

MADELINE MARTIN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE LAST BOOKSHOP IN LONDON

"A stunning story for booklovers to sink into with all their heart and soul."

—NATASHA LESTER,
New York Times bestselling author
of *The Paris Orphan*

the
KEEPER
of
HIDDEN
BOOKS

A NOVEL

Praise for The Keeper of Hidden Books

“*The Keeper of Hidden Books* shows us just why historical fiction is so relevant today—because it touches on universal themes that recur in every century throughout time. As more and more books are banned from our libraries and schools, Madeline Martin’s novel gives us a much needed shot of inspiration and hope that stories will always win. Zofia’s incredible bravery in doing whatever she can to save books and literature while the world is at war and despite the personal cost makes her a remarkable heroine for the ages. This is a stunning story for booklovers to sink into with all their heart and soul and be rewarded by the ultimate message—reading matters. Yes it does, and bravo to Madeline Martin for reminding us in this wonderful book.”

—Natasha Lester, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Paris Orphan*

“*The Keeper of Hidden Books* is a timely novel based on the brave librarians of Warsaw during the German Occupation of WWII who risked their lives to save books and Polish culture from being erased from history. Madeline Martin’s impeccable research leaps off every page in this powerfully absorbing story of resilience, enduring friendship and a love of literature and the arts. An inspiring novel you don’t want to miss!”

—Eliza Knight, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Starring Adele Astaire*

“*The Keeper of Hidden Books* is yet another expertly researched and inspiring work of historical fiction from Madeline Martin. As Zofia Nowak and her young friends fight for their fellow Polish and Jewish citizens during the horrific German occupation, they witness again and again the power of friendship and literature in even the darkest times. With her direct, brave and thoughtful manner (so wonderfully reminiscent of Jo March), loyalty and love for her Jewish best friend, and touching first love with a fellow resistance fighter, Zofia is destined to capture readers’ hearts everywhere—rarely have I loved or admired a character more. A heart-pounding, illuminating, and very important addition to the canon of WWII fiction.”

—Natalie Jenner, *USA TODAY* and internationally bestselling author of *The Jane Austen Society*

“*The Keeper of Hidden Books* is a powerful and poignant tour de force chronicling the efforts of Warsaw’s librarians and book-lovers to keep Poland’s culture alive during the dark days of the German Occupation. Impeccably researched and beautifully written, *The Keeper of Hidden Books* reads as a love letter to family, friendship, and the power of literature to sustain, inspire, and endure.”

—Bryn Turnbull, author of *The Woman Before Wallis*

“Intimate and immersive, Madeline Martin’s *The Keeper of Hidden Books* is an expertly researched portrayal of the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, a tale of profound resilience and loyalty, and a powerful reminder of literature’s ability to bind, inspire, encourage, and lend hope. Historical fiction readers will be transported and transfixed by this poignant, timely story.”

—Gabiella Saab, author of *Daughters of Victory*

MADLINE MARTIN

**The Keeper of
Hidden Books**

A NOVEL



HANOVER
SQUARE
PRESS

Madeline Martin is a *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author of historical fiction as well as historical romance that spans from medieval castles to Regency ballrooms. She lives in Florida with her amazing husband, two sweet daughters and one very spoiled cat.

For Momma

Every scene in *The Keeper of Hidden Books* makes me recall something I learned in Poland with you at my side and it's made this book all the more special to me. Thank you for those wonderful memories together and for your endless love and support. I'm so lucky to have you.

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

Warsaw, Poland
August 1939

ZOFIA NOWAK SAT BACK on her calves in the warm summer grass while her friend Janina clumsily wound a bandage around her head. The other pairs of Girl Guides sat in a semicircle beneath the oak trees in Łazienki Park, all working to perfect their first aid skills. Not that the looming war on Poland would ever come to Warsaw.

Still, it was wise to be ready and everyone in the city was preparing in their own particular way. For Papa, it was stocking medical supplies at the hospital while Zofia's mother waited in endless grocer's lines to ensure their cabinets were overflowing with tinned food. Posters were plastered all over the city asking men to line up at elementary schools and enlist, and radio stations filled the air with the pulse of patriotic music.

And it was why Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* was nestled in Zofia's bag, another read inspired by the list of books Hitler had banned in Germany.

Zofia pulled the bandage from her head and repurposed the linen to bind a splint onto Janina's lower leg. "How's that?"

"It feels good." Janina wriggled her limb. "Studying medicine like your father might be a good choice for next year."

Rather than reply, Zofia considered her handiwork.

"Have you decided what you want to do after our final exams?" Janina's voice was gentle as she spoke, but nothing could lighten the pressing decision that weighed on Zofia every day.

This was their last year of secondary school, a final exam away from graduating. They would be eighteen then—adults. The whole world stretched out ahead of them like a runway so they could soar into the future.

For everyone, except her.

"You sound like Matka," Zofia grouched.

Though it wasn't really true. Janina's characteristic delicacy was nowhere near the brusque tone of Zofia's mother. Whether she was insisting Zofia dress nicer, be more outgoing, or be more proactive with choosing a career

path—something lucrative, like medicine—there was always a demanding air about her mother. Which was precisely why Zofia referred to her in the more formal regard as Matka, rather than Mama.

Janina's mother was a Mama. The type to smile and ask after a test, or to offer hugs on a bad day rather than criticism.

Perhaps that was why Janina was always so kind and considerate. It was that congeniality that started their friendship so many years ago when they were children. Zofia had never been gregarious, more the kind to keep to herself and tuck into a book than drum up conversation with people she didn't know. Being the tallest in class did her no favors, leaving her feeling as though she stuck out like an ugly duckling among baby chicks. On Janina's first day in school, she'd strode over to Zofia with an enviable confidence and shared some of the flower-shaped butter cookies her mother had baked, filling in any silence between them with an animated chatter that made Zofia instantly like her.

Now, Janina moved her leg, testing Zofia's bandage. "If I sound like Matka, then I take back my suggestion." The loosely tied bandage gave and the neat knot slipped free, the band unraveling from her leg. One of the splints tilted over into the grass.

"Being in medicine is not my path, evidently." Zofia collected the splint with what she hoped was an uncaring smile. "I think Papa understands."

Her father was a renowned doctor in Warsaw, specializing in surgeries. His was a name that would be impossible to live up to, especially for a daughter who couldn't commit to any kind of future.

"You love to read." Janina blew a lock of dark hair out of her brown eyes. "Maybe you could study literature." She gasped in excitement and sat up straighter. "Perhaps you could become an author, like Marta Krakowska."

It sounded ridiculous even when Janina said it with such sincerity. While Zofia had no idea what she wanted to do, she did know she was no Marta Krakowska. The author penned epic tales of romance featuring lovers who meet amid the strife of war. Every story was better than the last, each ending in contented happiness for the couple and a little calico cat.

But Zofia didn't believe in romance, and she didn't have the lyrical voice of Krakowska. She was no author, to be sure.

Zofia pulled the other splint from Janina's leg and wound the bandage into a neat ball. "Did you read *The Story of My Life* yet?"

Janina's eyes lit up. "I did. What an incredible—"

“No,” a voice called out from the pair beside them.

Their friend Maria shook her head, blond curls swaying, her arm extended toward her Guide partner, who had it wrapped partially to the elbow. “You can’t talk about the book right now, when I can barely hear you.”

“At the library then.” Janina turned her attention back to Zofia with a mischievous glint in her eye. “But you clearly want to change the subject, so let’s turn to something more pleasant. Like how much you’re looking forward to school tomorrow.”

Zofia groaned and Maria turned away with a quiet smile.

Math was tediously dull, the series of numbers lacking any real challenge. Government was dryer than the dust gathering on her unopened textbooks from last year. Even art was awful. While Zofia appreciated the beauty of it, the medium of their application was of little interest to her. Oh, and how she hated, hated, *hated* being subjected to the mediocrity of her own limited skills when forced to try her hand. On and on it went with every class, each one more lackluster than the last.

Except literature. She did enjoy that subject.

At least at university, her courses would be tailored to her future endeavors. Whatever they might be.

Their Girl Guide captain, Krystyna, clapped her hands to get their attention, sparing Janina a sardonic reply from Zofia about just how much she was *not* looking forward to school tomorrow.

“Great job today, Guides.” Krystyna looked around the circle of paired-off girls, her head lifted with satisfaction. “War with Germany is coming, and Poland must be ready. At least the Girl Guides definitely are.”

Warmth effused Zofia’s chest at those words.

The Girl Guides was a scouting organization meant to prepare girls and young women for life with social skills, philanthropic ideals, and the ability to offer aid to the public in whatever form was needed.

If Germany did attack, the Girl Guides’ efforts would help Poland.

Zofia was part of the generation of Poles born in a free state after regaining its sovereignty during the Treaty of Versailles. It was something Poland had fought for more than one hundred and twenty years to obtain. From their earliest days, they were fed tales of heroism and bravery until their eyes burned bright with patriotism and their hearts thumped with Polish pride.

Theirs might be a country young in her independence, having only just celebrated twenty years, but she was ready to cut her teeth on victory.

Something the Germans would likely soon learn.

“What does Antek say about the war?” Janina asked as they pushed up from the grass.

Zofia smoothed a hand over her hair to tame her waves back into place after Janina’s bandaging attempts.

Like most men and boys in Warsaw, her brother was a self-appointed battle strategist in casting his predictions on the impending incursion. The map he had tacked on his wall was crowded with red-tipped pins representing the German army where they clustered around potential attack points.

“He thinks it’ll start in Gdansk.” She kept her tone glib. Antek may be one year older than Zofia, but that didn’t mean she trusted his assessment. “Maybe it’ll happen before school starts tomorrow.”

“Zofia,” Janina scolded. “You shouldn’t say such things.”

Zofia picked a blade of grass from where it had stuck to her knee and grinned up at Janina. “Maybe you should come see his map sometime.”

Janina’s face went red, just as Zofia knew it would. Though the two had been friends for well over a decade, Antek had never noticed Janina until earlier that year. Ever since, he’d made a fool of himself whenever she visited, tripping over his words and giving a funny smile that made a little muscle under his right eye tick.

And as much as Janina protested her own lack of affection for him, Zofia caught her discreet glances and inevitable blushes.

Maria sidled up next to Zofia, her honey-brown eyes as brilliant as Baltic amber. “Are we still going to the library? Papa was recently in Paris and said he’d bring me with him on his next trip. I have to study more books.”

“More?” Janina teased.

As any Francophile worth her Parisian silk, Maria knew everything about the city. And, no, it was not enough that Warsaw was considered the Paris of Eastern Europe. She wanted Paris. *The* Paris of all the world.

The trio wandered toward Koszykowa Street, keeping to the shadows where the late-August sun couldn’t beat down upon them. They were at the main branch of the Warsaw Public Library nearly every day now, not that Zofia minded.

In previous times, however, they might have gone to the cinema or purchased ice cream from one of the vendors in the park, but the recent lack of coins made such things difficult.

Rumor had it that Hitler ordered all the bronze and nickel coins out of Poland until not a groszy remained, so little things like a single postage stamp or an ice cream were impossible to pay for.

“Can we finally talk about *The Story of My Life*?” Janina slid a pointed glance toward Maria, who smirked.

“Now that I can hear and participate without being wrapped up like a mummy, yes.” Her chin lifted slightly, a sure sign she’d had her way.

“What Helen Keller has been able to accomplish in her life is truly incredible.” Janina nudged Maria with her elbow. “As I was going to say before.”

“That’s why I thought this was such a good selection to all read together,” Zofia said. It had been her idea for them to read Germany’s banned books as a slight against Hitler. Maria and Janina had agreed, but only after Maria accused Zofia of trying to assign them all summer homework. Once Janina was on board, so was Maria. So far this was the fourth banned book they had read.

Zofia turned to regard her friends, almost tripping over a crack in the walkway. “Did you know she wrote a letter to Hitler and the students of Germany who burned books?”

“Really?” Maria’s brows lifted.

A chimney sweep passed, and the three young women immediately grasped for a button on their Girl Guide uniforms. After all, who would turn down an opportunity for good luck with war on the horizon?

When the man passed, Zofia redirected their thoughts from superstition and back to the book. “Miss Keller donated her royalties to German soldiers who were blinded during the Great War, and then Germany burned her books. After everything she’d been through, she persevered and now speaks up for what is right with grace and dignity.” Admiration had seeped into her tone, and why wouldn’t it? Zofia found Helen Keller to be an astonishing woman even before having read the book on the obstacles she overcame in her life.

They took turns sharing their favorite quotes, Maria’s copy marked off with rectangles of perfectly cut paper, and turned down Koszykowa Street. Their voices dropped to a more respectful tone as they entered the library.

The vestibule still smelled like fresh paint and plaster, though over a year had passed since the new pavilion had been built.

An employee at the coat check nodded to them as they passed. The poor man didn't have as much to keep him busy in the summer months when the occasional hat might grace the elegant rack behind his desk.

"I'm glad Miss Keller mentioned the lessons of her teacher as well." Janina led the way upstairs. Of course, she would appreciate the educational efforts, when she herself intended to be a teacher.

Two familiar women in matching Girl Guide uniforms descended the steps as the trio was climbing—Danuta and Kasia.

Danuta, the taller of the two, stopped and wilted when she saw them. "Are we too late for the meeting?" She gave an exasperated look at the blonde next to her. "I told you we'd miss it."

Her friend, Kasia, patted her shoulder and gave her a sympathetic smile. But then, Kasia was never not smiling. "But we completed our final class here. We're going to be librarians."

The two had been talking all summer about the special classes they were taking at the main branch of the library after having finished their final year of secondary school several months before.

"But they were doing first aid." Danuta sighed.

"I'm sure we can get the materials from Krystyna and do some on our own." Kasia looked to them for confirmation. "And there are probably several books you can read for instruction."

Janina nodded. "I'm sure Zofia can ask Dr. Nowak to recommend a few."

Zofia gave a noncommittal shrug. Papa would likely offer a suggestion if he was home, which wasn't often.

"What were you talking about when you were coming up the stairs?" Kasia asked.

"A book by Helen Keller," Maria replied. "We're reading it as part of our book club."

Even as the words came out of her mouth, Zofia practically groaned. Having a club centered around books meant others would likely want to join, and if others joined, their small group wouldn't have the same intimacy where thoughts and opinions could be discussed without judgment. Especially with Danuta, who had a propensity toward trying to outsmart every person, likely due to both her parents being professors.

Danuta gasped in delight and descended two steps, putting her eye level with them. “A book club?”

“What kind of a book club?” Kasia’s face brightened with interest.

Zofia gave a quiet sigh.

“We read books that Hitler burned.” Maria pulled Helen Keller’s book from her bag, the little tabs bending this way and that from having been crushed inside. “It’s an anti-Hitler book club.”

Janina wrinkled her nose. “I think we need a better name for the club than that.”

“It’s not a club,” Zofia countered. “It’s just talking about a book we’ve all read.”

“Well, if it is a discussion about books, we want to be part of it.” Danuta folded her arms over her chest with an air of superiority. “Besides, I’ve already read *The Story of My Life* and have probably read all the other books you’ll be choosing. My insight will be invaluable. Some books can be very hard to understand for—”

“What she’s saying is that we’d love to join if you have room.” Kasia gave one of her brightest smiles. “And she promises not to interject too much, right?”

Danuta pursed her lips.

“We’ll think about it,” Zofia said prudently.

The last thing she wanted was Danuta telling them how they should interpret their books.

Danuta opened her mouth to press further, but Kasia pushed off the railing and took her friend by the arm, leading her down the stairs as she called out. “Perfect, thank you.”

Hopefully enough time could pass that they would simply forget about the book club.

Upstairs, Mrs. Berman sat at the reception desk. Of all the librarians, she was Zofia’s favorite. Not only did she recommend the best books, but she was also always patient with them and even once offered to teach Janina Yiddish.

Zofia knew Janina wished to accept, but her mother wouldn’t allow it. Even Janina didn’t have all the details, but apparently her uncle was killed twenty years ago for being Jewish. Janina’s mother had been so distraught, she’d miscarried her child and couldn’t have another one again until Janina was born three years later.

Out of fear for Janina's safety, the Steinmans only celebrated major holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Hanukkah and didn't want Janina telling anyone she was Jewish.

While Zofia wished she could reassure her friend she was safe in this free Poland, violent anti-Semitism and religion-specific segregation were not relegated to the past. In the last few years, Zofia had seen with her own eyes the boycotts of Jewish businesses, the shattered windows in homes and shops, as well as the slanderous graffiti. Even at the University of Warsaw, there were separate benches for Jewish students and limitations on enrollment.

It made her admire Janina's grandparents, who did not hide who they were, and even Janina's parents for engaging in the holidays they did. And it also made her appreciate what Mrs. Berman must have gone through to obtain her role in the library.

The world was full of extraordinary women.

As Maria drifted off toward the foreign language department, Mrs. Berman pulled Janina aside. "There's a new copy of *Ewa* in the magazine and periodical department if you want to see the latest recipe."

The weekly publication offered Jewish recipes and household advice, all written in Polish so Janina could read it as she cooked the recipes with her grandmother, known affectionately to them both as Bubbe. She was the best cook in all of Warsaw, and Zofia was lucky enough to get to taste the results of *Ewa's* recipes cooked by Bubbe and Janina—with love, as Bubbe liked to add. That was always the most important ingredient.

Once their books had been selected, they went down to the new lending room to check out, each of them with one title of their choosing and each with a copy of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, their next read for the anti-Hitler book club.

Which, admittedly, was a terrible name.

* * *

The scream of a foreign alarm wrenched Zofia from her sleep the following morning. She flew upright in a tangle of sheets, her thoughts spinning wildly as the door to her room was flung open.

"It's the air raid siren." Matka's pale blue eyes were wide, her voice shriller than Zofia had ever heard it.

The buzz of planes sounded over the wail of the alarm and sent the windows vibrating in their frames.

Matka gave a shriek and ducked, even though it was obvious the planes were outside.

“Zofia,” she cried, “the Germans are here.”