

A Match Made in Hell: The Jewish Boy and the Polish Outlaw Who Defied the Nazis

Larry Stillman

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"I can remember crawling out from beneath my father's lifeless body. It was with absolute certainty that I knew he was dead." These opening statements set the tone of this story of rescue and survival in Poland during World War II and the Holocaust, which the author wrote from the testimony of Morris Goldner.

In 1943, Goldner was sixteen years old, and his mother and twin sister had been killed by the Nazis. Goldner and his father had been hiding in the forest for eighteen months when a Nazi informer killed his father and left the boy with gunshot and bayonet wounds.

The Polish outlaw of the title was Jan Kopec. (Stillman uses a pseudonym so as not to embarrass the man's present-day family.) Kopec had been sent to Auschwitz Concentration Camp, one of many able-bodied Poles who were used there as forced labor. He escaped, and found Goldner near death from his wounds.

Kopec, who came from Goldner's own farming village, had been a wanted criminal long before the German occupation. At the time fate brought the two together, Kopec was also hiding from the Nazis in the forest, looking for ways to profit from his criminal expertise.

For a year and a half, Kopec hid and protected Goldner. He trained the boy first to help in robberies and black market activities, and later to carry out acts of sabotage and reconnaissance, including blowing up German trains filled with soldiers, tanks, and heavy equipment.

When they became separated, Goldner was picked up by Russian troops and, when the war ended, he was sent to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. He eventually came to Chicago, where he still lives. Kopec returned home and died in 1946.

The author, a writer living in Lake Forest, Illinois, spent hundreds of hours interviewing Goldner, then traveled to Poland and interviewed Kopec's surviving children and other Poles.

What Goldner came to understand was that not only did he and Kopec use each other to survive, but that over time their disparate personality traits rubbed off on each other. Goldner taught the man, to whom bullying and robbing had long been second nature, that it was all right to care for another human being, even a Jew. Kopec taught the once-sheltered teenager to stand up to any adversary. As Kopec observed one day to Goldner, "Our time together has made you tough as nails. And me, I must be getting soft."

The book is an exceptional memoir of the Holocaust: it chronicles the personal and symbiotic relationship between a Christian and a Jew in an era of unfathomable hatred.

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