



# Gertruda's Oath:

A Child, a Promise, and a Heroic Escape During World War II

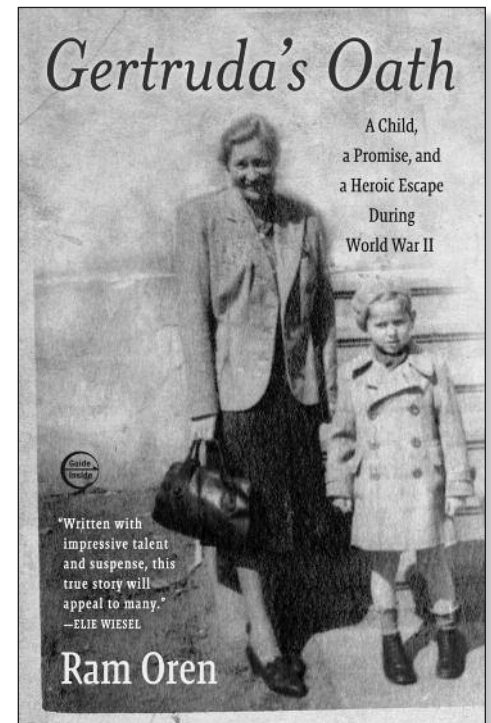
by Ram Oren; Translated by Barbara Harshav

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**Reading Level: 9th Grade-Up**

To watch a video with Michael Stolorow, go to: <http://tiny.cc/4o0gc>

**Teachers:** If you'd like a printable version of this guide, please download the PDF attachment at the bottom of this page.



## • note to teachers •

In *Gertruda's Oath*, Ram Oren relates the harrowing true story of Michael Stolorow, a newly-orphaned Jewish boy born to a wealthy Polish family, and Gertruda Babilinska, his Catholic nanny. As Gertruda and Michael seek safe haven in a Europe ravaged by World War II, they face seemingly insurmountable challenges. Oren also examines these tumultuous wartime events through the story of SS officer Karl Rink, whose allegiance to the Nazi Party is called into question by his refusal to divorce his Jewish wife, Mira. In this exploration of the impact of the genocide perpetuated by Adolf Hitler and his adherents, Oren focuses his attention on the remarkable examples of courage that emerged out of the tragedy of the Holocaust. This guide offers instructors the opportunity to consider questions raised by Oren's account, questions of religious and national affiliation, the nature of sacrifice, and the moral calculus of good and evil.

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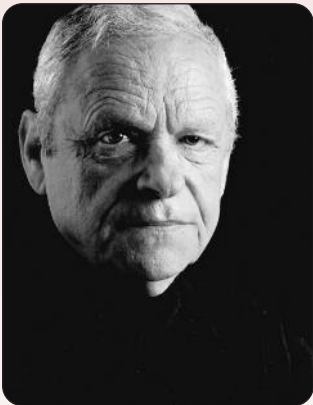
## • about this book

Ram Oren uncovered the amazing story of Gertruda Babilinska and Michael Stolorowiczky after more than a year of research in preparation for a book about the *Exodus*, the beleaguered transport ship that attempted to deliver more than four thousand Holocaust refugees to Palestine in 1947. In the course of his research, Oren sought out Michael Stolorowiczky, a passenger on the *Exodus*, for an interview. After several hours together, Oren realized that his planned book about the *Exodus* would never see fruition; instead, he turned his attention to retelling Michael and Gertruda's story, relying on interviews with Michael, immediate family members and survivors of the Holocaust, contemporaneous documents, and his own extensive historical research. In the course of retelling what he characterizes as "poignant history," Oren used his estimable talents as a novelist to fill in gaps in the narrative that depended on the incomplete recollections of those involved directly in the story.

The rise of the Nazi Party in 1930s Germany meant different things to different people. For Karl Rink, formerly a junior accountant at a chemical firm in Berlin, and recently fired from his job due to the economic depression, Hitler's rise to power represented an opportunity. Rink gratefully accepted an invitation to join the SS—the elite organization of German security services, despite the concerns for their family's safety voiced by his Jewish wife, Mira.

For Jacob and Lydia Stolorowiczky, a prosperous Jewish family who resided in Warsaw with their young son, Michael, Hitler's advance into Europe presented both a serious threat to their livelihood and to their way of life. When Lydia and Jacob were separated and unable to communicate with each other during the German occupation of Poland, Lydia came to depend almost exclusively on Michael's Catholic nanny, Gertruda Babilinska. On Lydia's deathbed, Gertruda vowed to Lydia that she would protect Michael, help him emigrate to Palestine, and raise him as her own child if necessary.

As Gertruda and Michael navigated the dangers in a Nazi-controlled Europe, they encountered Karl Rink and many other consequential figures who changed the course of their lives forever.



## • about the author

**RAM OREN** is a popular Israeli author known for his bestselling suspense novels. Born in Tel-Aviv in 1936, Oren worked as an unpaid messenger boy for *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's leading daily. He later became the paper's legal correspondent. Oren received his law degree from Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He returned to *Yediot Aharonot* and served in various capacities, including military affairs correspondent, legal counsel, chief reporter in New York, and Senior Editor. Following the extraordinary success of his novel, *Seduction*, Oren left the newspaper in 1994 to focus on his literary career. He founded the Keshet publishing house in 1995, and is the author of fifteen books.

## • teaching ideas

As a work of nonfiction, *Gertruda's Oath* brings the horror and devastation of the Holocaust to life with unforgettable details from the actual experiences of real people. Because the book examines the experience of the Holocaust from multiple perspectives—from the vantage point of its victims and its perpetrators, from Poles and Germans, from Jews and Christians, from adults and children, from women and men—it provides an unusually comprehensive examination of many of the essential elements involved in the conflicts that dominated World War II, including, but not limited to nationality, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and racial prejudice. Furthermore, the book's celebration of quiet acts of courage in a time of brutal devastation highlights the eternal battle between good and evil waged by humankind.

As a work of historical nonfiction, *Gertruda's Oath* would make an excellent text in a **literature**, **social studies** or **history** class that examines World War II and its impact on individuals and societies.

## • discussion and writing

- 1 Why was Karl and Mira Rink's marriage controversial, even though mixed marriages were common at the time in Berlin? How does Karl's decision to join the SS affect his relationship with his wife, Mira, and his relationships with his extended Jewish family and friends? To what extent does Rink seem to be in denial about Hitler's agenda for Jewish populations in Europe?
- 2 Why does Gertruda Babilinska react the way she does when she learns that the Stolowitzky family is Jewish? As a Catholic, what does her reaction reveal about her own biases and feelings about Jews? How does her priest's advice: "There are good Christians and bad Christians and good Jews and bad Jews," influence her decision to accept the nanny position? (p. 42)
- 3 How does Karl Rink's unwillingness to participate wholeheartedly in the destruction wrought on Jewish people and properties during "Kristallnacht" jeopardize his reputation within the Nazi Party? Given his ambivalence about participating in such violence against Jews, why does he stay in his position as SS officer?
- 4 What do the abduction attempts made against Michael Stolowitzky suggest about his family's insulation from the economic turbulence experienced by others in Warsaw? How is the direct involvement of Emil, the family's chauffeur, foreshadowed by his violent behavior toward Gertruda during Jacob Stolowitzky's absence from home?
- 5 When Unit Commander Schreider tells Karl Rink that he must choose between his Jewish wife and the party, he orders him to divorce Mira by the end of the week. Why would the Nazi Party be concerned about the loyalty of an officer married to a Jewish woman? By refusing to divorce Mira, despite a direct order from his superior, to what extent is Karl responsible for Mira's tragic fate?
- 6 Compare the efforts of Dr. Joseph Berman, a Jewish doctor from Warsaw, and Father Andras [tk Andreas? Check] [Andras is correct JC] Gedovsky, a Catholic priest at the Ostra Brama Church in Vilna, to protect Gertruda and Michael. Why would two people from radically different backgrounds find themselves drawn to help a vulnerable woman and her adopted child?
- 7 What do Karl Rink's efforts to get his daughter, Helga, to a kibbutz in Palestine suggest about his awareness of the dangers his family faces by virtue of its Jewish ethnicity? How does Karl Rink's predicament—being responsible professionally for the conditions that require his daughter to flee the country—call his judgment into question?

## • discussion and writing (continued)

- 8 When Lydia, Gertruda, and Michael escape from Warsaw to Vilna in their Cadillac, they witness Emil's treachery first-hand. After saving them from the knife-wielding farmers who threaten them on the road, why does Emil go on to abandon and rob them of all their belongings? How might his seemingly contradictory behavior be understood?
- 9 What does Gertruda's behavior as a refugee in Vilna—nursing her boss, Lydia Stollowitzky, at night and working by day as a dishwasher, using all of her savings to help Lydia and Michael secure an apartment, deceiving the landlady about her companions' Jewish ethnicity—suggest about her character? In what respects does she seem hard-wired for sacrifice and serving others above herself?
- 10 “Take off my wedding ring... [w]ear it now. From now on, you'll be Michael's mother.” (p. 128) How does Lydia's deathbed request of Gertruda reveal her absolute trust in her son's nanny? What does Gertruda's oath to Lydia reveal about her feelings for her young charge, Michael?
- 11 Why does Jacob Stollowitzky remarry Anna Massini before learning the truth about Lydia and Michael's whereabouts? In addition to her love and companionship, what does Anna, an Italian national, offer Jacob? To what extent does his marriage seem driven by self-interest? What do the terms of his will suggest about his hopes for his first wife and child?
- 12 What does the collective Lithuanian response to the occupation of their country by Germany reveal about the prevailing Lithuanian opinion of the Soviet Union? How do these sentiments extend to the Lithuanians' treatment of the Jewish refugees who have deluged their country from other parts of Europe?
- 13 “The Jews were forbidden to travel on public transportation, to own a telephone or a radio, to sit in cafés, to attend the movies or the theater, to go to the barber, to walk on the main streets, and to have any contact with non-Jews. They had to wear yellow armbands.” (p. 151) How does the treatment of the Jews during wartime isolate them socially and racially? To what extent were the German prohibitions on Jews during wartime specifically designed to be dehumanizing?
- 14 Why is Gertruda willing to risk everything to deliver Emil's gun to Dr. Berman in the Jewish ghetto in Vilna? In what context does Gertruda's smuggling of a weapon into the Jewish underground—an illegal act, according to German military law—seem like a sensible act? How does she benefit directly from having taken such an incredible risk?
- 15 When the German soldiers command six-year-old Michael to undress so they can determine if he is a Jew, how does Gertruda's reaction betray her fear that Michael will be exposed? What would such a discovery mean for Gertruda? Why does SS Officer Karl Rink's gesture of benevolence stand out in the course of their perilous journey to safety? What do you think accounts for Karl Rink's compassion to these Polish refugees and to those he encounters in the Kovno Ghetto?
- 16 “Don't shoot! We're Poles!” The soldier lowered his weapon and smiled. He was a Russian.” (p. 210) How does the fact of their Polish ethnicity save Gertruda and Michael when they encounter a Russian soldier aiming a submachine gun at them in the Lithuanian bunker where they have sought shelter? How do life and death hinge on nationality and religious affiliation during World War II?
- 17 To what extent do Gertruda's parents seem justified in reacting with dismay and disbelief when she tells him that she intends to bring Michael to Palestine to raise him as a Jew? As a faithful Catholic, why doesn't Gertruda attempt to convert Michael to Christianity? After all she has overcome during the war, why does she choose to live with Michael abroad, among other displaced Jews, rather than stay with her biological family in her homeland?

- 18 How can one reconcile Karl Rink's act of vengeance against Reinhard Schreider—killing him in cold blood to avenge the murder of his wife, Mira—with his compassionate behavior toward Jews in the course of World War II? In what respects should Rink be absolved for his acts as an SS officer because of his merciful treatment of Jewish victims during the war?
- 19 Why does Gertruda have to draw attention to her religious identity as a Catholic in order to gain admittance to the Exodus? Why are the organizers of the ship inclined to leave Gertruda behind? Compare and contrast life on the Exodus to life in the Vilna ghetto.
- 20 After Gertruda is granted the honorary title of “Righteous Gentile” by Yad Vashem, she moves to a special home for Righteous Gentiles in Nahariya, Israel. Why does Gertruda embrace her new identity as an Israeli gentile? How do the unusual circumstances surrounding Gertruda Babilinska's burial—first in a Jewish grave, then in a Christian grave—seem symbolic, given the extraordinary life she led?

## • suggested activities

- 1 Students will be familiar with Michael Stolorow's experience of the Holocaust from Ram Oren's account in *Gertruda's Oath*. Ask students to research another nonfiction account of Jewish life during World War II to learn more about how children in other parts of Europe fared under Hitler's regime. How did children's experiences of the privations of the Holocaust differ from that of adults? How did they cope with the extreme conditions in concentration camps? Among child survivors, how common were “guardian angels”—people like Gertruda Babilinska, Dr. Berman, and Father Gedovsky—who enabled them to endure the trials they faced?
- 2 Divide the class into four groups. Ask two groups to gather evidence from *Gertruda's Oath* that exonerates SS officer Karl Rink of his crimes during World War II. Ask the other two groups to collect evidence that would convict Rink of crimes against humanity. Then pair each group of students with an opposing group, and stage two mini-trials to determine the guilt or innocence of Karl Rink. Ask students to vote on Rink's fate, based on the strength of the evidence presented for and against him.
- 3 Ask students to imagine that they and their families are going to be forced to abandon their homes, and that they have twenty-four hours to get their affairs in order and to pack a small suitcase of belongings to take with them. How would they feel? What would they do to prepare for their departure? Who would they contact, and what would they be forced to leave behind? Encourage students to make lists of what they would want to bring with them and to share their lists with one another in small groups. What do these lists reveal?

## • beyond the book

### 1 Nuremberg Trials

Following the end of World War II, a series of military tribunals called the Nuremberg Trials and situated in the city of Nuremberg, Germany, were held by the victorious Allied Forces to prosecute prominent members of the defeated Nazi leadership. Over 200 German war crimes defendants were tried at Nuremberg. Ask students to read about the international response to the crimes committed in the course of World War II. Students may be surprised to learn that not all Nazi leaders responsible for the mass murder were able to be prosecuted. How did the international efforts to bring to justice members of the Nazi leadership attempt to satisfy the many nations involved?

## • beyond the book (continued)

### 2 British Mandate for Palestine

When Gertruda and Michael attempted to enter Palestine from the Exodus, they were refused entry by the British, who had legal authority to administer laws in Palestine, according to a law confirmed by the League of Nations in 1923. Ask students to research the history of British governance of Palestine. What accounts for the British refusal to allow a boat carrying over 4,000 Jewish refugees to land in Palestine? How—if at all—is the Britain's role in Palestine's history reflected in the current state of affairs in the Middle East?

### 3 Swiss banks and World War II

Michael Stolowitzky's efforts to reclaim his family's assets from Swiss banks were modestly successful, but many other Holocaust survivors were not so fortunate. In 1995, the World Jewish Congress began negotiations on behalf of Jewish organizations and Holocaust survivors and their heirs, who alleged that Swiss banks and the Swiss government were not being forthcoming with dormant funds in their banks belonging to victims of Nazi persecution. Ask students to research the settlement of the WJC claim and analyze other belated efforts on the part of the Swiss government to acknowledge the rights of Holocaust victims. How might these awards be as significant in terms of their symbolism as they are in terms of their recompense?

## • online resources

<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/about/> : The website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a living memorial providing materials for education and research.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/> : The website for PBS's documentary *America and the Holocaust* from the American Experience series with timeline, maps, and teaching guide.

<http://www.annefrank.com/> : The website of The Anne Frank Center USA.

## • other titles of interest

*Life is Beautiful*,  
Roberto Benigni and  
Vincenzo Cerami

*Anne Frank: Diary of a  
Young Girl*, Anne Frank

*Grauel: An Autobiography*,  
John Stanley Grauel

*The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosinski

*Clara's War: One Girl's Story of  
Survival*, Clara Kramer

*Survival in Auschwitz*,  
Primo Levi

*Maus: A Survivor's Tale,  
My Father Bleeds History*,  
Art Spiegelman

*Night*, Elie Wiesel

*The Pianist: The Extraordinary  
True Story of One Man's Survival  
in Warsaw, 1939-1945*,  
Wladislaw Szpilman

## • about this guide's writer

This guide was prepared by Julie Cooper, a writer from Bainbridge Island, Washington. A graduate of Harvard University, Oxford University, and the University of Washington, Julie works as a freelance writer and editor of educational materials and reading group guides.



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Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**  
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**  
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**  
Jones, Lloyd. **Mister Pip**  
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**  
Khedairi, Betool. **Absent**  
Koontz, Dean. **Odd Thomas**  
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**  
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**  
Matar, Hisham. **In the Country of Men**  
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**  
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**  
McCarthy, Susan Carol. **Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands**

Miéville, China. **Un Lun Dun**  
Mitchell, David. **Black Swan Green**  
Mori, Kyoko. **Shizuko's Daughter**  
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**  
Naylor, Gloria. **Mama Day**  
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**  
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Tan, Amy. **The Joy Luck Club**  
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**  
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**  
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**  
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**  
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Vonnegut, Kurt. **Cat's Cradle**  
Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five**  
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**  
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

### Nonfiction:

Angelou, Maya. **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**  
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Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**  
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**  
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Pollan, Michael. **The Botany of Desire**  
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Thomas, Piri. **Down These Mean Streets**  
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Whiteley, Opal. **Opal: The Journey of an Understanding Heart**



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