Jewish community. The *Judenrat* includes doctors, lawyers, rabbis and business leaders.

## July 5, 1942

We feared it and then it finally happened. The ghetto. The notices went out today. Supposedly, they're planning to deport half the people. Great Lord God, have mercy. My thoughts are so dark, it's a sin to even think them.

I saw a happy-looking couple today. They'd been on an outing; they were on their way back, amused and happy. Zygyus, my darling, when will we go on an outing like theirs? I love you as much as she loves him. I would look at you the same way. But she's so much happier, that's the only thing I know. Or perhaps—oh, Holy God, you are full of mercy—our children will say one day, "Our mother and father lived in the ghetto." Oh, I strongly believe it.

## JULY 14, 1942

The Nazis establish a sealed ghetto in Przemysl, ordering the city's 22,000 to 24,000 Jews to move within its boundaries by the following day. Only members of the *Judenrat* and their families are allowed to temporarily remain in homes outside the ghetto. Any- one assisting or giving shelter to Jews is threatened with execution.

## July 15, 1942

Remember this day; remember it well. You will tell generations to come. Since 8 o'clock today we have been shut away in the ghetto. I live here now. The world is separated from me and I'm separated from the world. The days are terrible and the nights are not at all better. Every day brings more casualties and I keep praying to you, God Almighty, to let me kiss my dear mamma.

Oh, Great One, give us health and strength. Let us live. Hope is shriveling so fast. There are fragrant flowers in front of the house, but who needs flowers? And Zygmunt—I saw him from a distance today, but he hasn't come over yet. Lord, please protect his dear head. But why can't I cuddle up next to him? God, let me hug my dear mamma.

## July 16, 1942

You probably want to know what a closed-off ghetto looks like. Pretty ordinary. Barbed wire all around, with guards watching the gates (a German policeman and Jewish police). Leaving the ghetto without a pass is punishable by death. Inside, there are only our people, close ones, dear ones. Outside, there are strangers. My soul is so very sad. My heart is seized with terror.

I missed Zygmunt so much today. I thought about him all the time. I've longed so much for his caresses, nobody knows how much. After all, we face such a terrible situation. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## July 18, 1942

Days go by. They're all the same, like drops of rain. Evenings are the most pleasant. We sit in the yard in front of the house, we talk, joke and—breathing in the fragrance of the garden—I manage to forget that I live in the ghetto, that I have so many worries, that I feel lonely and poor, that Z. is a stranger to me, that despite all my longing I cannot get closer to him.

Here, in the yard, doves coo. The moon's crescent silently floats into the sky. I was on the verge of tears three times today. I blamed the living conditions, but love can flourish anywhere. And yet, shadows always flit on my path. Where do those shadows come from? My heart aches so badly.

I don't want to ask God for anything else, only for our survival. I dream about putting my head on Mamma's bosom and crying so sweetly. Mamma's not here. Nora is, so I'll go to her and cry my eyes out. She's a dear soul, she'll understand. I don't want to see any other friends. Irka said she would stop by. What for? I can't stand her. It's all stupid, calculated, contrived. Bye, dear diary, my heart is heavy, like it's made of lead. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## July 19, 1942

Zygmunt, my beloved Zygmunt, is my beating heart again; he's so delightfully sweet. The world is good to us, even in the ghetto. So today I'm much calmer. Now I will have sweet thoughts about everything! Tomorrow Nora is turning 18. I'd like to give her something more than an album and flowers, something nobody else will give her. I promised to buy her a wonderful camera when we leave here and to go hiking in the mountains, to make my friend happy. That would make me happy, too.

## **JULY 20, 1942**

German authorities demand 1.3 million *zloty* (roughly \$250,000 in 1942 currency) from the residents of the Przemysl ghetto to guarantee "peace and quiet."

## July 22, 1942

I have to write to silence the pain. Such a terrible, grim time. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. We expect families to be taken away. Not a word from Mamma or Daddy. It's not good with Zygmunt, either. I really didn't want to admit that I'm seething with venom. But I can't stop myself. I have tears in my eyes from grief and the tips of my fingers are tingling with anger.

I don't want to write about the details, as I might write surly, clamoring words, and what's the point? It will always be the same. I'm resentful and helplessly in love. When I think about it, I get so furious that I don't want to see him ever again. I've had enough of it all. I cover my ears with my hands and close my eyes. I'd like to use my suffering to create suffering, to make myself ill.

But in my dreams, it's completely different. My dreams are sweet. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## **JULY 24, 1942**

The Judenrat in Przemysl is allowed to issue 5,000 stamped work permits that will temporarily save those ghetto residents from deportation.

## July 24, 1942

Dear God, help us. We need to pay our contribution by 12 o'clock tomorrow. The city is in danger. But I still have faith. My faith is deep and I beg you. You will help us, Bulus and God.

## July 25, 1942

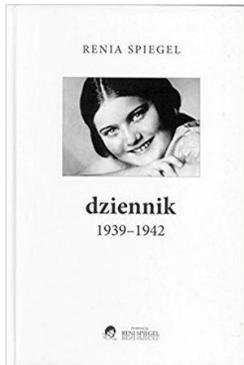
The Jewish Ghetto Police came last night. We haven't paid everything yet. Oh! Why can't money rain down from the sky? It's people's lives, after all. Terrible times have come. Mamma, you have no idea how terrible. But Lord God looks after us and, though I'm horribly frightened, I have trust in him.

I trust, because this morning a bright ray of sunshine came through all this darkness. It was sent by my Mamma in a letter, in the form of a wonderful photograph of her. And when she smiled at me from the photo, I thought that Holy God has us in his care! Even in the darkest moments there is something that can make us smile. Mamma, pray for us. I send you lots of kisses. You will help me, Bulus and God.

## ***In the evening!***

My dear diary, my good, beloved friend! We've gone through such terrible times together and now the worst moment is upon us. I could be afraid now. But the One who didn't leave us then will help us today too. He'll save us. Hear, O, Israel, save us, help us. You've kept me safe from bullets and bombs, from grenades. Help me survive! And you, my dear mamma, pray for us today, pray hard. Think about us and may your thoughts be blessed. Mamma! My dearest,

one and only, such terrible times are coming. I love you with all my heart. I love you; we will be together again. God, protect us all and Zygmunt and my grandparents and Ariana. God, into Your hands I commit myself. You will help me, Bulus and God.



## Dziennik 1939-1942

This nearly seven hundred-page journal by Renia Spiegel, which spans the years 1939 to the summer of 1942, presents a powerful insight into the life of a young woman whose life was tragically cut short shy of her eighteenth birthday.

# Zygmunt's Notes

**JULY 27, 1942**

Lt. Albert Battel of the Wehrmacht takes an unusual stand against the deportation of Jews from Przemysl. He uses Army trucks to rescue up to 100 Jewish armament workers, along with their families, sheltering them from deportation to the Belzec death camp.

**July 27, 1942**

It's done! First of all, dear diary, please forgive me for wandering into your pages and trying to carry on the work of somebody I'm not worthy of. Let me tell you that Renuska didn't get the work permit stamp she needed to avoid being deported, so she has to stay in hiding. My dear parents have also been refused work permit stamps. I swear to God and history that I will save the three people who are dearest to me, even if it costs me my own life. You will help me, God!

**July 28, 1942**

My parents were lucky to get into the city. They're hiding at the cemetery. Renia had to leave the factory. I had to find her a hiding place at any cost. I was in the city until 8 o'clock. I have finally succeeded.

**July 29, 1942**

The Aktion [mass deportation] was prevented because of a dispute between the army and the Gestapo. I cannot describe everything that has gone on for the last three days. I have no energy for that after 12 hours of running around the city. These events have shaken me to my core, but they haven't broken me. I have a terribly difficult task. I have to save so many people without having any protection for myself, or any help from others. This burden rests on my shoulders alone. I have taken Ariana to the other side.

**July 30, 1942**

Today everything will be decided. I will gather all my mental and physical strength and I will achieve my goals. Or I will die trying.

**5 o'clock**

At midday they took away our cards for stamping (along with wives' cards). I decided to risk my document, because I thought it was my last chance to save Renuska. No luck! They threatened to send me to the Gestapo. After a lot of begging, they finally withdrew that threat. But that forgery cost me my job managing military quarters. At 8 o'clock, I'll find out whether or not I'm going to stay.

## ***In the night***

Oh, gods! Such horror! It was all for nothing! The drama lasted one hour. I didn't get my card. Have I just slaughtered myself?! Now I am on my own. What will happen to me? I wanted to save my parents and Renia, but instead I just got into more trouble myself. It looks like the end of the world is here. I still have hope.

## **July 31, 1942**

Three shots! Three lives lost! It happened last night at 10:30 p.m. Fate decided to take my dearest ones away from me. My life is over. All I can hear are shots, shots shots....My dearest Renusia, the last chapter of your diary is complete.