For more than two years—from September 28, 1942, to January 16, 1945—Maria Devinki lived under barns.

For more than a year and a half, it was in a hole dug in the soil under the wooden floor of a barn at the edge of the village of Droblin, outside Wodzislaw, northeast of Kraków. Then fear of being discovered drove her and her family to another nearby farm, where she hid for eight more months until Soviet troops liberated the area. She, her husband, and her mother, and sometimes others were paying a lot of money for the privilege of hiding from the Germans in a hole in the ground, as much as two thousand dollars (in today’s dollars) a month.

The young woman who emerged from those unspeakable places of darkness saw the realities of the world with remarkable clarity. We had barely sat down with her in her suburban home in Kansas City when Maria, more than sixty years after the end of the war, said this: “Just to make it short and sweet before we go any farther, that generation, my generation, will never forgive. Pardon me for making this statement, because I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for a Polish army officer.”

That officer, Jozef (or Jusick) Gondorowicz, was a non-Jew in the Armia Krajowa. He had been a business partner of Maria’s parents, Solomon and Regina (or Rivka) Braun. Maria was known then as Mala Braun. Jusick acted as a trusted go-between, paying money the Brauns gave him to compensate a Polish farmer and his wife for hiding Maria, her husband, her mother, and sometimes her brothers and their wives as well. Maria’s father was murdered at the Treblinka death camp.

The Devinki story contains a range of characters—from the good-hearted Jusick Gondorowicz to farmers who risked their lives by hiding Jews—but did it for money. Maria Devinki said she believes the first farmer to hide them, Władysław Chelowski, probably did not realize how much danger he was putting himself in. The second was just desperately poor.

When Maria, born June 1, 1920, was a small child, her family moved to Wodzislaw from Hanover, Germany, where her parents had run a successful export business. Maria said she believed that at the start of World War II Jews made up more than half the population of Wodzislaw. ¹⁰

Maria had two brothers. She went to a public school as well as to a Bais Yaakov, a religious school for girls. Her goal was to become a teacher. But when the war came, she and some members of her family relied on a trusted business
friend to survive. “Jusick [Gondorowicz],” she explained, “he was a very close friend to us. Matter of fact, we had a partnership.”

The Braun family business was shipping merchandise, eventually getting it “to the Baltic and from there shipping to the United States, Canada, and other countries,” Maria explained. “So we had trucks and buses. There was a whole group of us. Because of Jusick we got the license to do that.”

When the German threat to local Jews became clear, Jusick “came to me and he said, ‘I have a place for you. If you feel comfortable, I will take you to a farm and they probably will hide you. But we have to make an agreement with him [the farmer]. To make it very short, I’m not going to go into every little detail.’”

One detail Jusick told Maria about only later was that when Jusick (an army man long before the war) first talked to the farmer about hiding Maria as well as her mother and husband, he pulled out a gun and pointed it at the farmer as he said, “If anything happens to those Jews, it will be bad.” The farmer understood Jusick’s clear meaning.

“So,” Maria said, “that was our guarantee that he’s not going to do anything to us.”

In a written statement that Jusick made much later to the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland, he said that he believed “my visits at the bunker played a very important role in the life of the Jewish families. On one hand, I had to make sure that the farmer was still willing to provide a shelter for them, and on the other hand I was reassuring the Jewish families that they were in a safe place, providing them with news, trying to keep their spirits high, and giving them hope to continue. Several times, we were pressured to stop helping the Jewish families and deliver them to the Nazis, but having the support of our relatives and friends who worked in conspiracy, we managed to resist the blackmailing and survive the occupation with dignity.”

Maria and her mother decided that, if things got really bad, they would accept Jusick’s offer. They would leave money with Jusick, who in turn would pay the farmer on a monthly basis.

“It was never for free,” Maria said. “It was ten thousand zloty a month.” This was, in fact, an enormous sum for a farmer, and the farmer’s carelessness with so much money could have cost Maria and others their lives.

“Here’s my choice,” Maria said of what the farmer offered to Jusick. “There was no bargaining. It was not like merchandise. I don’t know if he wouldn’t go for less or whatever. I have to be very frank with everybody: The farmer took a chance. His life was as much at risk as our lives.” If German authorities came to that farm and found Jews, she said, “then he has the same execution that we would have. But the farmer was not smart enough to think of this. He was thinking of the big chunk of money he would get.”
In Wodzisław, Maria’s family lived across the street from the burgomaster or mayor, and the families were friends. One day, Maria said, she learned through that family that the Gestapo was in the area, “and they said next week going to be bad,” meaning Jews would be rounded up and sent to death or labor camps.

The man who soon would become Maria’s husband, Fred Devinki (born Froim Dziewiecki), was staying not far from her at the time. They had known each other before the war. “He came in the middle of the night,” she said. “He walked to the city. It was seven kilometers to the city and he came into our place. We were in the ghetto then.” Fred told Maria he had heard the upcoming Aktion in Wodzisław would happen on the eve of Yom Kippur (1942). Maria and Fred were young and believed their age and their ability to work would help them survive.

“For example,” she said, “in my case, I was like a sanitizing commission. The city broke out with typhoid [fever]. Of course, the Germans were afraid of that. It was spread around between soldiers and whatever. So they separated parts of the city. And who should go there and who should do something in case of a death or in case to help them? Girls like me. So that’s why they let us live longer.”

Fred told Maria, “It would be a good idea for us to get married as long as there are still a few Jews in town and can get us Chuppah Kiddushin, like marriage blessing.”

Maria pressed Fred on why they should do that. She said he replied, “If we are a couple, you have a better chance. I’ll be with you. By yourself, your mother is going to be separated from you because she’s older. Now older persons go right away to Auschwitz or something. So you’ll be by yourself.”

Maria thought that made sense. “I said, ‘fine.’”

So that same Thursday evening they were married. The mayor’s sister-in-law, who had gone to school with Maria, came to be the witness. The marriage lasted almost fifty-one years and produced three children, Sam, Karen, and Ida, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Three days after Fred and Maria were married, the feared Aktion to round up the Jews took place.

That evening Jusick found Maria, Fred, and Maria’s mother and “made us hide in the hay” on a wagon, Maria said. “He put us under the hay, me, my husband, and my mother, and we went and lived in a barn,” which was about ten kilometers from the city.

Fred Devinki and the farmer dug a hole under the floor of the barn, and that became the hiding place. They placed floor boards on top of the hole and covered it all with hay. When it was done, it was about ten feet by fifteen feet, but not deep enough even for Maria, barely five feet tall, to stand up. It was, she said, “like a grave.”
Because it was September and hay-harvesting time, “the whole place was full of hay,” Maria said. “If the Germans come in they couldn’t possibly look in that spot unless the Polish tell them that there were Jews hiding on the farm and how they’re hiding and what they’re doing. Then they would start coming with their bayonets. If the ground is soft, somebody’s hiding under there. If the ground is hard, they walked away. That’s what happened. It was hard because there were boards. So they walked away.”

As many as ten times authorities came to check out the first farm to see if Jews were hiding there. And each time they failed to discover Maria and others living under the barn floor.

Maria said the farmer who first hid them eventually told them the village had been cleared of Jews, and that some farmers who had agreed to hide Jews “got tired of it.” So these farmers called the Polish police and told them there were Jews on their property who had come to rob them. In response to this allegation, Germans went out to those farms, “and they killed those Jews right on those places,” Maria said.

This kind of betrayal was not uncommon, even claiming members of Maria’s family as victims. Her husband’s brother, for instance, gave his family’s flour mill business to local non-Jews and told them they could keep it if his family did not survive the war. So, Maria said, those people told authorities where to find that Jewish family, guaranteeing they would not survive.

“After several months,” she said, the man hiding her brother-in-law and his family “called the Polish police saying, ‘The robbers have come to rob us.’ The police came out. He opened the door and the police saw Jews.

“‘They came to rob you?’ [the police asked.]

“‘Yes.’

“They killed one after another.”

There were lots of cases like that, Maria said. “Matter of fact, I had a girlfriend where the two sisters were hiding also on a farm and they had a store of leather goods. And they also signed over their store to a farmer, and he did the same thing.”

In this hostile and volatile atmosphere, Maria said, “the Polish police were going around looking for Jews and making themselves important for the Germans.” Indeed, when Polish authorities, collaborating with the Germans, found Jews in hiding, she said, they usually killed them, but not before calling in “the Gestapo to be witnesses to what they’re doing. They didn’t do it on their own.”

As Maria discovered, sometimes the life of a Jew was not deemed to be worth two suits of clothes.

One of her brothers, David, escaped from a camp to which authorities had sent him, she said. Jusick managed to pick him up and bring him “to our hiding place. And, of course, we didn’t have enough money to pay for one more man.
We couldn’t get much money.” Whatever money they had they already had given to Jusick so he could use it to pay the farmer for hiding them. Others could not be added to the original deal without more money changing hands.

To raise more money to cover the cost of hiding him, “my brother had to go find the places where we had left some goods from our business.” So one night, between midnight and four o’clock in the morning, he slipped out of the hiding place and went to pick up some men’s clothes he had stored away. His thought was to give them to Jusick to sell to raise funds.

“But,” Maria said, the man who was keeping his brother’s merchandise told him, “I’ll buy from you a couple suits.” His brother agreed and sold him two suits for thirty zloty, she later learned (zloty are still the Polish currency).

“My brother was happy because he felt that would help to buy some fruit. He started to walk back to our place. He had to go through a cemetery in order for nobody to see him. He could hide behind the stones. He came into the middle of the cemetery, and somebody walked out from the stones.”

It was, Maria said, the man who had bought the two suits. He killed Maria’s brother and took back the thirty zloty he had paid for the suits.

“I have to be honest with you. My life was like that. Maybe somebody else’s was different.”

A second brother, Shmuel, and his wife also spent some time in the hole under the first barn floor with Maria, her husband, and her mother, as did Maria’s sister, Pola Rubinek, and her teenage children, Shmuel and Alek. Pola survived and lived until age sixty-four in the Kansas City area. One of Pola’s sons was murdered when Polish police caught him outside his hiding place. The fate of the other boy is unknown.

In the hole the hours dragged. The place was cold and dirty. There was almost nothing to do but talk or sleep. And the food was barely edible.

“At the farm,” Maria said, “the only time in the night when we got out of that hole was like between 12 and 4 [a.m.]. And my husband went out and got some water from the well and that’s the way we bathed and that’s the way we drink. Otherwise the farmer’s wife was cooking one time a day for the pigs—potatoes. That’s what she brought down to us.” It was gritty, and “we had to clean it up and eat that and the water that we brought in the middle of the night. That was our food for twenty-seven months. Never, ever any meat or any eggs or anything. You know what else she [the farmer’s wife] did? She baked bread. Once a week, on Saturday, she bakes bread. But she doesn’t give us a loaf of bread for all of us for the week. She waits. When the week is over and she bakes fresh bread, she gives us an old loaf. That’s why we don’t eat a lot because we break our teeth.” At telling this so many years later, Maria was able to laugh.

During the day they took heavy blankets from the horses in the barn and put them on the ground in the hole “because the ground was wet.” Maria said
The Stories

that because she knew how to crochet and sew, the farmer’s wife “brought me down material to make a little dress by hand for the [couple’s] child. She had a six-month-old girl and a six-year-old boy. She brought with her a light, a lamp, kerosene. And by this I would sit and cut and sew and make a little dress.”

That filled up one day. The next day the farmer’s wife had no work for them to do, so “I tell her bring me the Bible, bring me anything.” The farmer, she explained, “didn’t want to go to the city to buy a newspaper because he didn’t know how to read. He said if you buy a newspaper they would accuse him of something. But they had a Bible and they had little children’s books. I was twenty-two then. Anyway, we didn’t take anything from home because we didn’t have enough time. Whatever we wear, the clothes, that’s what we had all the time.” By the time Soviet troops liberated that part of Poland, she had no shoes to wear because “my feet was still growing and I couldn’t get into the shoes what I had.” So she wrapped her feet in horse blankets.

In late spring of 1944, the farmer returned from church one day and told Maria and her family that someone in church had said to him, “Vładick, you holding some Jews?”

And he said, “Why?”

The man replied, “How do you have money to build a house?”

Maria explained that the farmer, using the money he received for hiding the family, was building a house using bricks as a replacement for what she called his “little shack.” The farmer denied hiding Jews.

“No,” he said, “I just accumulate the brick, picked up from the cemeteries” and elsewhere. Maria said that her husband, who was six years older than she was, thought the farmer’s story was a warning for them to get away.

“That was Sunday,” Maria said. “Monday night we all—five of us were left because my brother was killed already—we all left his place and go into another place.” This second farm was not one Jusick arranged. Rather, one of Maria’s brothers had met the farmer while in the wheat business, and he knew him to be terribly poor.

“He was a poor, poor farmer,” Maria said. So Maria and the others just showed up and asked to be hidden. They agreed to pay him what little money they had left—and they promised him more if they survived—and “he was pleased with it.”

To get to the second farm, in the nearby village of Olszowska, they got dressed in farm clothes and carried baskets as if they were going to or returning from market. They “walked in the middle of the night,” picking a path that avoided the German army. That meant walking through an area controlled by Volksdeutsch.

As they passed by a school, a man said in German, “Where are you going?”

Maria said they told him in German, simply, “Home.”
“And he said, ‘What do you have?’ thinking we had vodka or something because usually the farmers used to buy on Monday. And I answered him, ‘Eggs.’ Eggs they’re not interested in.”

In response, the man said, “Go to hell!” in Polish.

So, she said, they “walked through. We didn’t walk through because he let us go through but because Somebody above us make that possible. We call it a nes, a miracle.”

At the new hiding place, Maria said, the farm family “hardly had food for themselves.” The farmer there was a poor sharecropper who nonetheless shared whatever he had. “We didn’t have too much but we survived.”

In January 1945, Maria said, she and her family learned that Soviet troops were getting closer, and thus, liberation would not be long coming. One day the farmer came to tell them what they suspected based on the noises they had heard in the middle of the night. The Soviets had arrived. But Maria and her family were skeptical.

“Go and get a newspaper,” they told him.

But he said, “I don’t know how to read.”

So Maria and her family said, “We’re not taking chances.” And they remained hidden for another day.

The next day they heard Soviet troops on the farm coming in for baths and for food. So they came out of hiding and found a Soviet soldier in a military vehicle. They asked if it was possible now for them to go to their city without fear of dying at the hands of the Germans, and they were told it was safe.

“There were too many people for them to take us [to the city] and we didn’t have the nerve to ask for this,” she said. “Nobody really could speak good Russian, but we could speak German, we could speak Polish. He understood us even in the Polish language and he said, ‘No, you don’t have to worry about it. We all are occupying this part of Poland, the cities.’”

Because Maria had no shoes, the farmer gave her rags from the blankets used by the horses. She and the others walked eleven miles to Wodzisław. “There were two Jews in the city already. They had come out from the place where they were hiding.”

Finally, a few more Jews came into the city, but Maria said the non-Jews there were not happy to see any of them. “They didn’t treat us like we were welcome.”

In fact, the cold-shoulder reception got personal for Maria. She went to see the woman whom she had called her best friend, a member of the mayor’s family. Maria had left all her clothes with her when she went into hiding. And, as Maria explained, these were not just ordinary clothes. “We had nothing but the best and I left her everything. And she was not even my size. She was taller than I was.”

But when Maria knocked on the door, she didn’t get the happy welcome she expected. Instead the woman simply said to her, “You still alive?”
“I thought she was going to grab me and hug me and be so happy that I survived,” Maria said. Indeed, it is one reason Maria Devinki never returned to Poland.

**After the War**

Maria and her husband soon moved to a bigger city, Sosnowiec, just northeast of Katowice. There, they opened a grocery store. Her mother stayed in Wodzislaw to be with Maria’s brother, Shmuel, but she joined them in Sosnowiec after people Maria identified as antisemites killed Shmuel in May 1945.

“I start operating a store and started making good money,” Maria said. “We were doing wonderful.” Before long, however, Jusick came to Sosnowiec. “And he said to me in Polish, ‘I want you to leave the city, leave the business, leave everything.’ I said, ‘What I did wrong now?’ He said, ‘They killed your brother. And they were looking for your husband.’ I said, ‘Who?’ He said, ‘The A.K. [Armia Krajowa],’ the very militia in which Jusick served as part of the Polish resistance.

“I said, ‘You were at the meeting [of the A.K.] and you heard this?’ He said, ‘Yes.’”

So she had to pack up and leave. She could not “even go back to the funeral of my brother. So they buried my brother. I don’t know where.”

Maria and her husband had some money as well as jewelry and clothing that they had picked up back in Poland after the Soviets liberated their territory. So they went to Kraków to speak to a lawyer there whom they had known before the war.

“I said to him, ‘I have money. I got a grocery store and I made a good chunk of money. I give you all the money. Work out something for me to go over the German border.’ And he arranged a truck, a Russian truck, to take me to the Czech border. From there we got into Prague, and from Prague we got into Regensburg, Germany. This was 1945, November.”

There Maria and Fred created a textile business, and Maria gave birth to their son, Sam. From there, in 1950, the family, including her mother, moved to Kansas City.

Maria kept in touch with Jusick after the war. “In his eyes,” she said, “it was not the money. In his eyes it was he’s going to save human beings. Now, I tell you frankly, I was sending Jusick money all through the years. The minute I arrived in Germany and we opened a business and we would make money, I would send money to Jusick to help. And we got to the United States and bought a truck, Chevrolet, and send it to Jusick, because I know that the Germans took everything away from him. They still had something but they didn’t have enough. And I was sending money until he passed away [in the 1990s]. But I never sent a
penny and I never got in touch with the first farmer.” Maria learned from Jusick that the second farmer died “a long time ago, before we even got to Germany.”

Maria’s niece from Canada once went to Poland and took with her some money for Jusick, but he told her he really did not need the money any more. Maria reported that instead, he said, “‘I need pictures. I want to know if she’s still as pretty as she was.’ He didn’t care about my money, he cared about just me. And because of me he saved my husband, though he had no interest in my husband. And because of me my mother was saved.”

When Maria and Fred Devinki first moved to Kansas City, they ran several grocery stores, and Maria worked for a time in a department store. Then she borrowed a couple of thousand dollars from a cousin and bought a piece of property that the Kansas City Life Insurance Company wanted for a parking lot. Selling this property to Kansas City Life led to the creation of Devinki Real Estate, a Kansas City company that, with her son, Sam, she was still operating at the time this book was researched. Fred Devinki died in June 1993.

Maria has given a lot back to the community through such organizations as the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, which she served as vice president of the board and for which she has been named a director emeritus.