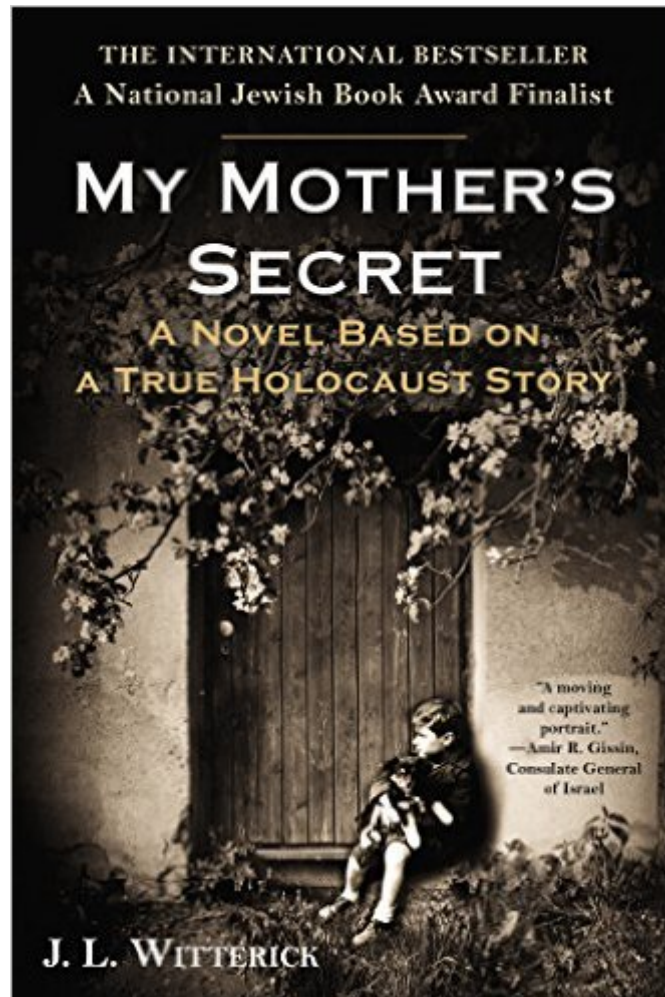


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# My Mother's Secret: A Novel Based On A True Holocaust Story



## Synopsis

Inspired by a true story, *My Mother's Secret* is a captivating and ultimately uplifting tale intertwining the lives of two Jewish families in hiding from the Nazis, a fleeing German soldier, and the mother and daughter who team up to save them all. Franciszka and her daughter, Helena, are simple, ordinary people until 1939, when the Nazis invade their homeland. Providing shelter to Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland is a death sentence, but Franciszka and Helena do exactly that. In their tiny home in Sokal, they hide a Jewish family in a loft above their pigsty, a Jewish doctor with his wife and son in a makeshift cellar under the kitchen, and a defecting German soldier in the attic—each party completely unknown to the others. For everyone to survive, Franciszka will have to outsmart her neighbors and the German commander. Told simply and succinctly from four different perspectives—all under one roof—*My Mother's Secret* is a testament to the kindness, courage, and generosity of ordinary people who chose to be extraordinary.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

J.L. Witterick tells a complex and harrowing tale of courage and silent resistance in brief, almost poetic language. Although the book is marked as "Young Adult", it would be appropriate for any children old enough to begin learning about horrors such as the Holocaust (in fact, it could be an excellent introductory text in a league with *THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK*), as well as being haunting and appealing for adult readers. We are told that the book is a fictionalized account of an actual woman, Franciszka Halamajowa, and her daughter who hid fifteen Jews and one reluctant German soldier during the Nazi invasion of Poland in World War II. We are not sure how much of

the book is real and how much is fiction. The fictional Franciszka saves seven Jews (and the German soldier) and has barely enough room for that many, not to mention the difficulty of procuring enough food for so many without attracting undue attention. Imagine the reality of sheltering twice that many. The story is told in five separate sections. The first and last are told from the point of view of Helena, Franciszka's grown daughter. Helena, rather unexpectedly, finds herself mutually in love with the owner of the factory where she works as a secretary. When Casmir's father calls him home to Germany during his terminal illness, Casmir wants Helena to come with him and marry him. However, Helena, though she badly wants to go with Casmir, feels she must stay and help her mother guard her secret. The scene shifts rather abruptly from Helena's point of view to Bronek's, leaving us a little disoriented wondering what happened to the story we had been so engrossed in. But soon enough we figure out that Bronek is the father of one of the families that Franciszka is sheltering - in the shed above the pigsty of all places. Bronek manages to save his sister-in-law after his brother's death, as well as his own wife and her son (whom he's adopted as his own), but they can't save their own baby as she is too little and her crying would endanger them all. The transition to Mikolaj's point of view and later to Vilheim's are more expected and therefore less jarring. Mikolaj is the son of a Jewish doctor who thought his position would protect him, and therefore did not get away in time. He and his parents take shelter in a space dug beneath Franciszka's table. Vilheim, the tender-hearted, vegetarian German soldier, takes refuge with Franciszka to avoid being sent on to Russia where he knows he would have to - but couldn't - kill. He is consigned to the loft, which is so low cannot even sit upright. While the two Jewish families are aware of each other (but don't meet), neither is aware of Vilheim, nor is he aware of them. The book does not delve too deeply into the misery of 20 months of extreme confinement. We know that each group is able to leave their shelter only rarely, very briefly and very discreetly. We learn a little about how they pass the endless dark days and the amusements they make up, but Witterick does not dwell on the issue. Likewise, we learn little about how bathroom and hygiene matters were handled. Both Mikolaj and Vilheim suffer illness during their confinement, but both recover and, again, Witterick does not dwell on the issue. And if there is any fault in the book, it would be the glossing over of the overwhelming sorrow and trauma of the giving up of Bronek's baby. What Witterick does focus on is the humble grace with which Franciszka opens her home and her heart to unspeakable risks, and the gratitude and stoicism with which her "guests" receive her generosity. Franciszka is so brave that she capitalizes on Casmir's connections to Nazi officers by inviting them to dinner, while Mikolaj and his family hide beneath their very feet. Even after she loses her own son (and major supplier), Franciszka soldiers on protecting the sons of strangers. If she has any doubts, fears or complaints, they make no

appearance in the book. Helena, on the other hand, is portrayed as more human, with plenty of doubts and fears, and even a hint of resentment for her own sacrifice, although it all works out in the end. With only a few understated examples of brutality, this is about as gentle an introduction to the Holocaust as you're likely to find. The brutality of the Nazi invasion and the genocide of the Jews is certainly present in the story, but mostly as a menacing but shadowy backdrop to the bravery, resourcefulness and basic decency of Franciszka, Helena, Damian, Casmir and the eight people whose lives they saved. Definitely recommended for ages 12 and up, and probably appropriate for classroom instruction in most junior high/middle schools. Please note, I received a complimentary copy of this book for review purposes.

A lot has been chronicled about the events that led to World War II, the barbarity that many underwent during that time, the unhealed scars, the aftermaths of the war and widespread destruction that those years caused. This period is nothing short of a black mark on the face of humankind. Having said that, if times like these bring out the worst in many, many rise much above the rest, forgetting their personal security and survival to epitomize a true human. These ordinary individuals with their compassion and sympathy become angels for others. And the more we read about such individuals the lesser it is. J.K. Witterick is one author who wanted to write to make a difference. Through 'My Mother's Secret', she brings out a courageous story of a mother and a daughter based on a true story in the times of Holocaust. Franciszka takes a firm decision to leave Germany and her Nazi sympathizer husband for Poland when Hitler became chancellor in 1933. Her elder son Damian and daughter Helena are more than pleased to leave their father. Poland at that point was a melting pot of people who were Polish, Ukrainians and Jews, though all mistrusting each other. Piece by piece Franciszka built a decent life for her children but it was not lost on them that Poland would soon be taken over by Germany and that happened in 1939 with complete invasion in 1941 disrespecting the pact that was signed by Hitler and Stalin. Franciszka and Helena were not immune to the happenings around them either. They could choose to save their skin over being philanthropic but magnanimous hearts find it hard to see helplessness and yet remain inactive. They ended up hiding two Jewish families and a German soldier in their house for not just a day or two but for 20 odd months. All through this time Helena had to undergo a pain in the heart for hiding this secret from the love of her life, her fiancé. The stories of Jewish families and that of German soldier build up separately and it is amazing to read how their paths led them to the house of their benefactress Franciszka. The foresightedness, intelligence and selflessness of the mother saw all of them through this difficult time and eventually all did come out from the hiding to lead their

normal lives. The book though set at the most unfortunate of times manages to evoke warm and uplifting feelings. After the story ends the readers are left with hope and belief in the goodness of individuals rather than bad taste for the savagery which dominated that time. *My Mother's Secret* is one of those books that are perfect to introduce young adults to the historical happenings. It is supposed to be the author's first creation yet she handles the subject with utmost care and sensitivity. A wonderful piece of writing. Worth mentioning quotes are sprinkled all over the narrative and this goes on to reiterate how adversity brings out the best in people and how sometimes smooth sailing makes a race impassive. A few excerpts from the book - "If you choose to do the right thing, it's a conscious decision at first. Then it becomes second nature." "I always thought that courageous people were those who were not afraid. Meeting Franciszka and her daughter, I realize that courageous people are afraid like everyone else. They just act despite the fear."

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