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the Medallion

CATHY GOHLKE

Praise for *The Medallion* and other novels by Cathy Gohlke

The Medallion

“Cathy Gohlke skillfully weaves true stories of heroism and sacrifice into her novel to create a realistic portrayal of Poland during WWII. *The Medallion* is a stunning story of impossible choices and the enduring power of faith and love.”

LYNN AUSTIN, author of *Legacy of Mercy*

“*The Medallion* is a rich story about the deepest of loves, the most impossible of choices, the determination to live and love others in the midst of paralyzing grief. Some stories stick with me for a season, but these characters—and the strength of this beautifully written novel—will cling to my heart for a lifetime.”

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *Hidden Among the Stars*

“Set against a backdrop of our world’s darkest time, Cathy Gohlke’s *The Medallion* seamlessly weaves heartache with healing. I read the story of these two women valiantly fighting for life in the midst of so much death, and felt myself humbled in the shadow of their strength. With every page, Gohlke reminds us that where there is life, there is hope.”

ALLISON PITTMAN, award-winning author of *The Seamstress*

“A master storyteller, Cathy Gohlke has created unforgettable characters in unthinkable circumstances. This story completely undid me, then stitched me back together with hope. A novel that has grabbed my heart—and won’t let go—for what I’m sure will be a very long time.”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award-winning author of *The Hidden Side*

“Cathy Gohlke has done it again! *The Medallion* is a beautifully written story with a riveting plot, realistic characters, and moving themes of sacrificial love, redemption, and forgiveness. Highly recommended for readers who are willing to stay up late, because they won’t be able to put this book down!”

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *No Ocean Too Wide* and *Across the Blue*

“Cathy Gohlke has done it again—woven history with stories of two families that must face the unthinkable. *The Medallion* is timeless and gripping, taking readers on a journey of bravery and hope.”

TERRI GILLESPIE, award-winning author of *Cut It Out* and cohost of Proverbs LIVE

“What a wonderful book, filled with characters I loved and cared about. *The Medallion* will grip your heart with its message of the sustaining power of faith in the direst of circumstances. Do not miss this book.”

GAYLE ROPER, author of *A Widow’s Journey*

Until We Find Home

“Gohlke’s powerful historical novel features a suspenseful and heart-wrenching plot and unforgettable characters.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL, starred review

“Gohlke’s latest takes place in England’s lush Lake District during the early days of World War II. Readers will likely smile at appearances from various literary icons, such as Beatrix Potter and C. S. Lewis, among others. The story is well researched and well written.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Splendid at every turn! *Until We Find Home* is a lushly penned novel about a courageous young woman whose definition of love—and trust—is challenged in every way. A must for fans of WWII and British front history. Not to be missed!”

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *To Whisper Her Name* and *A Note Yet Unsung*

“*Until We Find Home* is a deeply moving war story. . . . Gohlke’s well-developed characters, vivid descriptions, and lush setting details immerse readers into the story. All the way to the very last page, readers will be rooting for the unlikely family forged through the hardships of war.”

JODY HEDLUND, Christy Award–winning author of *Luther and Katharina*

Secrets She Kept

“Cathy Gohlke’s *Secrets She Kept* is a page-turner with great pacing and style. She’s a terrific writer.”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* bestselling author

“This well-researched epic depicts life under the Nazi regime with passionate attention. While the Sterling family story serves as a warning about digging into the past, it is also a touching example of the healing power of forgiveness and the rejuvenating power of faith.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Gohlke takes the reader on a compelling journey, complete with mystery and drama. She weaves in real stories from Ravensbrück, making this drama one that will be difficult to forget. It is well researched, and the multilayered characters demonstrate the power of love and sacrifice.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, Top Pick review

“Gripping . . . emotional . . . masterfully told, this is an unforgettable tale of finding family, faith, and love.”

RADIANT LIT

Saving Amelie

“Moving . . . At times both emotional and suspenseful, this is a fantastic novel for those who love both historical fiction and human interest stories.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“In this compelling and tense novel, Gohlke tells a haunting story of the courageous few who worked tirelessly and at great risk to themselves to save people they did not know. . . . Reminiscent of Tatiana de Rosnay’s stirring stories of human compassion and hope, this should appeal to fans of both authors as well as to historical fiction readers.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Definitely worth the read. Cathy Gohlke is a very talented author, and . . . I recommend *Saving Amelie* for everyone who likes World War II . . . fiction with inspirational tones.”

FRESH FICTION

THE MEDALLION

Also by Cathy Gohlke

William Henry Is a Fine Name
I Have Seen Him in the Watchfires
Promise Me This
Band of Sisters
Saving Amelie
Secrets She Kept
Until We Find Home

A silver chain with a medallion featuring a tree design. The chain is draped across the top and left sides of the cover. The medallion is oval-shaped and contains a detailed tree with many branches and leaves.

the Medallion

CATHY GOHLKE



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The Medallion

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FOR SOPHIA CHARLOTTE

Whose name aptly means Wisdom, Feminine, and Free

You are all these, and Absolute Sunshine to me,

Precious Granddaughter

All my love, forever

Acknowledgments

WITH DEEP GRATITUDE and debt to those whose courageous lives inspired this work:

Irena Sendler, and all those who worked to save 2,500 Jewish children from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. Your determination, great heart, and fortitude amid the most difficult and frightening of circumstances continue to inspire and convict me.

Itzhak Dugin (Isaac Dogim), for not giving up, even when your heart was broken. Because of you and the men who worked with you to escape the horrors in the Ponary Forest, we know what happened and are better equipped to challenge the world in the hope that history does not repeat itself.

Dr. Janusz Korczak, for loving children more than your own life, for your determination and sacrifice as you comforted and sustained others, and for showing us that we can all be stronger than we imagine.

Jan and Antonina Żabiński, for risking all to save the lives of many by hiding them in your zoo. Generations live because you dared to do what you could.

John Evans (Jan Iwaniczko), for living a life of faith and resilience when the world offered you little hope through WWII and

Communism in Poland, and even a family sentence to Siberia. Thank you for sharing your inspiring memoir through your grandson, Matthew Lemanski.

Thank you to all who have encouraged me to write this story:

Sandra Lavelle, dear friend, for alerting me to the discovery of the escape tunnel in the Ponary Forest of Lithuania.

Gloria Delk, dear sister, and all those who sent me links to Irena Sendler's story. I so appreciate that you share with me real-life accounts that move your hearts.

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Blend Coffee Bar in Ashburn, Virginia, for not minding when I visit my favorite chair for hours to write. Your coffee and cardamom honey cappuccinos keep me going!

Wilbur Goforth, my uncle, whose words of wisdom changed my life when I was uncertain which career path to take in the second half of my life's journey. You reminded me that a sure way to know if I'm working in the will of God is to ask, "Do I have joy? Is this yoke easy? Is this burden light?" So—is writing joy to me? Yes! A thousand times, yes!

Most of all, I thank my heavenly Father and Lord Jesus Christ for the unmerited gifts of salvation, of relationship and unbounded joy in You, for precious gifts of family and story, and for pressing on my heart things that grieve Your heart and things that bring Your heart joy. My heart breaks and sings in response. I pray my pen brings You glory and that this story brings kinship and encouragement to readers. All praise and honor to You, Father, now, and joy for eternity!

I know that my Redeemer lives. In Thy presence is fullness of joy!

Prologue

THE VIOLIN CRIES SOFTLY from the summer garden, weaving its notes among the gathered guests—a lament of the bride’s passing youth and the leaving of her father’s house.

Itzhak, his breath groom-tight, watches from the kitchen stoop, waiting for his Rosa. The door opens behind him, and he turns. A gasp escapes. Overcome by her beauty, he whispers, “Do you hear, my Rosa, the singing of the violin for us?”

Rosa nestles close, and though her veil obscures her features, he can hear her smile. “Itzhak, my love, I hear only the beating of my heart.”

He lifts her veil in this one private moment, revealing her beautiful face. He wants only to run his finger down her silken cheek, to touch her lips with his own, but steps back and quickly winks before lowering the lace once more.

“I saw that! Itzhak, don’t make me laugh.”

“I cannot help it. It’s really you, my beautiful Rosa! Even your papa, who knows I’m not good enough for you—” he makes sure to whisper this—“has not played the trickster like that old Laban.”

“Hush, now. Don’t say such a thing. Pay attention, Itzhak. Your mama nears.”

Itzhak presses her hands in hope and promise, then walks ahead to link arms with his father and mother. Heads high, they approach the chuppah. Ducking beneath the fringes of the grandfathers' prayer shawls, Itzhak's parents step to his right.

The violin still sings, but Itzhak cannot focus on its notes. Instead, he turns and watches his Rosa as she links arms with her parents, though he's not meant to. He cannot breathe as she walks toward him, a white cloud in summer.

They enter the chuppah, and her parents step to her left, now one family beneath the families' prayer shawls. Rosa lifts the edge of her skirt from the ground and begins her ritual. For Itzhak's ears only she whispers, "I circle you seven times, my tall and handsome Jericho. Smile as I do this, but do not dare to laugh. Listen for the cantor."

Forcibly, Itzhak swallows his smile. *If I laugh, I laugh for joy. You broke down every defense, each wall and barrier to my heart, long before today, my Rosa. I am a city captive, surrendered to your love.* As she finishes her final circle, he reaches for her fingers.

Together, they face the rabbi, who prompts them in Hebrew, "*Ani l'dodi v'dod li.*"

Itzhak repeats the words to his Rosa. "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

She responds, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

The rabbi encourages, "Itzhak, speak to your bride the words that you've chosen."

"In the words of King Solomon, 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'"

"Now, Rosa," the rabbi intones, "speak to Itzhak the words of our mother Ruth."

Clear and steady, like the deeper, surer strains of the violin, comes Rosa's vow. "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me."

Itzhak holds her gaze for a moment, his throat too full to speak, then remembers what he is to do next. He takes the ring from his father and slips it on her finger. "I give you this ring, my wife, with no adornment, its symbol eternal. And I give you this medallion, for you and for our children's children—the best and greatest hope my heart and hands possess."

He places his hand on the small of her back and turns his new wife, gently, firmly, as he would in dance. He clasps the slender golden chain around her neck.

She turns to face him once more, taking the medallion in her hand to examine its intricate and delicate filigree. "The Tree of Life, Itzhak! I vow, my husband, to wear it always."

From the wedding of Itzhak and Rosa Dunovich
August 17, 1938
Warsaw, Poland

PART I



CHAPTER ONE



Warsaw, Poland
September 1939

Plummeting from the ceiling, the library dome's chandelier exploded into a million crystal shards as it crashed to the floor—the floor polished three days before to a high sheen. Sophie Kumiega dove beneath the reading table as the bomb hit, shielding, as best she could, her stack of first editions, and the baby in her womb. A second bomb rocked stonework and shattered the floor-to-ceiling window, despite row upon row of crosshatched tape. Marble busts exploded. Great chunks of plaster crashed to the floor. Acrid flames burst from the shelves.

“Get out! Get out of the building now!” Stefan Gadomski, the library's junior officer, cried.

“Move those books first! We must save the books!” insisted the librarian in charge, shoving a cart at breakneck speed to the far end of the building.

“If we move them, the next bomb is likely to fall there!” Pan Gadomski shouted.

“Then we will move them to the basement,” the librarian shouted back.

Sophie could take no more. She’d worked hard to obtain her position in Warsaw’s library—a coup for an English foreigner, a greater coup for a woman. But she would not risk their baby—the baby she and Janek had prayed for, saved for, planned for every day of their married lives. Even now, Janek played cat and mouse in his Polish fighter plane, dodging the Luftwaffe in bomb-bursting skies above. The least she could do was save their unborn child.

She dropped the first editions into their designated crate and had nearly made it to the door when the librarian thundered after her, “Pani Kumiega, come back! If we lose our library, we lose everything!”

But Sophie didn’t turn. She feared she might relinquish her purpose, as crazy as such hesitancy was. She’d always submitted to authority, but not now. Two children had perished within her in two years. This child must live.

Sophie cowered in the shadow of the library door, uncertain which way to turn, to run. Day after day, more of Warsaw was being reduced to a war zone, and still the relentless bombs fell on new targets or punished old. Low-flying Heinkels strafed men, women, children, without mercy, without discrimination.

Finally she dodged between buildings, crouching beneath overhangs and awnings and in the crevices below steps as far and as long as she could. If they could not see her, would she be safe? Which could be worse? To be crushed by a familiar roof or gunned down in the street by German planes? Block after block she alternately crept and ran through the rubble city, praying for the safety of her husband, praying for their baby, praying that their apartment building had not been obliterated. She reached their street and had glimpsed her apartment in the block ahead when a brief whistling came from high overhead, a sudden silence, then a brilliant flash of white light and fire before her, opening a chasm without end.



“Sophia! Dear girl, you must wake up. Please, please, wake up.”

Janek, dearest Janek. Sophie barely heard him through dense fog and a constant rumbling in her ears. She tried to open her eyes, but her lids lay too heavy.

“She’s coming round.” Another voice—Pani Lisowski, her neighbor from across the hall, surely.

“Thank God! We thought we’d lost you. I thought . . .”

Through slits Sophie did her best to focus, to find her husband’s face, but it wasn’t there.

“You’re alive. That’s all that matters.” It was her neighbor, her friend, old Pan Bukowski.

Her heart caught. “Janek? Am I bleeding? Am I bleeding?” Fear pushed her up.

“No, no, my dear, lay back—only your forehead and knees.”

“I’ll find bandages. You musn’t get up, not yet.” Pani Lisowski again.

“Your Janek is in the skies, still fighting for us.” She heard the pride in Pan Bukowski’s voice.

Sophie pushed hair from her forehead; her fingers came away sticky and red. “An explosion. I remember an explosion.”

“The whole street is gone . . . rubble.”

“Our apartment?”

“The front blown off—open, like a doll’s house,” Pani Lisowski insisted.

Sophie tried to remember if she’d washed the dishes that morning. What Pani Lisowski must think if she’d left a mess upon the table for all the world to see.

“Stay here, stay quiet,” ordered Pan Bukowski. “I’m going to get help and then salvage what I can. I’ll come back.”

“Don’t leave. Don’t leave me, Janek.” Her mind reached for his coat, but her arms refused to obey.

“Your Janek will be back before you know it. I won’t be gone long. I promise.”

“Bring me—”

“Yes, I’ll bring all I can. Whatever is still there, I will place in your hand.”



When Sophie opened her eyes, she lay on a pallet in a room smelling of smoke and scorched metal, burned paper and wood, smoldering hair. The only light came from a shielded lantern on a small table in the center of the room. Ash crusted her teeth, her tongue, matted the hair stringing her face. The rumble of explosions came from farther away, as if her hearing had dimmed. A dark form huddled in a chair beside her pallet. It was too slight, too slumped, too round to be Janek.

“Pan Bukowski?” she whispered.

The form stirred, sat up, lost its roundness. She heard the vertebrae pop in his neck. “Ah, you are awake, Sophia Kumiega.”

“Pan Gadowski?” She had not expected her coworker, but then, the man was also godfather to her Janek.

“*Tak*, it is I. It’s good to see you in the land of the living. You’ve slept for three days.”

“What are you doing here? Where am I?”

“You are in a storeroom in the basement of the library—the safest place I could find at the moment. Though here we’re likely to be buried in all the knowledge of the ages if this bombing continues. Still, that is better than the rubble of the meat market. At least, I like to think so.”

“But, Pan Bukowski—the last I knew, Pan Bukowski—”

“The radio reports one hundred people have been killed. You won’t recognize the city. The zoo is a shambles. Zebras, lions, tigers, wallabies—they’re saying all the wilds of Africa, of Australia, of the world have escaped. A pedestrian’s nightmare and a hunter’s holiday.”

“What? They bombed the zoo?” It made no sense.

Pan Gadomski shrugged, as if he could read her mind. “What of reason is found in this? Jan’s heart must be broken—he’s poured his life into that work—not to mention Antonina’s.”

“The zookeepers. I know them. Janek and I love to . . .” But she’d heard nothing of Janek since the bombing began. Her eyes must have shown her pleading.

“We’ve heard only that they’re fighting, called back, regrouping, doing all they can. Janek is a good man, a strong pilot. You must trust that, my dear.”

Sophie swallowed, her throat thick. She knew Pan Gadomski worried for him too. He loved her Janek, almost like a son. She wanted to trust.

“Mayor Starzyński is pleading with the citizens of Warsaw to dig trenches—there are signs everywhere, calling us to arm ourselves, to cross the Vistula and regroup for a defensive line. Shovels and trenches against German panzers,” he chided. “Still, I must go and help.”

“Here? Now?”

“Not yet, but they’re coming, crawling their way across Poland, preceded only by hundreds—thousands—of refugees pouring into the city. Ironically, they believe themselves safer beneath German bombers than in the countryside. No matter that most of Warsaw is now without running water, many without electricity.” He shook his head. “All is chaos, but all is not lost . . . not as long as Władysław Szpilman continues to play Chopin for Radio Poland.”

“Pan Bukowski?”

Pan Gadomski looked away. “France and England have declared war on Germany. Between explosions and the rubble of fallen buildings, our citizens rejoice in the streets—they even tossed the French military attaché into the air outside the embassy, all the while singing the *Marseillaise*. Do you know how poorly Poles sing in French?”

Thank God in heaven, at least we won't be alone now. But we must wait it out. Victory will take time."

"Pan Gadomski—where is Pan Bukowski?"

A long moment followed. "He had his son bring you back to the library when you passed out, thinking there might be refuge among the stacks. Apparently your apartment building is no more. I'm sorry."

"Janek . . ." Every picture, every book, every memory of Janek and their life together was in that apartment.

"Your friend sent these for you. There is a photograph of your husband." Pan Gadomski pointed to two bags. "After he sent you back, he salvaged all he could for everyone on your floor, before . . ."

"Before what?"

Pan Gadomski moistened his lips, hesitating again.

"Where is Pan Bukowski?" Sophie insisted, while her heart quickened.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your friend was hit, strafed by a plane as he left the apartment for the last time. His son was with him, caught him as he fell. He did not suffer long, so the son said. He brought these things for you yesterday."

"No . . . no!" Sophie's heart stopped. It wasn't possible. Pan Bukowski, her friend, her only real friend besides Janek since coming to Poland.

"He said his father's last words were for you. 'Tell Sophia to fight, to keep faith.' Something about, 'Remember the Red Sea.'"

The Red Sea . . . how Adonai will make a way where there is no way . . . It was what he'd always reminded her of when she was tempted to despair.

The tension and the worry, the anguish Sophie had suppressed ever since Janek left for the battle, ever since the first bombs fell on an unbelieving Warsaw, finally ruptured in her chest. The cry came

first as gasping breaths, then deep heaves, bursting from a place she'd known only in the losing of her babies—primitive, naked keening.

Pan Gadomski slipped from the room as the storm played out.



When Sophie woke again, the lantern still burned, casting weird shadows on the wall. There was a small loaf of bread and some cheese on the floor beside her pallet, and a cup of water. The smells of burned clothing and hair were still there, but the silence was new. She heard only her own breathing . . . slow, fluid.

And then she remembered. Pan Bukowski. Silent tears escaped her eyes, rivuleting her sooted cheeks, dripping down her neck. She swiped them away and sat up, her swallow painful. Had he been hit while saving her treasures? Nothing she owned was worth that.

Sophie had no idea of the day or the time. She must be in an inner room—no windows. No wonder the bombing had sounded far away. Now she heard no bombing. Whatever that meant, it was a relief.

A cramping in her belly brought her wider awake. She felt for the mound of her baby and breathed, relieved again.

She must get up, must find the restroom, must eat something. But when she pushed back the blanket, her pallet was covered in blood.

Note to Readers

WHILE ON A WRITERS' RETREAT, I received a Facebook message from longtime friend Sandra Lavelle asking if I'd seen a news article. Her link led me to an amazing story—the discovery and unearthing of a WWII escape tunnel in Lithuania by an international team of archaeologists.

Goose bumps ran up my arms as I read. Something about it rang familiar—as if I'd been there before.

I walked into town that morning for a coffee and newspaper to clear the “ghosts” from my brain. While sipping coffee in the outdoor café, I came across the same story in print.

And then I remembered. Years before, while doing Holocaust research, I'd viewed a powerful documentary, *Shoah*, in which Claude Lanzmann, over an eleven-year period, had traveled the world to research and interview surviving concentration camp inmates, SS commandants, and Jewish, German, and Polish eyewitnesses of the “final solution”—Nazi efforts to systematically exterminate human beings. *Shoah* was first presented in French (1985) and later in English (1999).

The documentary includes over nine hours of heart-wrenching, mind-boggling interviews and tours, including the testimony of men who'd been assigned the unthinkable in the Ponary Forest.

When it appeared that the Russians were closing in and would retake Lithuania, Heinrich Himmler, for fear that Nazi wartime atrocities would be discovered, ordered eighty Jewish men to dig up and burn bodies (approximately 70,000 Jewish and 30,000 others) that the SS had shot and dropped into mass graves. Details of the assignment were too horrific to comprehend. Prisoners knew that they, too, would be murdered once their gruesome labor ended so that there would be no witnesses. It was then that the prisoners contrived to dig, by night, a tunnel from their pit of imprisonment to the forest's edge, and escape. They had only their hands, spoons, and a few electricians' tools to do the job.

Until new technology (using radar and radio waves to scan the area) verified the existence of the tunnel in 2016, the story had been relegated to the stuff of myths—an escape tale so fantastic people found it hard to believe.

With the tunnel's discovery, old interviews were resurrected and the children of Holocaust heroes rejoiced that their parents' accounts were confirmed. *Nova* aired a documentary revealing the scientists' search and tunnel discovery in 2017.

Past interviews included the story of a man (Isaac Dogim, sometimes spelled Itzhak Dugin) who, in the process of digging up bodies, found those of his family. Some sources reported he found his mother, three sisters, and their children. Some sources said it was his wife and sisters. According to the story I read, he had identified the partially decomposed bodies of some of his family by their clothing and his wife by the medallion she wore around her neck—a medallion he'd given her on their wedding day.

I remember walking back to the retreat house after reading the story in the newspaper, legs trembling with the realization that this was what I would write next. I didn't know how my fictional story would begin or end, or even the story's purpose; I only knew that I was angry such carnage had ever taken place, that it must not happen

again, and that I couldn't get the image of this man's horrific, heart-breaking discovery of his wife out of my mind. By the time I reached the house, I could see and hear some of the characters in my head, and a picture of the medallion had formed clearly in my mind. I walked inside, shared the newspaper story with author friends Terri Gillespie and Carrie Turansky, and said, "This is my next story, and what if the medallion is the Tree of Life?"

As I reread transcripts containing Itzhak Dugin's (or Isaac Dogim's) and other interviews, and began researching details, I asked the Lord to show me the greater purpose of this story—what in this would bring Him glory and what would He teach me through its writing? What would bless and encourage readers?

For several months, my sister, Gloria Delk, and others had sent me links to Irena Sendler's story. Irena was a Polish Catholic social worker who accepted the challenge to develop a network within Żegota (the underground Polish Council to Aid Jews) to rescue children during WWII. Despite terrible risks, they smuggled 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto and certain death at the hands of the Nazis, then hid them in Polish homes, convents, churches, and hospitals until the end of the war.

For years I've admired Irena Sendler and those who worked with her, as well as the courageous Polish families and others who took in children. I thought how wonderful it would be to tell her story—their story. But it had been done, in numerous books. Best of all is *Life in a Jar*—a nonfiction account of Irena's heroism and the American teens who uncovered her story for the world based on firsthand interviews. I could add nothing to that brilliant work, and yet I couldn't get her story or her lifelong mission and approach to life out of my mind.

Irena's father, a medical doctor, treated impoverished Jewish patients for typhus when no other doctor would risk helping them. While treating his patients, he contracted typhus. As he lay dying,

the young Irena asked him why he'd done it. He replied that when someone is drowning, you jump in to save them, whether or not you can swim. It was a principle Irena lived by all her life.

Of the 2,500 Jewish children her network helped to save, approximately 2,000 were found after the war. Though their parents had been murdered (mostly at Treblinka), many were united with extended family, thanks to lists Irena had kept hidden of the children's Jewish names and the new Aryan names and addresses they were assigned. Approximately 400 to 500 children were never found.

Theories abound regarding the whereabouts of those 400 to 500: Perhaps they and their foster families had been discovered and killed by the Nazis or died by other means during the war. Perhaps the foster families had been forced to move away or hide, taking the children, and left no means of contact. Perhaps the foster families had bonded so closely that they wanted to keep the children or the children knew them as their only parents, and they moved away so they wouldn't have to give them up. Young children might never even know they were Jewish.

What became of all those children? What became of one?

I wondered, if I had hidden a child, loved and treated them as my own for several years of war, bonded with them and believed their parents had perished . . . if that were the only child in my life and my only reason to get up in the morning and keep going, if I'd grown to fear the powers that be and what might become of this beloved child if I came forward, would I be able to give up that child at war's end? Would I lie to hide and protect that child—and my family? Would I lie to my family?

Irena Sendler's story and these threads entwined through my heart and mind and joined with the threads of Itzhak Dugin's (or Isaac Dogim's) story to form a whole.

Most of the other characters in this book are creations of my

imagination, inspired by stories I've read or composites of interviews I've conducted. Father Stimecki is a composite of priests who gave the names and identities of Polish Catholic dead to Jews to save their lives and to extend medical benefits when those benefits were denied Jews under Nazi occupation. Jan and Antonina Żabiński owned and operated the zoo in Warsaw and hid Jews and others there during the war, including (for a short time) Irena Sendler. Dr. Janusz Korczak was a respected Polish pediatrician and well-known radio personality who advocated for children and authored the beloved children's book *King Matt the First*.

During the war, Dr. Korczak ran an orphanage for Jewish children in the Warsaw Ghetto. Though repeatedly offered opportunities for freedom, he refused to leave the children for whom he cared. Very much as my story portrays, Dr. Korczak marched with the children to the train that would take them all to be killed at Treblinka.

These are the real heroes of this story.

The Medallion is a reminder to help when help is needed, regardless of the cost to ourselves.

It is a reminder that anti-Semitism has run rampant not only through history, but continues in our country and throughout the world today. We must be vigilant, knowing that “never again” can be the outcome only when we all stand for our neighbor and those in need, and when we all stand against hatred and violence.

It is the story of our surrender to the One who loves us with everlasting love and knows best and beyond what we can imagine—even when we're terrified that our losses and letting go will consume us.

As Pan Bukowski taught Sophia, we don't know how the Red Sea parted when Moses and the Israelites, desperate, at their wits' ends and pursued by enemies, stood at the water's edge—only that God made it happen.

In the same way, He can part the Red Seas—the deep and raging waters—of our lives. When we are still enough to watch, to listen,

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when we lean not on our own understanding but trust in Him, acknowledging Him in all our ways, He will direct our steps. Trusting Him is our path to peace, to the fullness of shalom.

When there seems no way forward, our God who is able can forge paths we never imagined.

God's eternal love and blessings for you,

Cathy Gohlke