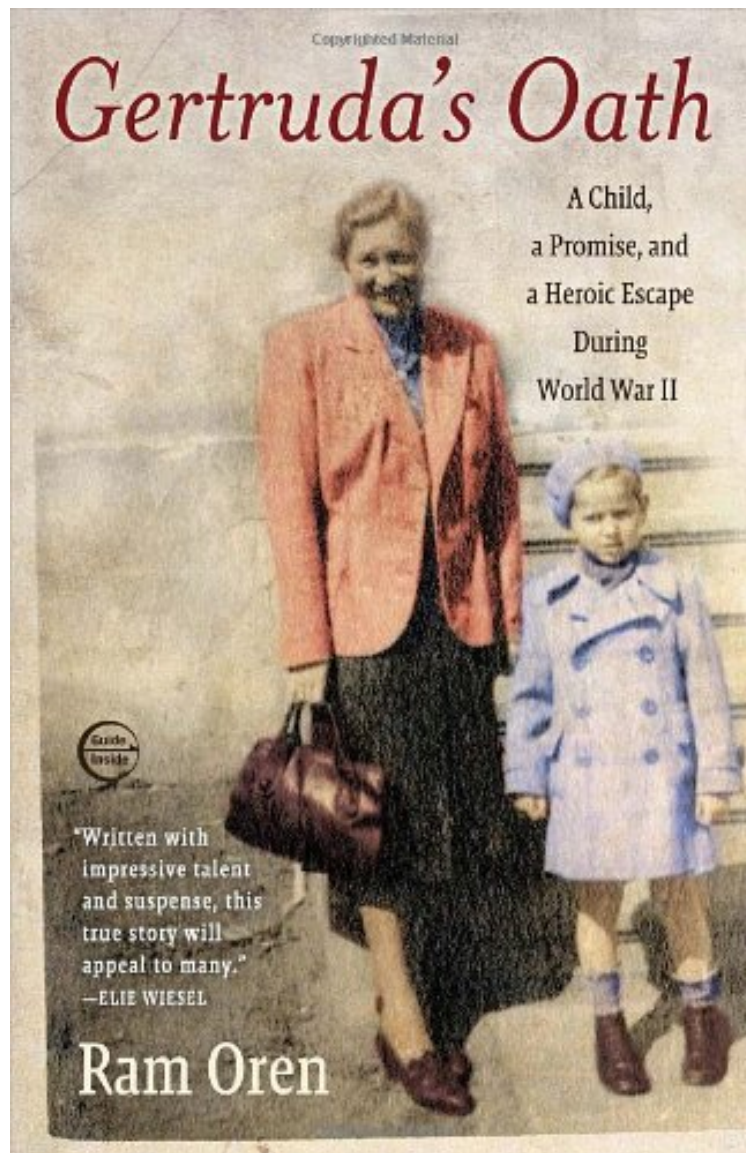


Gertruda's Oath: A Child, a Promise, and a Heroic Escape During World War II

Ram Oren

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Ram Oren : Gertruda's Oath: A Child, a Promise, and a Heroic Escape During World War II before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Gertruda's Oath: A Child, a Promise, and a Heroic Escape During World War II:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. An Interesting True Story By Lynn Ryan-loeb Gertruda's oath is the true story of a heroic escape from the terrors of the WWII, but it is also a story of love and devotion. Gertruda, a Catholic woman, is hired by a wealthy Jewish family as a nanny for their son, Michael, in pre-war Poland. As the war progresses and the Nazis conquer Poland and move from there to Vilna, Lithuania, the family is separated by circumstances and death. Gertruda makes a solemn promise to Michael's mother to watch over him, raise him as her own, and ultimately deliver him to Palestine. It is also the story of Karl Rink, a Catholic German man who marries the love of his life, who happens to be Jewish, and has a daughter with her. Down on his luck and unable to find work, Karl is lured into working for the Nazi party before they show their full colors, and feels unable to leave even after they do. Even after his own wife's mysterious disappearance, he continues to serve in the party and move up through its ranks, but while he stands by and watches, he steadfastly refuses to take part in any of the hostilities towards the Jews. He also very wisely sends his daughter to a kibbutz in Palestine to wait out the war where she'll be safe. Later, he becomes more emboldened and risks his own life helping many to escape detection and even death. It wouldn't be fair to rate the writing style of this book as I would a fiction piece, because true events don't lend themselves to flowery embellishments. They must be told as they happened. If this were a novel, I'd say that Karl Rink's refusal to leave the SS even after his wife disappeared was too naive to be believable, but as they say, truth is stranger than fiction. That said, it was an extremely interesting read, and underlines more than ever the hardships and inhumanity that people endured during the war, even outside of the concentration camps. It is a story of bravery, heroics, and deep commitment. I'm glad that I read it.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A touching miracle of love and devotion By Marylou H. Foley I have worked with Michael for many years in the travel industry - and had heard comments about struggles thru WWII - and about his nanny - but I had never taken time to find the book. This is an amazing story of personal commitments and inner strength as well as intertwining relationships thru a dark period. That Michael could share these experiences so well and today still do so much to help others understand the humanity of people against such hardships, is inspiring. Michael continues to try to help people break down barriers to ethnic and cultural biases which still threaten our world. I admire Gertrude - and others like her - who gave so much to protect the Jews of Europe from the Nazis. And I admire Michael for being a strong leader in cross-cultural tourism to try to educate today's people. This is a MUST read!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Truly Righteous Gentile By Sharon Beverly Remember hearing the lofty notion; a promise is a promise? As Hitler's army advanced through Europe, no Jews were exempt--not even the Stolowitzkys. This extremely wealthy family was no exception. Author Ram Oren's story, Gertruda's Oath: A Child, A Promise, and a Heroic Escape During World War II presents the facts with supposed dialogue of these very real individuals. Obviously no one recorded the conversations but, they aid in the telling of this family's tragic history. Eliminating them would de-personalize the story, rendering it a sterile presentation of facts. For purists, this is non-fiction with fictionalized dialogue. Michael Stolowitzky was barely more than a toddler when separated from his father, who was unable to return to Poland, as Jews were herded out of their homes and into ghettos. It wasn't much later when his mother, on her deathbed, begged Michael's nanny to protect him and to see that he get to Palestine. Gertruda, Michael's Polish Catholic nanny, vowed to his mother that she would do just that. This remarkable woman endured suffering, personal sacrifices, and bitter hardships to keep her oath. To Gertruda, a promise was a promise. While this book was written for adults, it would also be appropriate for students in grades eight and above. It includes portions that reveal man's inhumanity to one another but, does not dwell on gore or excessive violence. Gertruda's story would be a good choice for supplemental literature in a Holocaust history class. There are thousands of books to read about this period of time but, this story is unique and that is what makes it an exceptional choice to read.

Trapped in the horrors of World War II, a woman and a child embark on a journey of survival in this page-turning true story that recalls the power and the poignancy of Schindler's List. Michael Stolowitzky, the only son of a wealthy Jewish family in Poland, was just three years old when war broke out and the family lost everything. His father, desperate to settle his business affairs, travels to France, leaving Michael in the care of his mother and Gertruda Bablinska, a Catholic nanny devoted to the family. When Michael's mother has a stroke, Gertruda promises the dying woman that she will make her way to Palestine and raise him as her own son. Written with the invaluable assistance of Michael, now seventy-two and living in New York City, GERTRUDAS OATH re-creates Michael and Gertruda's amazing journey. Gripping vignettes bring to life the people who helped ensure their survival, including SS officer Karl Rink, who made it his mission to save Jews after his own Jewish wife was murdered; Rink's daughter, Helga, who escaped to a kibbutz, where she lived until her recent death; and the Jewish physician Dr. Berman, who aided Michael and Gertruda through the worst of times. GERTRUDAS OATH is a story of extraordinary courage and moral strength in the face of horrific events. Like Schindler's List, it transcends history and religion to reveal the compassion and hope that miraculously thrives in a world immersed in war without end. From the Hardcover edition.

"Written with impressive talent and suspense, this true story will appeal to many." --Elie Wiesel From the Hardcover edition. About the Author RAM OREN is known as the John Grisham of Israel. Formerly a lawyer and journalist, he

founded the Keshet publishing company and has written more than sixteen runaway bestsellers. GERTRUDAS OATH is Orens first English translation sold in the United States. He lives in Israel. From the Hardcover edition. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The smoke clouds of war slowly began to dissipate and the spring sun broke through, caressing the ruins that buried tens of thousands of human beings, flooding the devastated streets, and scattering sparks of light on the waters of the broad Vistula River that slowly bubbled up to wash away memories of dread and death. On the hill, above scarred Warsaw, stood the ancient and magnificent mansion of the Stolowitzky family, which had miraculously survived the war intact. Four floors of hewn stone, carved edges, statues of ancient warriors on the roof ledge, impressive mosaic windows and painted wooden ceilings. Only two of the original inhabitants of the mansion were still alive, a boy and his nanny, and they were on their way to another country, far away. In their new home, between peeling walls, rust spots spreading in the bathtub, and cheap furniture that mansion with all its splendor and charm seemed like a daydream, the product of an overactive imagination. The boy and his nanny, who adopted him as a son, lived in a small apartment in one of the alleys of Jaffa, in a tenement. From the window, they saw only dreary buildings, children playing in an abandoned yard, and women returning home from the market, carrying heavy shopping bags. Most of the day, the apartment was invaded by the noise of passing cars and the stench of garbage. In winter the smell of mildew permeated the rooms, and in summer the walls trapped a blazing stifling air. In the mansion on the hill, everything, of course, was different. The big building with its spacious wings, its gardens, was properly heated in winter and properly cooled in summer. A pure breeze from the river blew in the windows and servants tiptoed about to avoid any undue noise. The closets were stuffed with expensive clothes. Luxurious meals were served in rare china dishes. The old heavy cutlery, polished clean, was gold, and the wine was poured into fine crystal glasses. Michael Stolowitzky and his adoptive mother, Gertruda, had survived the war and now both of them were struggling to survive in the new land. He attended school. She was past her prime by now. Every morning she went to work as a cleaning woman in the northern part of the city and return in the evening, her joints aching and her eyes weary. Michael would greet her with a kiss, take off her shoes, cook her meager supper, and make her bed. He knew she was working too hard only to have enough money to send him to school and provide for all his needs. He swore that someday he would pay her back generously for everything she had done for him for saving him from death, for devoting her life to him, for making sure he didn't lack anything. Poverty and shortages weren't strangers to Michael Stolowitzky. He had experienced them throughout his journey of survival in the world war, but he also saw light at the end of the tunnel, the end of penury, the end of the daily struggle for existence. He believed that someday, in the not-too-distant future, everything would change and things would go back to the way they were, to the days when they knew wealth and comfort, days far from suffering and torments. His rosy future was within reach, clear and concrete. Only a four-hour flight from Israel lay a blocked treasure, millions of dollars and gold bars deposited in Swiss banks by his late father, Jacob, the Jew who was called the Rockefeller of Poland. Michael was his only heir. The legacy, a small recompense for the suffering and loss of the war, filled Michael's thoughts and assumed a central place in his fantasies. When he was recruited into the Israeli army, he waited impatiently for his military service to end so he could work on getting the money. He was sent to a battle unit and was wounded in the leg by a bullet from a Syrian sniper during a firefight in the northern Kinneret. Groaning in pain, he was taken to the operating room in the hospital in Poriya. When he opened his eyes after the anesthesia wore off, he saw his adoptive mother weeping. He held his weak hand to her and she clutched it to her bosom. "Don't cry," he said. "I promise you that everything will be fine." When he was discharged from the army, he returned to their small apartment and the very next day he went to look for work. No work was beneath him. He was a messenger on a scooter, running around all hours of the day among customers in Tel Aviv; he worked as a waiter in the evening; and he was a guard at a textile factory at night. It was important for him to save up money. Two years later, in June 1958, he took all his savings and the surviving family documents and bought an airplane ticket to Zurich. "How long will you be there?" asked Gertruda anxiously. "Two or three days. I don't think I'll have to stay any longer than that. And if they won't give you the money?" He smiled at her confidently. "Why won't they? You'll see, I'll come back with my inheritance and our whole life will change," he promised. She went to the airport with him and kissed him good-bye. "Take care of yourself," she said. "And take care of the money. Don't let them steal it from you." "Don't worry," he replied. He got on the plane, excited and anxious. In Zurich he rented a small room and couldn't fall asleep all night. He had only the name of one bank among those where his father had deposited his funds, and the next day he went there. He pictured the bank clerks bringing him heaps of money and his adoptive mother welcoming him when he got back to Israel, rich and carefree. He knew exactly what he would say to her: "We're rich, Gertruda. Now we'll move to our own house, we'll buy whatever we want, and most importantly you won't ever have to work again." And she would wind her arms around him, and would say to him, as always: "My dear, I don't need money. I only need you to be with me."

Two Weddings

1. Shrouded in a uniform decorated with the military medals inherited from his forefathers, the marquis Stefan Roswadowsky bit his lips in rage and drained another glass of brandy. He was a potbellied, ruddy-faced man, whose seventy-two years had passed in a nonstop journey of pleasures. Under his broad jaw, like a plump dumpling, hung a pink double chin, which grew and thickened as the rest of his body swelled with his gluttony. From the yard came the rustle of carriage wheels entering the gate, and the taste of nausea, as the taste of impending disaster,

rose in the marquiss throat. What wouldnt he give to prevent this? Gloomy leaden clouds, like his mood, hung over Warsaw. A thin silent rain fell on the flower gardens of the mansion at Ujazdowska Avenue 9 when the carriage stopped and the driver jumped from his seat and opened the door. A man of about forty, lean and tall, in an elegant wool coat, got out of the carriage. His face was firm and his step supple and confident. The driver opened an umbrella over his head and walked him to the door. From the corner of his window, the marquis watched them in despair. In a few minutes, he knew, the door would be opened and the honor that had been the glory for generations, passing as a legacy from father to son, his family honor and his own honor, would be trampled and desecrated by a coarse foot. A servant with a frozen face, wearing a black frock, led the guest in and took his coat. Will the gentleman please wait until I announce his arrival, he said submissively. The servant silently entered Roswadowskys office and bowed deeply. Marquis, he said, Mr. Stolowitzky has arrived. The marquis hesitated. It wont hurt the Jew to wait a little, he grumbled. He needed more time to prepare for the meeting. With a sigh, the marquis sank deeper into his armchair. His forefathers looked on from the velvet-covered walls, decorated army officers, bearing swords, astride noble steeds with gleaming hides. Next to them, in gold frames, were the portraits of their beautiful plump wives in splendid gowns, wearing gold jewelry and diamonds. Persian rugs, woven by experienced artists who toiled for days in the cellars of Isfahan and Shiraz, were spread from wall to wall, and beautiful furniture that could adorn royal palaces stood in various corners of the spacious office. The elderly marquis stirred uneasily in his chair, nervously pulled his well-tended mustache, and labored to hide his revulsion at his meeting with the man waiting in the next room. Never had it occurred to him that he of all people, offspring of a noble Polish family, only ruler of the fate of hundreds of tenant farmers, owner of lands and precious art, would wind up in such an embarrassing and offensive situation that would roil his peace of mind and stir melancholy thoughts about the order of the world that had beenturned on its head. In the family of Marquis Roswadowsky, honor and position were supreme values, the core of life. Roswadowsky was sure of what his ancestors would have done if a Jew had dared to set foot in their house. None of them would have hesitated to throw him out and might even have thrashed the man who had the nerve to stand up to them and take advantage of their distress. Never had members of the Roswadowsky family met Jews like the man now waiting in the vestibule. In Baranowicz in eastern Poland, where the family owned many estates, the Jews would be filled with dread and awe whenever the marquiss carriage passed by. They all knelt down and didnt dare raise their eyes to him. Where did those days vanish to, how did his authority fade? Could the floor of his splendid house in Warsaw, one of the many glorious family houses scattered throughout Poland, be defiled by the shoes of one of the Jews of his city, who came not to plead for his favors, but because the marquis himself summoned him urgently to help get him out of trouble? Moshe Stolowitzky was the sort of Jew Marquis Roswadowsky didnt know. He was extraordinarily rich, very powerful and influential; not many men in Poland could boast of his great wealth. He had inherited a great deal of his wealth from his father, a resourceful businessman who had made the bulk of his money before World War I, producing and selling sleepers for railroad tracks, polishing millstones for flour mills, operating a tavern in Baranowicz where he lived, and trading successfully in real estate. When Baranowicz passed from the Poles to the Russians during World War I, many of its residents fled to Warsaw. Moshe Stolowitzky managed to save most of his fortune. Marquis Roswadowsky wasnt so lucky. In the dead of night, he escaped from the city, leaving behind quite a bit of his wealth, and found shelter in his magnificent house in Warsaw. But his money soon ran out, his debts mounted, and he had to settle them without delay. The only way to satisfy his creditors was hard and painful he had to sell houses and plots of land. Buyers came and went. Some wanted to take advantage of the marquiss difficulty and offered unreasonably low prices. Others offered a little more but not enough. Until Moshe Stolowitzky came and finally made a decent offer. The servant returned to the marquis a few minutes later. Mr. Stolowitzkys in a hurry, he said. He claims he cant wait. The marquis grumbled aloud. Hes got some nerve, that Jew, he growled. The servant was silent, waiting for instructions. Fine, show him in. The marquis swallowed his revulsion. A few minutes later, Moshe Stolowitzky stood in the doorway, looking directly at the marquis. He came to do business from a position of strength. He had no time for small talk or pleasant manners. Reluctantly, the marquis entered into a business discussion with his guest, who conducted hard and uncompromising negotiations. In the next hour, Roswadowsky sold him buildings and lots in Baranowicz and also transferred to him ownership of the house in Warsaw. As always, when he was in desperate need of money, it outweighed honor, position, and every other consideration. With a heavy heart, the Polish marquis swallowed his offense and signed the bill of sale. It was very hard for him to part from his property, particularly the beautiful house in Warsaw. It was a big mansion, furnished with ostentatious splendor, full of rare art, his pride and joy. In that house, Roswadowsky employed an army of servants, and there was a pantry stuffed with delicacies and a cellar of fine wines. At stately dinners, he entertained the Polish elite and wealthy businessmen, and it was painful to give all that up to prevent a scandalous bankruptcy. His young mistress, a black-haired beauty, daughter of one of his tenant farmers, who lived in the mansion in Warsaw and made his visits there even more pleasurable, wept bitter tears when she had to pack her things and return home. The marquis stood helplessly at her side. What will happen to me now? What will happen to us? she sobbed. The marquis stroked her head and a tear gleamed in the corner of his eye. He had no answer. Moshe Stolowitzky left the marquiss house with the feeling that he had made an excellent deal. He was known as an experienced merchant. His crafty mind and audacity paved his way

to the offices of senior government officials, and he soon became the contractor for railroad tracks. The hundreds of workers he hired laid railroad tracks throughout Poland and then stretched rails for trains over Russia as well. Anti-Semitic manifestations didn't bother him because Jew haters didn't dare touch him. He was a welcome guest in the homes of heads of state and they were glad to be entertained in his own house. The marquis requested a week to move out of his house in Warsaw. After the last moving van left the place for good, Moshe Stolowitzky moved in there with his wife, Hava, and their little son, Jacob.² Moshe Stolowitzky wasn't only a rich man, he was also a proud Jew. He regularly read the Yiddish newspaper, *Dos Yidishe Tageblat*, he and his wife attended the Jewish theater, *Wikt*, established by the actor Zigmund Turkow, invested in the Yiddish film *Yiddl mitn fiddl*, which became a hit among Jews throughout the world, contributed to yeshivas and Jewish schools, and supported Jewish writers and poets. Every Friday baskets of Sabbath food were sent on his behalf to the poor of the city, and in his mansion, as was customary among major Jewish philanthropists, a box of cash was set up for grants to the needy who knocked on his door every single day. His only son, Jacob, was destined to follow in his footsteps. Moshe hired teachers who taught him Hebrew and general sciences, bought him a subscription to the Hebrew children's newspaper *Olam Katan* (Small World), and was happy when the boy read stories about Hasidic Jews and the holy places in the Land of Israel. One stormy winter night, Moshe Stolowitzky sat in the first row in the *Novoschi* auditorium where about three thousand Jews gathered to listen to a talk by Zeev Jabotinsky. The short, bespectacled Zionist leader with a serious face called on them to ascend to the Land of Israel before Europe tossed them out. Moshe Stolowitzky admired Jabotinsky and read his writings devotedly, but he thought Jabotinsky exaggerated when he talked about the danger lurking for the Jews of Europe. Stolowitzky and his family, like most of their friends, saw Poland as their homeland and were grateful for the wealth they had amassed there. They felt good and comfortable and naturally it didn't occur to them that bad times were in store for them as Jabotinsky's gloomy predictions had foretold. Before long reality proved to Moshe Stolowitzky that he was living in a fool's paradise. One Friday evening, the Jewish millionaire was relaxing in his velvet easy chair, facing the Ark of the Covenant in the *Tlomackie* Synagogue, the biggest and oldest synagogue of Warsaw. For a long time he listened with pleasure to the chanting of the well-known cantor Moshe Koussevitzky, and when it was over, he left the synagogue with a group of worshippers. His carriage was standing nearby and at home his family and a traditional Sabbath meal awaited him. Stolowitzky didn't get far. A group of anti-Semitic youths surrounded the group of worshippers, threw rocks, and shouted curses at them. The Jews stopped in their tracks, stunned. Most of them had witnessed anti-Semitic persecutions in the past, but never ones so brutal. Only when the attackers tried to snatch their prayer shawl bags did the victims recover and assault the youths. A brawl developed, lasting until the police came and restored order. In his private carriage, Moshe Stolowitzky, bruised, his clothes torn, returned home. The event itself didn't worry him too much. He preferred to believe that isolated anti-Semitic incidents didn't indicate a dangerous trend. He was concerned mainly that his wife would take things more seriously than he, and so he told her only that he had fallen and bruised himself on his way out of the synagogue. She called a doctor, who bandaged him and ordered him to stay in bed for two days. When he returned to the synagogue a week later, the rabbi mounted the pulpit when prayers had ended. His arm had been broken in the attack and was in a sling. I have decided to leave Poland and move with my family to Jerusalem, he called out in a clear and emotional voice. Poland is a trap for every Jew. Take your things and leave here before it's too late. Moshe Stolowitzky wished the rabbi good luck and returned home. He told his wife about the panic that had gripped the rabbi and about his decision to leave Poland. Maybe he's right, she responded pensively. Nonsense! He raised his voice. There's no reason to panic.³ June 28, 1924, was a hot, sunny day, and hundreds of Warsaw residents were strolling on the paths through the green lawns along the river. That afternoon, Jacob Stolowitzky introduced his parents to his fiancée, Lydia. He was twenty-two years old, and his bride-to-be was twenty, a handsome girl, thin, the daughter of a Jewish army officer from Krakow, studying political science in Warsaw. They had met at a party at the home of mutual friends and it was love at first sight. Hava and Moshe Stolowitzky greeted their son's fiancée in the ballroom of their mansion and spoke with Lydia about her family and her studies. They liked her very much and didn't care that her parents weren't as rich as they were. She was Jewish and their son loved her and that was what mattered. At the festive dinner they made for Lydia and her parents, the guests toasted the young couple and they set the date for their wedding. Three months later, the wedding ceremony gave the elite of Warsaw an unforgettable experience. Members of the government, senior officials, tycoons, artists, and intellectuals poured into the mansion and blessed the happy family. Dozens of servants passed among the guests offering abundant delicacies and champagne and an orchestra played until the last guest withdrew. The young couple left for a honeymoon in Switzerland and when they returned to Warsaw, a surprise awaited them. Moshe Stolowitzky suggested they live in his splendid mansion and set a big wing aside for them. Jacob and Lydia settled down comfortably in the spacious house. Lydia ordered furniture from Italy and supervised the crew of servants of their wing: a housekeeper, a cook, two cleaning women, and a chauffeur. Jacob was integrated into the management of his father's business, which flourished more than ever. He traveled a great deal throughout Europe, signing contracts with various states and amassing a great deal of wealth. The two of them badly wanted a child. Lydia dreamed he would grow up to be a doctor. His father wanted his son to be a businessman like him, who would someday inherit the family empire. Although they couldn't agree, both of them had every reason to believe that their

child's future, like their own, would be a bed of roses. They were wrong.⁴ Karl Rink expected much more from life than he got. He was a twenty-four-year-old bachelor with blue eyes and short hair who worked as a junior accountant for the chemical firm A. G. Farben in Berlin. His salary was barely enough to pay his rent and buy food. His office was small and dark and his work was boring. He dreamed of a different career, more lucrative and more interesting, which would guarantee him real success. Now and then he even went looking for such a job, but the only work he was offered was in accounting and that wasn't enough. He learned very quickly that for every good job that opened up, many people, more talented than he, jumped on the opportunity. Unfortunately for him, the chances of finding another position were growing dim. The only refuge from his tedious routine was sport. Bicycle racing was the only area where Rink showed real talent. He belonged to the company sport club, trained on the weekend in all weather, riding on mountain paths, and he won trophies that were displayed on a shelf in his small apartment. Above them, in a glass frame, was a local newspaper article reporting on his victory in the district competition of bicycle riders. On September 12, 1924, he hurried to finish work earlier than usual and returned to his one-room apartment in a dreary working-class neighborhood in west Berlin. He put on a dark suit and a tie, picked up his parents at their house in a distant suburb, and they all took a trolley to city hall, where Mira, her parents, and a handful of friends were waiting for him. Mira, a plump, fair-skinned girl of twenty-one, was starting out as a clerk in the Department of Wills in the Ministry of Justice. She wore a white dress and stood arm in arm with Karl before the municipal clerk who performed their marriage. Karl was a Christian and Mira a Jew, but their differences didn't diminish their love. Karl's father was a truck driver and his mother was a housewife. They seldom went to church and loved Mira like a daughter. Mira's parents owned a grocery store and were observant Jews. Even though mixed marriages were common in Berlin, Mira's parents strongly objected to her marriage with a Christian. Karl tried at length to convince them, and Mira also made considerable efforts to persuade her parents to let her marry her fiancé. In the end, they were forced to agree. The young couple received a few wedding gifts, mainly glass and china dishes. Karl's colleagues collected a small sum and his manager gave him a week's salary as a present. The couple's parents threw a modest reception and bought them a new double bed. Happy and in love, Mira and Karl went on a two-day honeymoon to a small town in the Black Forest. They rode bikes on winding paths among the trees, ate blutwurst, and danced to the music of a rustic orchestra in the local beer cellar until the wee hours of the morning. When they returned to Berlin, they settled in Karl's apartment, and at the end of the year they had a daughter, Helga. They brought her home from the hospital, put her in a cradle, and looked at her with loving eyes. After everything they had been through, their life was calm. They loved each other and their baby daughter and pushed her stroller in the green parks on warm weekends. Mira was promoted in the Ministry of Justice, and Karl believed he would finally find the work he dreamed of. They both faced the future with confidence. They believed they would have prosperity and professional satisfaction, pure bliss. They were wrong. From the Hardcover edition.