

IRENA'S GIFT

A former marketing executive, Karen Kirsten is an Australian–American writer, genocide educator and refugee advocate. Raised in Australia by a Holocaust survivor mother and grandparents who silenced her questions about extermination camps, Karen lectures around the world on hatred and reconciliation. Her work has been published by Narratively and nominated for Best American Essays, Salon.com, *The Week*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *WIEŻ* in Poland and Boston's National Public Radio station. Karen has lived in five countries across three continents and now calls Massachusetts, USA, home.

‘Deeply moving and beautifully written, *Irena’s Gift* is a powerful unravelling of mysteries and memory. The journey of reconstruction and reconnection brilliantly evokes a lost era full of pain and love, as well as laying out the intricacies of intergenerational trauma. In addition to its value as Holocaust history, *Irena’s Gift* deserves to become a classic of the memoir genre.’ Lucy Adlington, author of *The Dressmakers of Auschwitz: The true story of the women who sewed to survive*

‘In *Irena’s Gift*, Karen Kirsten proves yet again that family stories and densities of human affection, when they ran up against that calamity we call the Holocaust, are as individual as fingerprints. News withheld, and what is passed on in doubt and affections, is always dramatic if it can be creatively depicted, and Karen Kirsten more than fulfils that task of narration and enchantment here.’ Tom Keneally

‘An extraordinary story of how secrets and lies can tear a family apart.’ Maya Lee, author of *The Nazis Knew My Name*

‘Since I first learned about my Opa escaping the Nazis in occupied Holland, I have been taken with the heroic stories of everyday people during World War II. With author and refugee advocate Karen Kirsten, I find a kindred spirit. In *Irena’s Gift*, Kirsten brings to life the true and remarkable story of her family, including her mother and her grandmother, who like my Opa sabotaged munitions at an armaments factory. This is a story of extraordinary women, survival and sacrifice. A must read.’ Tara Moss, human rights and disability advocate, and author of *The War Widow* and *The Ghosts of Paris*

‘As Karen Kirsten sets out to solve the mystery of her mother’s past, she takes us on a very personal journey of discovery. Skillfully, she unearths a thrilling story of war and survival against all odds. A keen researcher and sleuth, Karen uncovers a truth both astonishing and heartbreaking. *Irena’s Gift* is a beautiful, insightful, heartfelt and nuanced book. Masterfully crafted, it is both history and a memoir, but also so much more. Essential reading for anyone interested in World War II, trauma or family histories, this is one of the best second-generation Holocaust books ever published. I loved it and couldn’t put it down.’ Ariana Neumann, author of *When Time Stopped*

‘An epic story and an epic search for the truth that is beautifully written and meticulously weaved together, in a page-turning read I couldn’t put down. Karen Kirsten has captured her remarkable odyssey to place the final pieces of her family jigsaw in place, with moving and at times gut-wrenching detail. Alicja’s poignant words, “You think someone will want to know all of this?” will ring in your ears with every twist and turn that Kirsten’s journey takes to find the truth of who her family really are and how they were saved. Compulsive enough to read in a single sitting, this is ultimately a story of love, healing, hope and humanity that will tug at your heartstrings. *Irena’s Gift* offers a prescient reminder, as Alicja says, that “We should never forget what happened”.’ Sue Smethurst, author of *The Freedom Circus*

**AN EPIC
WORLD WAR II
MEMOIR OF SISTERS,
SECRETS AND SURVIVAL**

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GIFT**

Karen Kirsten

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For my nieces: Brooke, Jade and Emma.

And for Joasia, your memory will always be a blessing.

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face . . . You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

Eleanor Roosevelt

Author's Note

While I am not a historian, I have attempted to corroborate my family's recorded memories and those they recounted to me with historians, with deeply researched historical accounts, extensive research in archives, documentation, artifacts and diaries. In addition, letters, recorded testimonies, photographs and film footage helped me reconstruct historical scenes. Undoubtedly, there are mistakes. They are mine.

Because we all remember events differently, this story changes as I tell it, depending on whose point of view I am examining. When trying to inhabit a history and experiences not my own, I investigated gaps in my mother's and grandparents' accounts and any disparate information to determine if and how their

stories connected. It was like poking an earring into my earlobe, trying to find the hole.

Besides where I have flagged details and dialogue for the reader as pictured or imagined, dialogue is as recorded by me or others, the USC Shoah Foundation or from published works. Occasionally, I have simplified dialect for clarity and combined descriptions.

PART ONE

I

Magpies warbled in the gum trees as we walked up the path to Nana Alicja's ground-floor flat in the upper-crust Melbourne suburb of Toorak. I pushed the buzzer, then heard Nana's poodle barking and sniffing beneath the door, the *donk, schlep, schlep* of Nana shuffling down the hallway with her walking stick. As the door slowly opened, I sensed my mother beside me bracing herself.

'What you have there?' My grandmother raised her head of perfectly coiffed, auburn-dyed hair as far as her bowed shoulders would allow. She smiled at me warmly, but barely acknowledged Mum.

I levered open a box containing cakes we had selected from Nana's favourite patisserie: a hazelnut meringue gateau for Nana,

mille-feuille filled with crème patissière for Mum and me, and strawberry tarts for us all. Nana inhaled the rich vanilla scent. ‘Mmmm!’ she said, grinning. She brushed off my mother, who was trying in vain to peck her on the cheek, and made her way back down the oil-painting-lined hallway to the galley kitchen that smelled of beef fat and carrot. Nana’s part-time Polish caregiver had made a stew.

I followed Nana and arranged the cakes on a platter while watching Mum in the lounge room trying to calm the dog. As Nana reached into a cupboard for her gold-rimmed china, light streamed in from the courtyard and caught the blue-green numbers tattooed on her forearm: 2 4 5 3 3 5, though they’d softened over time, morphing into her skin folds and sunspots.

I was four or five when I first asked about the numbers. I was sitting with my younger sister, watching Nana Alicja chop beetroot and onions for a soup. Nana’s knife hit the cutting board: *rap, rap, rap*. She tilted her head high to prevent the onion fumes stinging her eyes.

‘It’s our phone number,’ Nana said. ‘So I won’t forget it.’

‘Who put it there?’

Papa Mietek poked his nose over his newspaper.

‘Oh, just some man.’ Nana scraped the onions into a pot. She put down the knife and passed us a tin filled with European chocolate biscuits.

I often suspected Nana Alicja wasn’t telling the truth. On her birthday we’d stand around her Edwardian mahogany dining-room table delicately forking her freshly baked strawberry and meringue cake from her best china. I’d ask how old she was. ‘About fifty,’ she’d reply nonchalantly. Every year.

Papa Mietek would pour champagne into flutes and pass them around to the adults, then to my sister and me, with just enough for a toast. 'Sto lat! Sto lat! Niech żyje, żyje nam!' — *One hundred years! May she live one hundred years!* we'd sing in Polish.

We were never sure of Nana's age, or what she looked like when she was young; there were few photos of her. It didn't occur to me back then to read anything into the absence, and, besides, Nana treated me like a princess. She'd bake me cakes, shop with me at Polish and Hungarian food stores like The Chocolate Box in Camberwell, dress up to take me to the ballet and Chopin concerts, and collect seashells with me on the beach with her poodles. I didn't want to question her stories. I was too busy basking in her love.

Now Nana's poodle was licking my leg in her kitchen.

'I like zis hair.' Nana nodded at my new bob. She always took an interest in my appearance and made approving comments of the sort she rarely made of my mother. 'Put cakes in lounge room,' Nana commanded.

I joined Mum and placed the platter, cups and silver cake forks on the coffee table, then poured Nana a strong cup of French press as she slowly lowered herself into a recliner. Mum moved the platter to make room for Nana's cup. My body tensed — I knew what was coming.

'Don't touch zat!' Nana barked as my mother retracted her hand.

Nana often lost her temper at Mum for no reason, criticising her and snapping. My father had nicknamed Nana 'The Dragon'. I would stay silent during these outbursts. Perhaps I held my tongue because Nana's behaviour scared me, or because I knew

by then that she had suffered unspeakable horrors in Auschwitz. Maybe, too, I felt flattered she spoiled me. Perhaps it was easier for me to justify because I was never on the receiving end of her fury.

To this day, I still don't understand why Mum bothered to visit Nana Alicja every week only to be humiliated. Now I feel ashamed I didn't speak up for her. Once, after witnessing Nana's spitting insults, my sister-in-law asked Mum why she put up with the treatment.

'Because she is my mother,' Mum said pragmatically.

But the problem – as we knew by then – was this was only partially true.

2

The thing about secrets is they are like a loose thread in a jumper; if you pull hard enough, the whole garment falls apart. My mother tells me that growing up, she'd long suspected she didn't belong to her parents. Alicja's hair was auburn and Mietek's light brown, but Mum's was jet-black. Her chocolate-coloured eyes were not hazel, like theirs; her stubby nose contrasted with Alicja's slim one. Alicja and Mietek were tall and lanky, whereas Mum was a curvaceous five-foot-two. 'Short, dark and wide,' she would say.

It went beyond appearance, though. My mother never felt loved by her parents. At times, she believed they hated her. Sometimes they'd hit her if she persisted with her circuitous

questions about the war or the black-and-white photos from Poland on Alicja's dresser. Yet they seemed to tolerate questions from her younger brother, Tony. Once, she says, the bruises from Mietek's wallopings were so severe she stole money from Alicja's purse to purchase bandages so as not to attract awkward questions at school. On her way home at the end of the day, she hid the bandages in her bag so Alicja and Mietek wouldn't notice she'd covered her arms.

Then there were the strange nightmares Mum had as a child: men in uniform shooting guns, dark rooms where one needed to stay quiet. Alicja and Mietek dismissed these and showed no interest in her dreams or memories: they wanted her to simply keep quiet and behave. Mum begged Alicja and Mietek to explain the scary men, but they tried to convince her to admit she'd imagined them, just like the world she'd often conjure at night in bed before trying to sleep, where her 'special' friends would hug her and listen to her secrets. 'They said my imaginary life was lies,' Mum tells me now.

As a teenager, Alicja and Mietek also screened her dates. They mandated Jewish boys from well-to-do immigrant families which Mum found strange, as the parents of her Aussie friends didn't voice such concerns. It felt overbearing and protective; a form of control, not love.¹ They seemed to care little about her hopes for the future, yet it was deeply important to them that, instead of the Aussie Goyish men she kissed or the biker gang she hung out with, she should date only Jewish men.

My mother believed she'd failed to live up to her refugee parents' lofty ambitions. Mietek had wanted her to pursue law or engineering, insisting she learn Latin, French and maths.

After my mother failed maths, she decided she wanted to teach children art and history. When she announced at eighteen she was enrolling at Gippsland Teachers' College – which did not require a bachelor's degree, but did require, as she'd intended, that she live on campus a few hours' drive away – her parents threw their hands in the air, yelled and called her ungrateful. 'You'd think I'd started a war,' Mum says.

By contrast, Mum's brother, Tony – an upbeat and relaxed child – received warmth and adulation. When Tony graduated from medical school, they presented him with a car, a flashy white MG convertible. When Mum graduated from teachers' college, they gave her a pen.

A year after college, my mother left home for good to marry my Australian-born father, whose Swiss immigrant parents were neither well-to-do nor Jewish. Alicja's best friend had introduced them. 'She thought he was Jewish because of his big nose!' Mum later told me, chuckling.

My handsome father was a sales executive who'd worked in Europe for a global chemical company. Alicja's friend thought Alicja and Mietek might approve of my father's rising trajectory.

After my parents married, it was my father who showed my mother how to cook basic meals. Alicja baked babkas and stewed goulashes, yet she'd taught Mum nothing about taking care of a household, about sexual matters or raising children. Maybe Alicja's memories of her own mother were too painful to recall. Maybe the war had eradicated her ability to bond. Regardless, everything my mother knew about parenting she learned herself. When her first-born baby wailed, my mother mostly didn't pick me up. Later, she armed herself with Dr Spock's *The*

Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care and fed her babies when they cried, instead of adhering to a strict schedule. She wanted her four children to feel secure. She wanted to create a household full of warmth and love, one that was nurturing. Her own dysfunctional home haunted her. She'd never leave me home alone with a crying sibling, as Alicja had done, while she and Mietek jitterbugged across nightclub dance floors. This was how most weekends went: Mum listening to her baby brother wailing through her bedroom wall.

When it was her turn to be a mother, Mum attended meetings at the Nursing Mothers' Association. A gregarious, practical woman, she made quick friends with fellow young mums. They taught her how to soothe a colicky baby, treat nappy rash, bake moist cakes – and how to welcome her husband home after a hard day at the office with fresh eyeliner, lipstick and a baby-spit-free miniskirt.

I was nine and a half and at school the day my mother heard a car turn off the dirt road where we lived, in Warranwood, about thirty minutes' drive from Nana Alicja's. Mum always complained about the dust from that road. Whenever a car passed by, a sandy cloud rose over our clay-tile-roofed homestead. It was worse in summer, when it rarely rained and the paddocks behind the house were brown and bare and our cows wandered further to find food. On hot days like that February summer morning, my mother would close windows and draw curtains to keep the house cool, yet the dust still crept in. She would wipe away the layer that powdered the furniture and her neatly arranged knick-knacks.

That particular day, she glanced out the kitchen window and saw the postman. He handed her a thick, heavy envelope pasted with Canadian stamps. She placed the letter on the kitchen bench. She fixed herself a cup of tea. She poured coffee for my father, who was home preparing for a business trip.

Because my mother never started the day without make-up, fragrance, a necklace and matching earrings, she carried the coffee to my father in his study smelling of Chanel No. 5, an apron tied round her waist. She then returned to her cup in the kitchen, and the envelope. The address indicated a Canadian business had sent the letter: Zdzisław Przygoda and Associates.

My thirty-two-year-old mother knew no-one in Canada. She sliced a knife along the top of the envelope and removed a hefty mass of ivory paper – pages and pages. The letter was penned in curved, blue script.

My dearest Joasia,

You must excuse me to call you like this, but I have been silent for so many years, now I use the name as I hold it in my memory . . .

My mother frowned. She knelt to pick up a brown leather folder that had slipped from the envelope. Worn and dog-eared, it contained photos. They were familiar; she had seen them on Alicja's dresser. The first was a picture of herself at around fifteen months old with jet-black hair, tucked into a pram on gigantic wheels, bundled up in a thick woollen coat, hands encased in white knitted mittens. The second photo showed Alicja's sister, Irena, who had died in the war. This was Mum's aunt, dressed in a long evening dress and jacket, clutching an elegant white purse.

Mum stared at Irena's black, wavy hair and her deep-set, dark eyes. She read more of the letter, her own eyes darting back and forth between the photograph and the words. Then something clicked into place.

Hearing my mother shriek, my father dashed into the kitchen. He presumed Mum had cut herself with a knife. Instead, he found her waving a letter. He led her to a chair and told her to sit. 'Read it!' he encouraged.

'I survived the war only because the thought about you gave me the necessary strength . . .' my mother began tentatively. As she read the letter aloud, faces and memories from her childhood in postwar Germany flashed inside her head. She remembered a two-storey villa in the town of Dachau, where she'd lived with Alicja and Mietek and other refugee families.

Your photograph and your mother Irena's photograph were with me all the time. I smuggled these photos through all the camps, even standing naked in Dachau, I hid your picture under my foot . . . I did everything possible to save you and your mother. The Germans killed her – you are the only person I love now and I did love you all the war years and after the war and up till today.

Mum clutched the photograph of Irena to her chest. 'This is my mother,' she said. 'This is my mother.'

My mother kept this letter hidden from me for years. One would think that having been left in the dark, she would be the last person to want to replicate what had been inflicted on her.

But then, much of what transpired makes little sense to me. For example, I don't understand why Alicja would adopt my mother only to treat her so caustically. Alicja nursed her back to health and brought her to Australia where she could have a future. Yet she withheld affection. Why would she treat a child so poorly that her future didn't feel bright at all?

Most families harbour secrets, ordeals we'd rather forget, myths we invent to protect ourselves and those we love. The question is, how to keep secrets and preserve stories of our pasts without lying? And if we don't unravel the lies, how will we ever know the truth?

I may as well begin with the lies. The day after the letter arrived, my father phoned Alicja and invited her to lunch at Café Balzac in East Melbourne. The packed restaurant was austere, well suited to Alicja's aura of superiority, but not the kind of place one would want to make a fuss. My father topped up Alicja's wine glass. 'I need to tell you something,' he said. 'Joasia received a letter. From Canada.'

Alicja stared at my father, who calmly described the contents of the letter. Her mouth fell open. 'Zdzisław promised he'd never tell!' she shouted, as men in suits and ties turned to stare at her from across the dining room.

The next day while I was at school, Alicja growled through sprawling suburbs in her fancy car – burlwood dash, bread-slicer grill – past hills dotted with dull green eucalypts, and up the dusty road to the cow-filled paddocks of my parents' home. She slammed the car door and stepped around chicken poo splatted on the brick verandah.

'We were so *good* to you!' she yelled at my mother.

Mum pulled off her vinyl kitchen gloves slowly, trying to calm Alicja. 'But I appreciate you more now I know you adopted me.'

From the couch in our living room, Alicja begged my mother not to tell her grandchildren about the letter. It would only confuse them, she said. We wouldn't love her any more.

Mum thought it over. 'I owe it to you, if this is what you want,' she conceded. 'But I won't lie to them about it if they ever ask me directly.' She dreaded inflicting this pain of betrayal on us.

My mother soon discovered most of Alicja and Mietek's friends and relatives had known about the secret for years. When Alicja learned of the letter, she phoned them and made them swear not to tell her grandchildren. When my mother told Jill, her best friend, Jill burst into tears. She'd known for years, too. Jill had once overheard someone explain that my mother's contrary, stubborn nature was 'because she was adopted and went through dreadful things during the war'.

My mother couldn't believe it. Everyone around her knew. Everyone had tiptoed around the truth for years. My mother didn't feel bitter, so much as stunned. She didn't think it possible a secret could persist in the open for so long. Everyone knew, but her.

A few weekends later, my seven-year-old sister Jacqui and I pulled on our best dresses and buckled our black patent leather shoes. Dad drove us to Nana Alicja's for Papa's birthday. Inside the brick bungalow I thought of as a palace (in truth, a three-bedder in the middle-class suburb of Burwood), a brass mushroom-shaped stool, rugs on polished timber floors and oil paintings lined the entrance hall. One, a broody scene in rich reds and blues, depicted a narrow alleyway in Papa Mietek's

hometown of Kraków. I'd asked him about it once, but he'd cupped his hands behind his back and stayed silent. Papa never said much, but whenever he saw me, he'd pull me close and kiss the top of my head.

In a lounge room lined with books and more paintings, adults sipped from Nana's gold-rimmed porcelain, discussed politics and classical music, and gossiped away. I kissed the older relatives and friends first, the ones with more wrinkles. In accented English they called me 'darlink', and the women pinched my cheeks. Shiny specks of silver and gold blinked at me from their teeth whenever they smiled. I could smell coffee on their breath. Ladies splayed their fingers while sipping gingerly from coffee cups, lifting their top lip, placing the cup back onto the saucer. Lipstick still perfect. *Clink, clink.*

Jacqui and I called it the Polish Circus whenever these people gathered together. It was an over-the-top spectacle of jewellery, food, thickly applied make-up and chattering in foreign languages. Most of them pronounced words differently, counting 'vun, two, tree', before singing Happy Birthday in Polish to Mietek. Later, they'd ask me, 'So vot you doo-ink?' I'd say, 'Nothing.' 'Nussink?' they'd repeat. It all felt like theatre.

Nana and her friends even looked like movie stars. They smelled of coconut, of Nana's beauty salon where women sat under metal bulbs and flicked through magazines while steam puffed on their wrinkled faces. Nana would lie on a bed with electrodes plugged to her face before they steamed her. I wanted to try it myself when I grew up. I wanted to be glitzy like her: thin, plucked eyebrows; tanned brown forehead; filigree gold necklace framing the final sculpted product. Compared to my

friends' blonde, pale-skinned mothers who crowed 'aaw-yeeah' with an Australian nasal twang, who baked cupcakes and chocolate crackles instead of babkas, Nana and her friends were chic and exotic. My nana was not the kind of woman who would pull on gumboots to collect eggs from our chicken coop. She'd never squelch in clay at the edge of the dam while I caught tadpoles. She and Papa preferred opera.

Aussie parties I attended were nothing like the Polish Circus gatherings. Instead of donning serious faces while debating philosophy and politics, people chugged beer from tinnies and watched footy and cricket on the telly, yelling words Mum abhorred like shit, crikey and bugger. ABBA and AC/DC's electric guitars blared from speakers. Men stood in front of the TV while the women laughed and chatted in another corner. Aussie parties made me feel like a normal Australian. Maybe the tension I felt at Polish Circus parties came from all the effort that went into masking the lies. Or evading the truth.

'Hello darlink,' Inka, one of Nana's best friends, greeted me in her thick, velvet voice. Her gold bangles jingled, her hoop earrings swayed. I did not know then that Inka's husband had been friends with Papa Mietek in Kraków and ended up in the same concentration camp. Years later, my mother would tell me that Inka herself might have been in a camp. The secrets were endless.

Next, Auntie Berta stretched out her arms and wrapped them around me in a bear hug. 'You look so skinny, darlink. Doesn't your mother *feed* you?'

We visited Berta in Caulfield, a suburb my father called The Holy Land because so many Jewish people in Melbourne

lived there. Berta would stuff us full of pierogi, goulash and babka because she thought we starved at home. Berta's body was bent over and a hump stuck out of her back. Her face tucked deep into her neck, so when she laughed, she broke into coughing fits. Mum said it was because of the war. When I asked about it, she'd swat me away with her hand. 'When you're old enough,' Mum would say.

Had I learned about the Holocaust at school, I might have interrogated my mother about Berta's husband, who was Alicja's brother. I might have probed her as to why Berta lived alone. I might have hounded her about that hump on her back.

Now I know that after the war, Australia accepted the second highest number of Holocaust survivors proportional to its population² after Israel. Around 40 per cent of Caulfield's residents were Jewish.³ Nana Alicja chose not to live there. Maybe she worried someone from Warsaw who knew my mother's biological father would recognise her and ask questions. I imagine that shops selling potato latkes, pickled herring and onion-filled rollmops reminded her of Poland. If she steered clear of them, she could feel more in control of the new life she was building.

On arrival in Australia, Papa Mietek worked on a poultry farm, though he'd been a lawyer back in Poland. Years later he built a business importing art supplies. From then on, Nana Alicja could live a life of ease. She swung a golf club in her white shoes, donned her bathers on regular holidays to Fiji and lunched with her lady friends. She tossed balls to her poodles in Wattle Park. She wanted to put as much space as possible between her old life and her new one.



In Nana's lounge room, Auntie Stella kissed me on both cheeks. With her undulating waves of Queen Elizabeth hair, Papa's sister exuded warmth and kindness. Her smile melted me.

'What piano pieces are you working on, Karen?' she asked. Stella had been a concert violinist in Poland and now played violin on the radio, in recitals and quartets.

'I'm practising Bach,' I told her shyly, glancing at my shoes.

Dad liked classical music, too. At home, he blasted the 1812 *Overture* through monster speakers custom-built into cabinets extending below the floor. The walls throbbed. Dad would throw his head back and swing his arms pretending to conduct the orchestra when he thought no-one was looking.

'So, you've mastered the Mozart, have you?' Stella asked, not skipping a beat, as if I were her student.

I felt honoured. Stella remembered all my pieces. None of my friends at primary school played classical piano. Stella made me feel as if everyone did, like it was the most perfectly normal thing in the world for me to love Mozart and Bach.

I did not know all that Stella was hiding. After the letter from Canada arrived, my mother phoned her, but she already knew. 'Why didn't you tell me?' my mother asked.

Stella had promised Alicja she'd keep her secret safe. She also didn't want the information that Alicja and Mietek were not her parents to upset my mother. She maintained the ruse even when my mother visited her as a teenager, desperate to unburden herself and confide in someone. 'Why doesn't Dad have a number on his arm?' my mother asked. 'And why can't I be like normal Australian girls and wear a short dress and stockings to speech night – why do they want me to look Polish and wear socks?'

My mother complained about Alicja's cold and cruel attitude. Sometimes Stella would let my mother stay overnight to give her a break. Arguments at home often died down after these sleepovers.

So, after the letter arrived, my mother went to Stella first for advice. 'What should I do?' she sobbed. Shouldn't Alicja be mad at the man who sent the twenty-eight-page letter? He was the one who had upended Alicja's perfect life, the one she'd painstakingly rebuilt after the war. He was the one who had ruined everything. Yet Alicja blamed my mother. Why?

'Leave it to me,' said Stella.

Instead of feeling betrayed by Stella, the Polish Circus and her friends, my mother felt as if someone had lifted a barbell from her shoulders. She had not hallucinated the grey-uniformed men in black boots she'd remembered as a child, men who'd plagued her nightmares. She had not made them up, as Alicja suggested.

'I'm a somebody, not a nobody,' Mum said.

Her memories finally made sense.

Looking back, it's clear that although my grandparents were hiding details of their past, some of their secrets lived in plain sight. Books crammed their living room shelves with war titles so terrifying I didn't want to touch them, the likes of: *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* by Dr Miklos Nyiszli; *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi and *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* by Dr Yehuda Bauer.

'What happened to you during the war?' I asked.

Shooting glances at each other, they replied with a terse, 'Not much', or 'We were staying some place where we couldn't travel around', as though at a far-flung spa.

'Did the Nazis do that to you?' I once asked Nana about the dense crimson scar like a giant hand that crept down her cheek and bled into her neck.

'No. It's a birthmark.' Nana touched her neck tentatively.

But friends at school had shown me their birthmarks – mottled patches of pink dots, a postage stamp-sized brown splotch on one girl's chin. Nana's mark was enormous – and it looked inflicted. When she applied make-up in the mornings, I would watch her press powder onto her nose, cheeks and forehead, then spray her hair into a voluminous bob so stiff you could hit it with a stick and it wouldn't move. For someone so meticulous about her appearance, why didn't she dab over the 'birthmark'? Nana mostly wore dresses, even when we drove to the park to play with the poodles. I don't recall her wearing upturned collars or roll neck jumpers, which would at least partially hide the blemish. It was as if she considered the mark a badge of merit. I did not know that after a doctor had suggested she remove her tattoo, she'd told him, 'Never!' She hid the past to protect my mother, but didn't conceal her scars.

'Why don't you know how old she *really* is?' I asked Mum on one of Nana's many fiftieth birthdays.

'Because she lost her papers during the war.'

'She has a passport, though,' I countered. 'Didn't she have to tell them her age?'

'Yes, but when she got new papers after the war, she made up a date.'

IRENA'S GIFT

‘But isn’t that *lying*?’

‘Enough with the questions,’ Mum scolded. ‘Go outside and play with the poodles.’