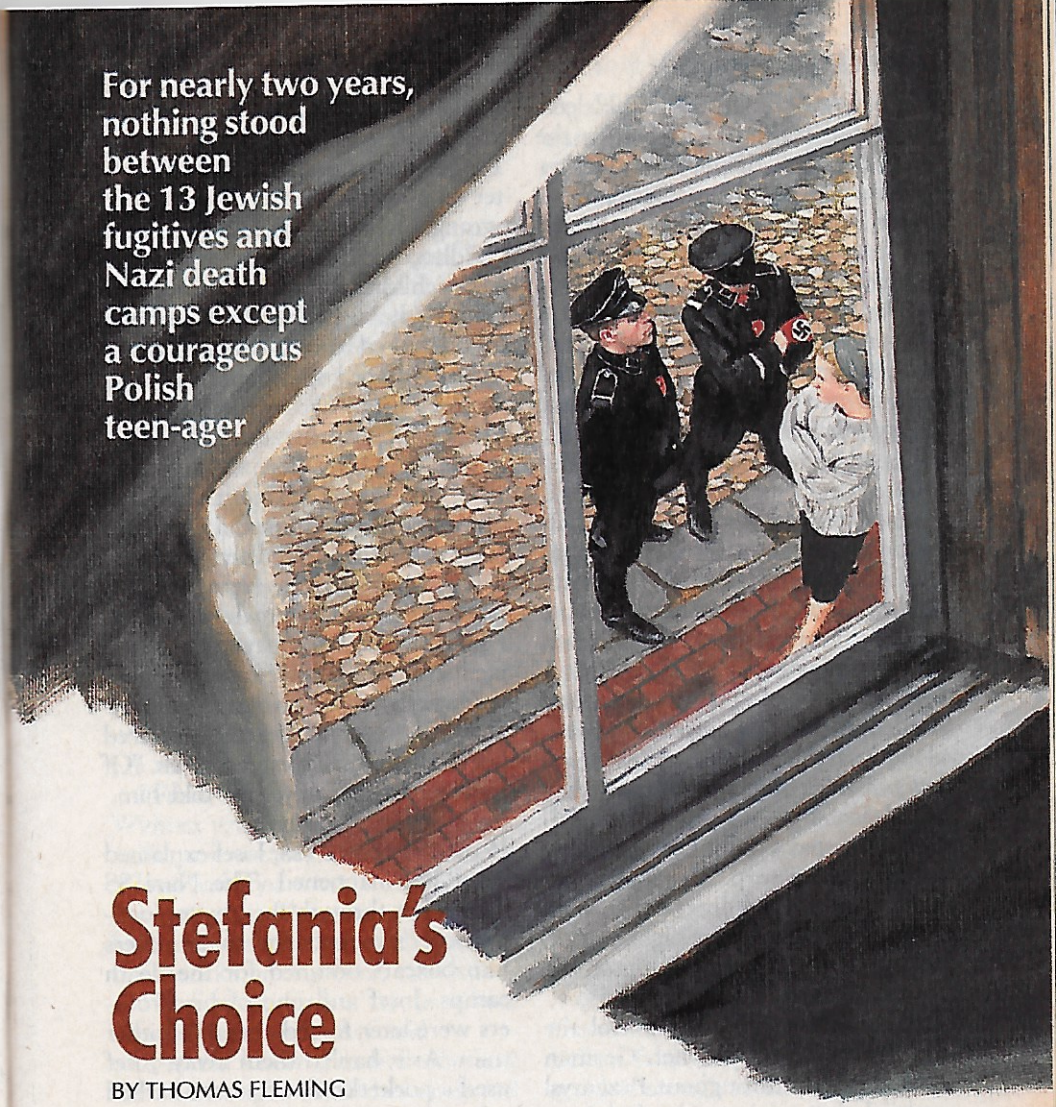

For nearly two years, nothing stood between the 13 Jewish fugitives and Nazi death camps except a courageous Polish teen-ager

Stefania's Choice

BY THOMAS FLEMING

STEFANIA PODGORSKA had just put her young sister Helena to bed when a knock rattled the front door, sending a chill through the 19-year-old. For over three years, southeastern Poland had been part of Hitler's empire. It was 1942, and Przemysl, a city of more than 50,000, was full of grim-eyed Gestapo agents and soldiers on their way to the Russian front.

Blond, beautiful Stefania had felt their eyes on her more than once as she entered the house where she

ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL DOOLING

lived alone with eight-year-old Helena. Their father had died before the war, and their mother and brother had been deported to Germany as forced laborers. To support herself and her sister, Stefania worked as a machine-tool operator at a local factory.

Was this visitor, she wondered, a soldier offering to "protect" her? Heart pounding, Stefania opened the door a crack. There stood a battered, stocky man in muddy clothes. He slumped against the doorjamb and whispered, "Fusia, I need help."

Fusia. It was a nickname used only by close friends. Stefania recognized the grisly figure as Josef Burzminski, 27, a son of the couple in whose household Stefania had worked when the Germans occupied Przemysl. A few months before, the Nazis had herded his family into the ghetto, along with the rest of the city's 20,000 Jews. Before the parents left, they asked Stefania, whom they considered a trusted family friend, to stay in their house to protect it.

Stefania helped Josef to a chair. "Can I stay with you one night, Fusia?" he asked. "I swear I'll go tomorrow. I don't want to endanger you."

Stefania struggled to control the raw fear that gripped her. German notices posted throughout Przemysl warned that anyone who hid Jews would be executed. She wanted to help this desperate man, but could she risk not only her own life but Helena's as well?

FROM ALL THE TEACHINGS of her parents, especially her mother, Stefania knew what she should do. Along with a strong religious faith, Katarzyna Podgorska had instilled in her daughter a powerful sense of right and wrong. Stefania recalled a day in her childhood when her mother had seen some children abusing a young boy because he was Jewish. Katarzyna had rebuked them, telling Stefania that she hoped she would never do such a thing. "We're all children of the same God," her mother said.

Now, looking beyond the doorway to the bedroom, Stefania glimpsed a painting of the Blessed Virgin. She had found the picture at a fair when she was nine and had begged her mother to buy it. Each night when Stefania prayed, the serene face soothed and strengthened her.

You must do it, a voice now whispered in Stefania's heart. She placed her hand on Josef's bruised cheek. "Of course you may stay," she told him.

WHILE SHE MADE TEA, Josef explained what had happened. The Nazi SS had swept through the ghetto, loading Josef's parents and many others into boxcars destined for the death camps. Josef and one of his brothers were later forced aboard another train. As it hauled them away, Josef used a pocketknife to cut the barbed wire on a small window high up the boxcar wall. Squeezing his short, muscular body through the opening, he thudded to the ground with terrific force.

When he regained consciousness, he stumbled along the tracks toward Przemysl, hiding in the woods. "This

was the only place I thought to go," Josef said as he gratefully devoured the bread Stefania put before him.

After two weeks, Josef felt strong enough to leave. Sneaking back into the ghetto, he found his youngest brother, Henek, and Henek's wife, Danuta, near starvation. Old family friend Dr. William Shylenger and his daughter Judy, along with their friend, a widowed dentist in his late 50s, and his 20-year-old son, were also in a desperate state.

Josef bribed a printer for a fake identity card that allowed him to move about the city, smuggling food to the others with Stefania's help. But after he lost the card and had to knock out an SS trooper who stopped him, this tough, daring Jew realized the game could not go on. He made his way back to Stefania's.

"Fusia, would you hide some of us? Without your help, we can't survive."

For a moment Stefania wondered if Josef had gone crazy. The war could last ten years. "A lot of people can't hide under my bed every time someone knocks on my door," she said.

"You must find a house where we can hole up," Josef said.

Stefania knew that both she and her sister might die if they sheltered this man. But she would be dead in spirit if she abandoned him. "If I can find such a house, I'll do it," she finally said.

But where? Eventually she discovered 3 Tatarska Street, a semi-detached cottage with two rooms, a kitchen and an attic. After checking with Josef, she rented it and started cleaning up and hanging dark curtains so no one could see in.

Soon the fugitives began arriving. First came Josef and the dentist's son. Then Dr. Shylenger and his daughter, followed by the dentist, a grave, bearded man who wept with relief when he reached safety.

No sooner had they settled in than a note arrived from a friend of the dentist's, a widow still in the ghetto. She wanted to join them with her son and daughter—hinting that if she were turned down, she might report them. Angrily, Stefania agreed to accept her.

The dentist then begged Stefania to admit his nephew and his wife, who were hiding in an abandoned building. Next, Henek and Danuta joined the group.

Last to come was a Jewish mailman who had heard of the house on Tatarska Street. Once more Stefania agreed, swelling the number of fugitives to 13. That she had made the right decision would become brutally clear when the Przemysl ghetto's remaining Jews were herded off to the death camps.

Using boards Stefania bought, Josef built a false wall in the attic. There was just enough room behind its cleverly disguised door for all 13 to sleep.

Scarcely had he finished when Stefania came home with unnerving news. "An SS man lives next door!"

Now the group was even more fearful of making too much noise. Because several fugitives snored, Josef appointed night monitors, and the

snorers were prodded into silence.

Visits by Stefania's friends were also a problem. Usually she managed to ease them out quickly. But one young man, proclaiming his love for her, began visiting almost nightly. During one visit the dentist almost suffocated himself in the attic, trying to muffle a coughing fit.

"That's enough!" said Josef after the ardent suitor left. He told Stefania to buy a picture of the handsomest German officer she could find and hang it on her wall. That night, when her suitor arrived, he asked, "Who's that?"

"My new boyfriend," Stefania said. Out went the suitor, never to be seen again at 3 Tatarska Street.

"WE HAVE A CASE of typhus," the dentist announced one cold winter morning. The widow had come down with it. They tried to isolate her to avoid infecting others. Her fever soared.

One night, the frenzied woman rushed screaming into the moonlit street. Stefania finally got her back into the house. If an informer saw all this, the young woman realized in panic, they were doomed.

Stefania stumbled into the other bedroom and knelt before her painting of Mary. *Save us, not for my sake, but for Helena's,* she prayed.

She turned to find Josef in the doorway. "Did you get an answer?" he asked.

"Yes," Stefania said with calm certainty. "We'll be all right. The Germans won't come."

A few weeks later, another disaster loomed—the fugitives began running out of cash to buy food. "We'll raise money with our hands," Stefania said.

The next day during her factory lunch break, she began knitting a sweater, using yarn from an old one she had unraveled at home. A coworker, admiring it, asked if she would knit one for her, for cash. "Sure," Stefania said.

Soon she had orders for a dozen sweaters. At 3 Tatarska Street, the group worked night and day. Grateful customers never noticed the extraordinary amount of knitting Stefania turned out.

As 1943 waned, Stefania picked up rumors that the Germans were losing the war and retreating. But Josef warned against being too hopeful. "The Germans are still here," he said. "Their mood may grow more vicious as defeat looms."

One day, as Stefania left for work, a police siren wailed. A few blocks away, SS troops surrounded a house, dragged out some terrified Jews and the Polish family who had been hiding them, and flung them against the wall. "Fire!" the SS commander ordered, and machine-gun fire riddled the victims.

Stefania stared dazedly at the bleeding bodies. For the next several weeks, she was unable to sleep. One night, trudging home from work, she wondered how much longer she could endure the ordeal.

As she came in the door, Josef and some of the others were playing hide-

and-seek with Helena. The child's eyes sparkled as she raced by, calling, "I'm going to catch you this time, Joe!"

These people are my family, Stefania realized. *I cannot abandon them.*

A FEW MONTHS LATER, as spring sent warm winds and soft rain swirling through Przemysl, the lookout at the window warned, "SS approaching!" The fugitives scrambled to the attic.

Stefania answered the door. An officer curtly informed her that she had two hours to move out. "Why? What have I done?" she asked.

"The army is setting up a hospital across the street. We need this house for nurses' quarters."

After he left, Stefania rushed to consult Josef. "You and Helena must leave immediately," he said. "Hide in the countryside."

"What are you going to do?"

"Die fighting," Josef answered.

"Before we do anything, I'm going to pray for help," Stefania said.

"Let's all pray," Josef agreed. Ever since he had jumped from the train, a sense of God's protecting hand had been growing within him.

Everyone followed Stefania into her bedroom and knelt.

Stefania concentrated. Long ago, in a shrine at Czestochowa, her Virgin had promised to protect Poland from its enemies. Stefania now asked that her Jewish family be included in this historic vow.

A gentle voice seemed to tell her, *Don't leave—you have nothing to fear. Send your 13 upstairs. Open the windows. Begin cleaning as if you expect to stay. Sing as you work.*

Calmly, Stefania told Josef to take everyone to the attic. "I'm not leaving you," she said. "Everything will be all right." Then she and Helena opened the windows and began spring-cleaning.

Soon the SS officer reappeared. "You won't have to leave after all," he said. "We'll only need one bedroom for two of our nurses."

They were saved—or were they? How could they survive with two Germans in the house? "I'll make sure no one even budges when they're around," Josef assured Stefania. He promised unwavering vigilance.

A week later the nurses moved in. They spent many hours a day at the hospital, but at night they would often bring home German soldiers and retreat to their bedroom for a noisy party.

Fear and tension gripped the fugitives. One afternoon, both nurses came home early with two soldiers carrying rifles. The four talked in low tones. Suddenly one nurse climbed the ladder leading to the attic.

Josef, behind the false wall, heard footsteps and signaled everyone to freeze. Through a pinhole, he saw a blond head appear at the top of the stairs. The nurse looked around, frowning. Moments later, the four Germans left the house. The hideaway had survived its ultimate test.

Then at work the next day, new trouble arose. The German manager announced that the factory was going to be dismantled and moved back to

Germany. Stefania's salary vanished.

Now everyone redoubled the knitting efforts. One sweater earned them only enough to eat for three days, and the market for their wares was not dependable. Whole days went by without food. In desperation they chewed pork rind and other scraps Stefania bought on the black market.

One day the nurses rushed back from the hospital in wild agitation. "We're going home to Germany. Come with us—our ward needs a maid!" the blonde ordered.

Once more, disaster threatened. Josef, fearing what the Germans might do to Stefania if she refused to go, again talked about fighting to the death. Stefania shook her head.

Packing a suitcase, she dressed Helena in her good clothes and talked cheerfully to the nurses about how much she looked forward to going. When the bus arrived, the nurses boarded, and the driver began beeping for Stefania. But she just strolled away, calling, "I've changed my mind—I'm not going. *Auf Wiedersehen!*"

The nurses shouted threats, but the driver, anxious to get away, drove off. Laughing, Stefania ran back to the house and threw her arms around Josef. "If they tried to take me, I would have socked them with one of your uppercuts!" she said.

Soon the whine of artillery shells filled the streets. One morning, on sentry duty, Josef called, "Germans coming!"

Three bedraggled members of the once-victorious *Wehrmacht* staggered wearily down Tatarska Street. It was the last glimpse of the Nazi enemy.

Finally, when they were sure they were safe, the 13 emaciated fugitives descended the ladder from the attic and spilled into the street. "Germans gone!" said Josef with a laugh.

Joyful smiles spread from face to face. As the residents of 3 Tatarska Street embraced, Josef hugged Helena close, and then wrapped his arms around her heroic sister for an even longer embrace.

In 1945, a few months after the war ended, Josef Burzminski proposed to Stefania Podgorska. "You asked to stay one night," she teased him. "Now you want to make it a lifetime?"

In 1961 the couple immigrated to the United States, where Josef established a dental practice outside Boston, and they raised a son and daughter. Helena Podgorska married, became a doctor and practices in Wroclaw, Poland.

Last year Stefania and Josef took part in the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., along with the heads of state of Israel, Poland, the United States and many other countries. It was a reminder that, in the midst of the greatest evil man can inflict, great good is possible too.

ONE of the worst mistakes you can make as a gardener is to think you're in charge. —Janet Gillespie, quoted by Lindsay Bond Totten, Scripps-Howard News Service