

a novel by

ALAN GRATZ

New York Times bestselling author of **REFUGEE**

PRISONER 8-3087

Based on the true story by
RUTH and JACK GRUENER

PRISONER B-3087

By

A L A N G R A T Z


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KRAKÓW, POLAND

1939-1942



CHAPTER ONE

IF I HAD KNOWN WHAT THE NEXT SIX YEARS OF my life were going to be like, I would have eaten more.

I wouldn't have complained about brushing my teeth, or taking a bath, or going to bed at eight o'clock every night. I would have played more. Laughed more. I would have hugged my parents and told them I loved them.

But I was ten years old, and I had no idea of the nightmare that was to come. None of us did. It was the beginning of September, and we all sat around the big table in the dining room of my family's flat on Krakusa Street, eating and drinking and talking: my parents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, and me, Jakob — although everybody called me by my Polish name, Yanek.

“‘The Jews must disappear from Europe.’ That’s what Hitler said,” Uncle Moshe said, reaching for another pastry. “I don’t know how much more clear he could be.”

I shivered. I’d heard Hitler, the German *fuehrer*, give speeches on the radio. *Fuehrer* meant “leader” in German. It was what the Germans called their president now. Hitler was always talking about the “Jewish menace” and how Germany and the rest of Europe should be “Jew free.” I was a Jew, and I lived in Europe, and I didn’t want to disappear. I loved my house and my city.

“The British and the French have already declared war on him,” my father said. “Soon the Americans will join them. They won’t let Germany roll over all of Europe.”

“He’s already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia,” said Uncle Abraham. “And now he invades Poland!”

My father sipped his coffee. “Mark my words: This war won’t last more than six months.”

My uncles argued with him, but he was my father, so I believed him.

“Enough politics,” my mother said. She got up to clear the table, and my aunts helped her. “Yanek, why

don't you put on a show for us? He built his own projector."

I ran to my room to get it. It wasn't a film projector like the one at the movie theater. It was a slide projector I'd made by mounting a lightbulb on a piece of wood and positioning wooden plates with lenses from magnifying glasses in front of it. I could show pictures on the wall, or do shadow-puppet shows. My cousins helped me hang a white sheet in the doorway of the sitting room, and when everyone was seated I plugged in the projector and clicked on the radio. I liked to have musical accompaniment, like a movie sound track. When the radio warmed up, I found a Count Basie song that was perfect and started my show.

Using cardboard cutouts of cowboys, Indians, stage-coaches, and horses I'd glued to sticks, I projected a shadow show about a sheriff in the American Wild West who had to protect his town from bandits. John Wayne Westerns were my favorite films, and I took all the best parts from his movies and made them one big story. My family laughed and cheered and called out to the characters like they were real. They loved my shows, and I loved putting them on for them. I was never prouder than when I got my father to laugh!

Maybe one day I would go to America and work in the movies. Aunt Gizela would often ruffle my wavy hair and say, “You look like a movie star, Yanek—with your dark-blond hair and big eyes.”

I was just getting to the part where the bandit leader robbed the town bank and was squaring off for a shoot-out with the hero when the music on the radio stopped midsong. At first I thought the radio’s vacuum tube had blown, but then a man’s voice came on the radio.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this broadcast with the news that the German army has reached Kraków.”

“No!” my father said.

“So soon?” Uncle Moshe said. “It’s been only six days! Where is the Polish army?”

I came out from behind the sheet in the doorway to listen. While the radio announcer talked about Polish forces withdrawing to Lodz and Warsaw, there was a big *BOOM*, and my mother’s teacups rattled in their saucers. My cousins and I ran to the window to look outside. Dark smoke curled into the sky over the rooftops of Podgórze, our neighborhood. Someone cried out on the next street, and the church bells of Wawel Cathedral rang out in alarm.

It was too late. The Germans were here. If I had only known then what I know now, I would have run. I wouldn't have stopped to pack a bag, or say good-bye to my friends, or to even unplug my projector. None of us would have. We would have run for the woods outside of town and never looked back.

But we didn't. We just sat there in my family's flat, listening to the radio and watching the sky over Kraków turn black as the Germans came to kill us.

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“Based on the true story by Ruth and Jack Gruener.”

“While the story of Jack Gruener is true—and remarkable—this book is a work of
fiction. As an author I’ve taken some liberties with time and events to paint a fuller and
more representative picture of the Holocaust as a whole.” — Afterword.

Includes a bibliographical afterword.

Summary: Based on the life of Jack Gruener, this book relates his story of survival
from the Nazi occupation of Kraków, when he was eleven, through a succession of
concentration camps, to the final liberation of Dachau.

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