

# DAUGHTERS OF THE OCCUPATION

A NOVEL OF WWII

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## Author's Note

IT STARTED WITH a photo I discovered in the National Archives in Riga, Latvia, a small black-and-white headshot of my great-grandfather's brother, Jossel Talan, on an identity paper. Until that day, I only knew his name and fate from online resources: murdered in the Rumbula forest, 1941, with his wife and two children. Seeing his face, so much like my Nana's, gave me pause. How did my great-grandfather, Mendel Talan, a prosperous merchant in Riga, end up in Siberia, where my grandmother was born?

The answer came from a conversation with the director of the Museum "Jews in Latvia," Ilya Lensky, born and raised in Latvia, and an expert in Jewish history. This is what he told me: In 1905, Mendel's involvement with the Russian Revolution led to a hasty marriage with my great-grandmother (Sophie) and exile from Riga to Siberia, an event that dramatically altered their future. Jossel, and the rest of the extended family, remained in Latvia, where they ended up in the Riga ghetto and were murdered at Rumbula forest.

That's why my grandmother was born in Siberia. She lived because she was not in Latvia during the war. My mother and I were born because my great-grandparents were exiled.

Nana suppressed her childhood in Novosibirsk, Siberia, her family's escape from an anti-Semitic pogrom, their involvement in the 1917 Russian Revolution and subsequent exile to Shanghai. She was the only grandparent I knew, and I am her namesake, but she died when I was thirteen and more

interested in boys than my ancestry. I didn't understand what it meant to be Jewish until a few years ago, when I began exploring Nana's past and reclaimed my faith.

Before delving into my family's history, I'd never heard about the Rumbula forest massacre, where 26,000 Jews were killed over two nights, a tragedy in the manner and on the scale of Ukraine's Babi Yar. I knew practically nothing about Latvia, its Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the fact that the execution of 90 percent of its Jews (including twenty-six of my relatives) was organized by a death squad also employed at Babi Yar, *SS-Einsatzgruppen*.

My search for answers planted the seeds for this novel, rooted in truth. Miriam Talan's character is inspired by Frida Michelson, who survived the Rumbula massacre. For three years, Frida hid in the forest, where she dug holes in the ground to keep warm, hid in barns, and received help from farmers and Seventh-Day Adventists. Her ability to "pass" as Latvian, her seamstress skills, and her proficiency with Lettish helped her endure the relentless terror she faced.

Frida testified at the Nuremberg trials and, in 1979, bore witness against a former Latvian policeman who'd emigrated to Baltimore, stating he "was the green-uniformed Nazi collaborator who had ordered her to remove her clothes and valuables as she was driven to an execution ditch with scores of other Latvian Jews, five abreast."

Salaspils, where Miriam witnesses a dead boy being tossed into a trench, was a concentration camp near the Rumbula forest. Though it was touted as a Police Prison and Work Education Camp, it was a place where children were given poison that made their eyes itch and caused diarrhea, leading to their deaths within a week, and where the blood of Jews was taken for wounded German soldiers. And where at least 632 corpses of children between three and nine years of age were found, along with the remains of thousands of adults.

One of the things I couldn't fathom, at the beginning of my search, was why Jews didn't leave Latvia when they had the chance. One reason had roots dating back almost twenty years prior to World War II, when the former premier of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin, signed a peace treaty recognizing Latvian independence. A second reason originated with Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis's takeover, by military force, of the Latvian government in 1934. He established an authoritarian regime that censored all news. Finally, the signed nonaggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, and Ulmanis's

assurances that Latvia was neutral and therefore safe from attack, gave Latvians a false sense of security.

Unbeknownst to Latvians (including Ulmanis), a secret protocol, within the nonaggression pact between Hitler and Stalin, sealed Latvia's fate ten months before the first Soviet tank appeared. The terms of this agreement divided Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union, and Latvia was given to the Soviets. This chain of events meant Latvians were completely unprepared when Soviet tanks rolled through the border.

The lack of blatant anti-Semitism also contributed to the Jews' overconfidence in Latvia. They were treated quite well, with Jews represented in Parliament and frequenting more than one hundred Jewish schools and sixty-five synagogues. In fact, Latvia's tolerance of Jewish culture and religion was renowned throughout Europe, prompting other Jews, such as historian and author Simon Dubnow, to move from Germany to Riga before the war. In 1941, there were 66,000 Jews in Latvia; more than 43,000 lived in Riga, including Jossel Talan, who prospered as a second-class merchant with a house in a well-heeled part of Riga that still stands today.

Yet a furtive tide of anti-Semitism prevailed. Jews were forbidden to attend the University of Latvia, for instance, and only two Jewish professors were admitted to the university during the country's twenty-three years of independence. Anti-Semitism became more visible as a disturbing wave of nationalism swelled, driven by student fraternities in Riga, far-right periodicals, and two extremist nationalist organizations, touting the slogan "Latvia for Latvians." Both groups were banned by 1934, but their attitudes remained, foreshadowing a disastrous future for Latvian Jews.

Days after Latvia was illegally declared a Soviet Socialist Republic, the country's Home Guard was disarmed and Red Army commanders replaced some Latvian officers, while others were deported to Siberia or executed. This was the beginning of the end of a flourishing Jewish population, with Latvians defining Jews as Bolsheviks, falsely implying that Communism was a Jewish conspiracy. These accusations stirred up the underlying hatred among university students and professionals, many of whom would later collaborate with the Germans.

With continued censorship under the Soviets, Latvian Jews were

largely unaware of the deepening anti-Semitism throughout the rest of Europe. For this reason (and because Latvians viewed Germans as sophisticated and honorable, compared to the brutal Soviets), crowds of Latvians welcomed the Germans as liberators rather than occupiers when they arrived.

Immediately, Nazis began spreading anti-Semitic propaganda, linking Jews to the Communist Soviets. Newspaper stories blamed Jews for Stalin's atrocities. Jews were "guilty of spilling the blood of Latvians, torturing, and maiming them," the newspapers said. "One must remember it was the Jews who greeted the Red Army in July 1940, and enslaved, tortured, and killed Latvians during Communist rule." Meanwhile, as Andrew Ezergailis points out in *The Holocaust in Latvia*, "It is a matter of historical record that Jews had very little (almost nothing) to do with the Latvian communist movement."

The SD (the security service of the SS), commanded by Franz Walter Stahlecker, played a large and devastating role in the annihilation of Latvian Jews. It began with the announcement that all Jews had to wear a yellow star, not smaller than ten centimeters by ten centimeters, on the middle of their backs and on their chests—two stars instead of one, so that Jews could be easily identified in a crowd. Then, to escalate hatred towards the Jews in Riga, the Nazis apprehended young Jewish men and ordered them to dig up graves of victims murdered by the Soviets. Once the bodies were above ground, photos were taken and printed beneath a phony headline stating that these Jewish men had killed these Latvians.

I was dismayed to find that Jossel Talan's twenty-one-year-old son, Ewsey, was one of the Jews forced to dig up graves. Instead of dying in the Rumbula massacre, as I'd believed, Ewsey was taken to the prison's central courtyard, along with the rest of the Jewish gravediggers, and shot. Nobody knows where they are buried.

Jews were burned to death in synagogues on July 4, 1941, by Latvian collaborators, the Arājs Kommando, a notorious killing unit of volunteers, mostly university students, created by Stahlecker and led by Viktors Arājs, a lawyer. Curiously, many members of *Einsatzgruppe A*, which operated in Latvia, were also academics, with PhDs. Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda was so forceful, it turned intellectuals into murderers.

In October, Jossel and his family, along with 30,000 Jews, were forced to move into the ghetto. I walked the cobblestone streets of the ghetto,

on the same stones that were there in 1941, looking at the same wooden shacks. I toured a ghetto house and saw layers of newspaper stuck to the walls for insulation. I saw how people had tried to make these hovels feel a bit like home, with lace squares draped over bureaus, porcelain jugs, and crystal trinkets from their former lives. Standing there, I couldn't imagine Jossel's anguish, or that of his wife and daughter, but I could believe it.

Their time in the ghetto would be short. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SD, brought Friedrich Jeckeln from the Ukraine, where he had organized the mass murder at Babi Yar, to Riga to plan the Rumbula massacre. Jeckeln devised a chilling strategy to murder the ghetto Jews over two days, under cover of darkness, employing 1,700 men. Six pits were excavated by Russian prisoners of war, and the Jews were ruthlessly killed using Jeckeln's system of "sardine packing": forcing people to lie on top of dead bodies so that time wasn't wasted pushing corpses into the pits.

Jeckeln's methods were monstrous with their cold, calculated rationale—stripping victims of their clothing and valuables; using "neck shot specialists" as executioners; and shooting each person once, to save ammunition, so that Jews not shot were buried alive.

On November 30, 1941, the Arājs Kommando marched half the residents through arctic-cold air, along icy streets, seven miles to the Rumbula forest. Members of the *Einsatzgruppen* shot column after column with Russian machine guns that could be set to fire single shots. The same ordeal took place the following week, on December 8, the day Simon Dubnow, too ill to walk to the forest, said, "Jews, write and record," before he was shot in the ghetto.

Janis Lipke, a dockworker in Riga, did, in fact, save forty Jews, risking his life as well as the lives of his wife and three children. He dug out a bunker in his yard, where a number of people hid during the war. Janis saved more Jews by hiding them in the cellars of trusted friends' homes, as well as another bunker, though several were caught and killed.

My description of the hiding place where Jan takes Miriam comes from one of the people Jan rescued, Semyon Ostrovsky. Janis Lipke was posthumously awarded the title Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial, for non-Jews who risked their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust.

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Ironically, the Soviets invaded Latvia a second time, in 1944, overthrowing the Nazis and reinstalling Communism. Only 5,000 Jews remained in Latvia, mostly in camps and ghettos. The mass graves, the burned synagogues, and the ghetto were not publicly acknowledged for the next forty years. In fact, as survivor Bernhard Press writes in his memoir, *The Murder of the Jews in Latvia*, many Jews who “saved their own lives, were sent to Siberia.” People he knew who were deported by the Soviets included a physician, a tailor, a pharmacist, and the wife of a jeweler.

Judaism, along with all religions, was banished. Intourist did bring North Americans to Riga during the 1970s, but tourists were closely monitored and kept away from locals. Exceptions were made for those who spoke Russian.

Sarah’s horrifying time in KGB custody was based on information from the KGB building in Riga. Her overall experience in Riga was inspired by a friend’s visit, with Intourist, to the Soviet Union in 1977, as well as a Soviet tour I took in Riga.

The end of the war, for Latvians, came on May 4, 1990, when the country adopted its own declaration of independence. In 1991, the Soviets left the country for good, and the atrocities finally came to light.

Viktors Arājs was charged with war crimes in a British court but was inexplicably released in 1948. Though his Kommando collaborated with the Nazis at the Rumbula forest and murdered 22,000 Jews in other actions, Arājs wasn’t brought to justice until 1979, in Germany, where he was convicted of murder. He died in 1988.


In 1942, Friedrich Jeckeln was awarded the War Merit Cross First Class with Swords for his ruthless efficiency. He was captured by the Soviets, however, after the war, put on trial for his war crimes, and hanged in Riga in 1946.

I arrived at Rumbula forest in the late afternoon. The sun cast long shadows, like bars, over orange, yellow, and burgundy leaves that crunched underfoot. Rectangular mounds, in concrete frames, denoted mass graves where thousands, including Jossel, his wife, Baschewa, and daughter, Witalia, lay. Nausea rose to my throat, knowing how they were killed. They had no funeral. There is no grave marking their lives. It’s as if they never existed. Jossel’s branch of my family tree was



forever broken. There are no descendants, no survivors bearing witness at Holocaust memorial events. It's inconceivable, what was lost.

I put a stone on one of the mass graves, a Jewish tradition symbolizing the permanence of memory, and was struck by the sense that my identity was shallow compared to Nana's trauma-filled self. After exploring the city that brought her family wealth and ruin, I'd begun to appreciate her resilience, private grief, and weariness at not knowing the fate of those who disappeared. I'd begun to understand her silence.

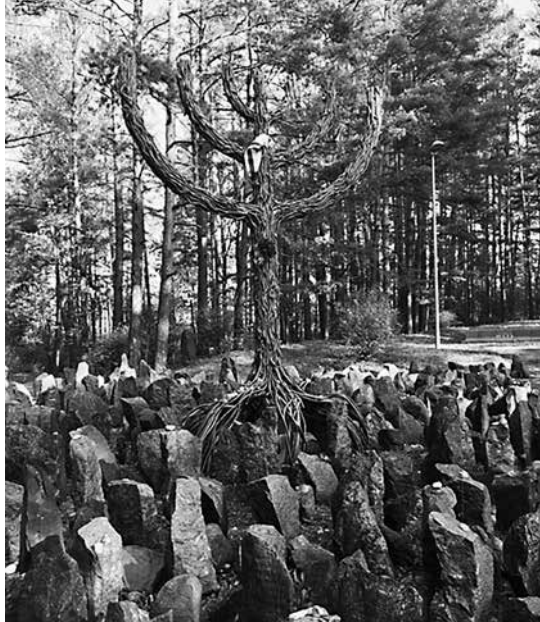
After I returned home, I compared the photos of relatives I'd discovered in the archives with faces I hadn't been able to identify in Nana's photos. One young man had piqued my curiosity for years, as he was in many photos with Nana and the rest of her family. Now, there was something familiar about his face. I rummaged through the archive photos and pulled out Jossel's image. The hairs on the back of my neck rose when I realized the young man standing beside Nana was Jossel, about twenty years prior to the photo on his identity paper. This was a bittersweet moment, knowing he mattered to Nana, knowing his fate, knowing he has no descendants. And it was the reason I chose "Talan" as Miriam's surname for my novel, to make sure the people on this broken branch of my family tree are not forgotten. 



Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Museum



An image of the actual forced march to Rumbula



The memorial at  
Rumbula today  
(courtesy of the  
author)



(Seated, left to right) Mendel Talan, Anna  
Talan, Jossel Talan; (standing) Rachel  
(Shelly) Talan, author's grandmother.



Jews in Latvia (Michelson Family Collection/Museum)



Frida Michelson (Michelson Family Collection/  
Museum)

# Further Reading

## Latvian Holocaust

*The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center* by Andrew Ezergailis

*Extermination of the Jews in Latvia, 1941–1945*, a series of lectures edited by Rabbi Menachem Barkahan

*The Murder of the Jews in Latvia 1941–1945* by Bernhard Press

*Like a Star in the Darkness: Recollections about Janis (Zhan) Lipke* by David Silberman

*Behind the Barbed Wire* by Gwendolyn Chabrier

*I Survived Rumbuli* by Frida Michelson

*Endless Miracles* by Jack Ratz

*Odyssey of a Child Survivor: From Latvia through the Camps to the United States* by George David Schwab

*City of Life, City of Death: Memories of Riga* by Max Michelson

*One Who Came Back: The Diary of a Jewish Survivor* by Josef Katz

*Churbn Lettland: The Destruction of the Jews of Latvia* by Max Kaufmann

*Memoirs* by Elmar Rivosh

*Journey into Terror: Story of the Riga Ghetto* by Gertrude Schneider

## **Life Under Soviet Regime**

*Soviet Milk* by Nora Ikstena

*Young Heroes of the Soviet Union: A Memoir and a Reckoning* by Alex Halberstadt

*A Mountain of Crumbs: A Memoir* by Elena Gorokhova

## **Jewish Memoirs**

*Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover Their Jewish Roots* by Barbara Kessel

*Survivor Café: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory* by Elizabeth Rosner

## **On the Creation of Evil**

*Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* by Richard Rhodes

*East West Street: On the Origins of “Genocide” and “Crimes Against Humanity”*  
by Philippe Sands 