

Miriam Winter:
The Girl Behind the Mask

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In 1939 approximately one million Jewish children lived in Poland. By the end of World War II, only about 5,000 survived (“Quest” [online]). Most of these survivors outlived the Nazi regime through hiding- not only physically but also by merging into Aryan or Polish, and usually Christian, society. Such was the case with Polish-born Miriam Winter. Although she faced many hardships during her hiding throughout World War II, the most devastating effects of her integration into Christian peasant life were the damages wrought upon her psyche.

On June 2 in 1933 the girl now known as Miriam Winter was born in Łódź, Poland to Tobjasz and Majta-Laja Winter. Her family was loving; she was raised with close relations to her Hassidic parents and extended family. Miriam was six when World War II began. Tighter constrictions and the fear of deportation drove the Winters in the fall of that year to the largest ghetto in Poland- the Warsaw ghetto (Winter 31). Warsaw’s rough conditions worsened during the winter, causing the Winters’ relocation to the Ozarow ghetto shortly before the sealing of Warsaw in November of 1940 (Zornberg 3).

By 1941, conditions for Jews had deteriorated so drastically that Tobjasz and Majta began to lose hope. Miriam was soon sent away with a Jewish woman named Cesia, bearing a new name of Marysia Kowalska and a copy of the Lord’s Prayer which she was to memorize. On the train leaving Ozarow Miriam and Cesia met a food smuggler named Maryla; soon Maryla arranged to care for Marysia at her apartment in Lwow (Winter 43). Confined inside its walls, Marysia cooked and cleaned while waiting for her new *mamusia*’s return from work. Although she had been ordered never to come near the window, the lure of children’s laughter one day proved too much for her:

I stepped back into the apartment, but it was too late. The children had already noticed me and had begun to yell, ‘Zydowa [Jewess]! Zydowa!

Zydowa!' I pulled the curtains together tightly, but the calls did not cease. Their screams kept coming at me louder and louder. (Winter 49)

Security was elusive as Marysia and Maryla relocated to the small village named Czudec and the home of a woman named Magda. Czudec was the first rural town in which Marysia had ever lived; however, she still faced many challenges in addition to hiding her identity such as arduous physical tasks. After two more discoveries and relocations, in November 1941, the same month that Auschwitz was established, Marysia came to stay with a widow named Maslowa in Wola Rzedzinska (Zornberg 3). As in most of Poland, the villagers of Wola Rzedzinska were farmersⁱ. Life with Maslowa therefore consisted of daily chores including taking the cow to pasture. Once, frightened by a gander, Marysia was beaten after failing to draw water from the well due to her terror. Because of separation from children her own age, homesickness, and harsh treatment, she became intensely lonely:

This first beating in my life was followed by others, and I hardened. But it was harder to live without tenderness. I came from a warm loving family. At home I was hugged, caressed, patted, kissed, and I missed it terribly. I longed for a simple pat. I wanted to be touched, but my life was devoid of any sign of affection. (Winter 56)

In this town she was introduced to Christianity since the village school was run by the *Siostry Sluzebniczki*, or "Sisters of Service". As every contact severed Marysia from her old life, she became intensely involved in religion: "My only attachment was to my new religion. I loved Jesus, I wanted to serve him, and I waited to be baptized," (Winter 56). There were two major factors for this love: the kindness shown to her by the sisters at the school and the security she perceived for local Christian children.

Although Christianity provided a measure of strength for Marysia, it also became part of an emotional battle between her new identity and her old. One catechism given to

her by Sister Klara proclaimed anti-Semitism, depicting leering Jews chanting “Crucify him, crucify him!” as Jesus carried the cross. Seeing the “ugly and grimacing” faces covered with Hassidic clothing similar to her grandfather’s, Marysia became shameful: “I was guilty because I was Jewish. I saw myself in the paws of the Devil. As I looked at his pitchfork I knew that he would punish me soon,” (Winter 58). In part spurred on by this guilt, she memorized prayers from catechism and read religious books avidly; church seemed a safe-haven where Marysia could feel accepted. Sadly, when she went to be baptized the priest refused, saying he could not baptize her at a time when she might feel it was forced upon her. Although his intentions were noble, they caused Marysia to feel sinful and confused when she had to fake communion. His action also increased the danger of discovery.

Desperate for affection, the child remained with Maryla and her abusive boyfriend, Rysiu. In December of 1944, they left Lwow, to where they had returned after the July 27 German retreat, for Rysiu’s apartment in Lublin (Winter 105). In Lublin, Marysia was forbidden to attend school as she so desperately desired, since she was needed to sell sweets for Rysiu’s pastry business. Rysiu often beat her if she failed to vend enough: “‘You cursed Jew!’ he yelled. ‘Don’t you know better than to come back before all the pastries are sold? Don’t even try to bring any of this back. Next time I’ll lock you out,’” (Winter 131). Although Marysia loved both Maryla and Rysiu, she still felt the loneliness that had encompassed her earlier and often wished to have the same loving treatment given to their Saint Bernard. Despite this, her loyalty persisted to the extent that she refused an offer to leave with two scouts assisting Jewish war orphans: “‘After everything that I did for you,’ Maryla said to me, ‘You will betray me like Christ-

killers betrayed Jesus Christ.' She held my hand and whispered, 'Don't go with them,' and I obeyed," (Winter 143).

Although Marysia eventually regained her freedom at the age of fifteen in September 1948, the greatest effects of the war- her emotional problems gained during that period- persisted late into her adulthood. She retained her Christian "mask" and nameⁱⁱ, although restoring her original birthdate, through her education and even marriage in 1963. In 1967 she finally reclaimed her identity as Miriam Winter and fledⁱⁱⁱ to Italy with her husband and son (Winter 189). Even after immigrating to America, she continued to deal with guilt- guilt for leaving her family, guilt for not trying to find them, guilt for remaining with Maryla^{iv}, and guilt for living while her family died. In 1991 Winter learned of her family's fate: the Jews from Ozarow were taken to the death camp Treblinka; her family was included in the 850,000 killed there ("Timeline" [online]). Today Winter is reunited with both her cousin Celia and Cesia but continues to search for the rest of her family. Her mother's forgotten face continues to haunt her to this day.

Endnotes

ⁱ While separation from her family and the children of the towns affected Miriam emotionally, the rurality of the towns in reality protected her from the sweeping reach of the German Front.

ⁱⁱ Winter often refers to her Christian identity as a mask she wore throughout her schooling, continuing the analogy to imply the thick layer of safety it gave her: “Have I ever known how to be myself? Haven’t I worn countless, deceiving masks? How many have I had?” (Winter 186). Her word choice is especially appropriate in relation to her chosen career- acting.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although she had confessed her true identity to her husband Romek, Miriam publicly revealed her Jewish background as an involuntary reaction to the Polish government’s condemnation of Israel during the Six Day War. Winter was then asked to write a letter to the newspaper condemning Jews; when she refused, she was fired (Winter 190).

^{iv} In 1994 as a result of a letter written by Miriam, Maryla was named “Righteous among Nations” by Yad Vashem, the Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Israel. A tree with Maryla’s name now grows in Yad Vashem’s Forest of the Righteous (“Righteous” [online]).

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