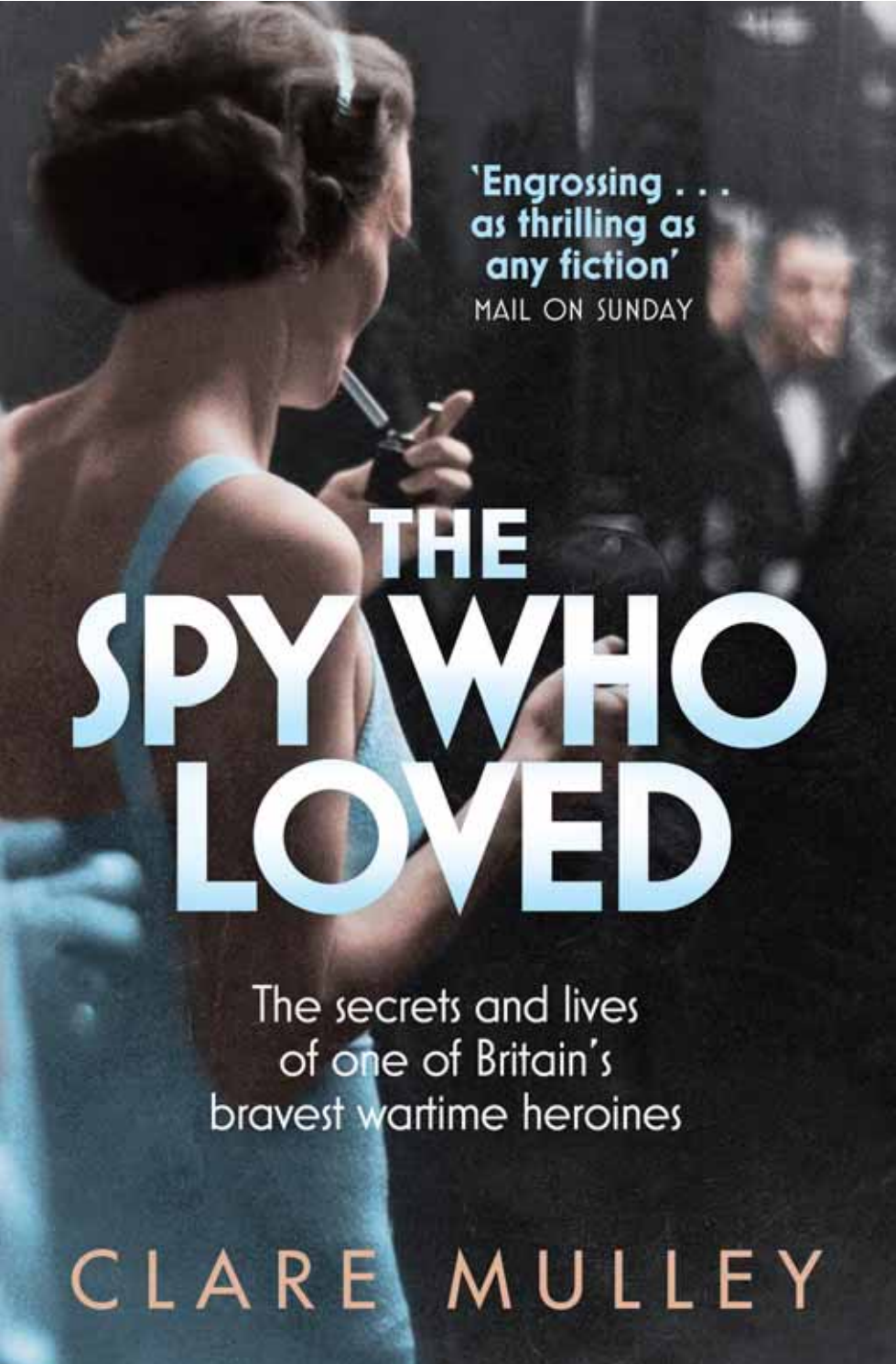
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CLARE MULLEY

1: BORDERLANDS

Perhaps appropriately for a secret agent, the deceptions and confusions that surround Christine's life start with her birth.* One story has it that Christine was born at the Skarbek family estate on a stormy spring evening in 1915, and that her arrival coincided with the appearance of Venus, the evening star, in the sky. As a result she was nicknamed 'Vesperale'. In an even more romantic version of events, she was born 'in the wild borderlands between Poland and Russia', to a family that was noble, 'tough, used to invasions, warfare, Cossacks, bandits and wolves'.[1] In fact Christine arrived in the world on Friday 1 May 1908. One of her father's childhood nicknames for her was 'little star', but she was born at her mother's family house on Zielna Street, in central Warsaw, now the capital of Poland. Then, however, Warsaw was technically in Russia. Poland as we know it today was not a recognized country: apart from a brief reappearance, courtesy of Napoleon, for more than a century Poland had been partitioned into three sections, each of them subsumed into the empires of Russia, Austro-Hungary and Prussia. Christine was born into a family of aristocratic patriots, loyal to a country that would not officially exist again until she was ten years old.

She was a small and seemingly frail baby, so frail in fact that her parents feared for her life, and she was hastily baptized Maria Krystyna Janina Skarbek by a local priest less than two weeks after her birth. Five years later, Christine would go through the rite a second time in Bęczkowice, where her parents had moved in 1913.

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* Although she was 'Krystyna' until 1941, to prevent confusion I consistently use her adopted name, 'Christine', of which, she later wrote, she was so proud.

The record of this second event has somehow survived in the local parish archive despite a series of wars and regime changes. Written in Russian, it was dated with the Russian Julian and Polish Gregorian calendars, as both the 17 and 30 November 1913.[2] The Church does not officially sanction second baptisms, but Christine's parents, one a rather lapsed Roman Catholic, the other a non-practising Jew, had long wanted a more elaborate celebration of their daughter's arrival than had been possible at her birth. Their move out of Warsaw had conveniently provided a new local parish priest with whom to make arrangements.

Two certificates of baptism, five years apart and showing three different dates, serve as notice for Christine's birth. But she has a single death certificate, part typed, part closely penned into the printed boxes of a Royal Borough of Kensington register office form. Here her given name is 'Christine Granville', her occupation is listed as 'former wife', and although the certificate is dated 1952, her age is recorded as just thirty-seven. Somewhere between 1908 and 1952, Warsaw and London, life and death, she had changed name and nationality, left two husbands and numerous lovers, won international honours but buried her career, and cut seven years from her life.

Christine's father, Count Jerzy Skarbek, was a charming man. Described by his cousins as darkly attractive with 'a seductive little moustache', and by his nieces as 'a very handsome man of patrician beauty', he had that enviable ability to be at once hugely popular among his male friends, and almost irresistibly attractive to women, who seemed to constantly surround him.[3] But the Count's dark good looks were matched by his dark intentions. He was the archetypal aristocratic cad and bounder.

Jerzy Skarbek led a privileged life, typical of the landed gentry and very far from the struggle for existence faced by much of the Polish population in the late nineteenth century. The Count had been a 'master' since childhood, accustomed to having a valet and a groom. It was part of the innate order of the world. And yet, arguably, Jerzy Skarbek was not a Count at all.

With the exception of some Lithuanian princely families, histor-

ically Poland's large enfranchised class, or 'szlachta', did not hold aristocratic titles. It was traditional for them to regard each other as equals, to be addressed as 'dear brother', and even – when Poland was still an independent country – to elect the Polish king. But many of the ancient nobility became so impoverished that they were effectively peasants with coats-of-arms. And many families who sported illustrious titles, as opposed to simply having noble names, owed these to their imperial overlords, who were, as a rule, buying favours. It was the Russian tsar Nicholas I who granted the Skarbeks' title in the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that Jerzy Skarbek was not descended from this branch of the family made little difference to his social status. He was known to be a member of one of the oldest families in Poland, and was certainly accepted as an aristocrat in the circles that he believed mattered.*

Jerzy Skarbek certainly felt the honour of his family keenly, and any perceived slight rankled. As a child Christine remembered him rising from the table when a guest claimed descent from the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski. '[And I am] descended from a cobbler!' Jerzy responded with some style, referring to the medieval Kraków cobbler who had killed the fabled Wawel dragon by enticing it to devour a sheepskin stuffed with sulphur, and from whom he claimed descent.[4] Few families boast a dragon-killer among their ancestors, let alone one who then married a king's daughter. There were plenty more such stories in which the Skarbeks' history was intertwined with Polish legends, and these would later fuel Christine's own deeply held sense of personal, family and national pride. The one piece of jewellery that she wore throughout her life was not a wedding ring, but a Skarbek signet ring. This was designed with a slice of iron embedded in its face to commemorate the defiant eleventh-century Skarbek who would not bow to a German emperor for all his war chests of gold. Instead the proud

* Jerzy Skarbek referred to himself as Count, and was named as such in his press obituary and on his tombstone. Christine listed her parents as Count and Countess Skarbek on her British Certificate of Naturalisation, dated December 1946, and elsewhere. For Polish genealogy and titles see Tomasz Lenczewski, 'The Marriage of Coats of Arms and Accounts', *Rzeczpospolita*, 22 VII (2008).

Pole defiantly tossed his gold ring into the German coffers, shouting, 'Let gold eat gold, we Poles love iron!' The insulted emperor was later routed in a great battle when Polish swords indeed proved their might over the mercenary imperial German forces.

Not all notable Skarbeks had been so warlike, however. The nineteenth-century count Fryderyck Florian Skarbek was a highly respected economist, historian, author and social and political activist who, as president of the Charities Council, had introduced many important social reforms. Count Fryderyck had grown up on the family estate of Zelazowa Wola in the flat but not particularly productive plains west of Warsaw, where he was tutored by a distant relative called Nicholas Chopin. The estate was not hugely rich, and the house itself was quite modest, with the traditional long stretch of low rooms flanking a four-column portico entrance with balcony above. Despite the grand piano in the drawing room, it was essentially a comfortable family home, with geese and ducks free to wander on the porch. When the tutor's son was born in 1810, he was named after the count, who had sensibly been invited to be the boy's godfather. Fryderyck Chopin's first printed work, a polonaise, would be dedicated 'to Her Excellency Countess Victoria Skarbek, composed by Fryderyck Chopin, a musician aged eight'.[5] Count Fryderyck probably paid for the piece to be published, which would account for its dedication to his sister, and he went on to be one of Chopin's earliest and most ardent supporters. The Skarbek family remained immensely proud of the connection, especially when, after Chopin's death in 1849, he was widely regarded as the embodiment of Poland's nationalist politics and poetic spirit.

Jerzy Skarbek had inherited a noble name, a rich family history, and little sense of restraint. The Skarbeks owned acres of land, an assortment of houses, a collection of farms, and stables full of thoroughbred horses, but by his mid-twenties Jerzy's indulgence in wine and women, roulette and racing had quickly diminished his income. In 1898 his family arranged for him to marry an exceedingly wealthy, clever and 'absolutely beautiful' Jewish banking heiress.[6] In December that year, Stefania Goldfeder, newly baptized, was delighted to be embraced into the fold of one of Poland's oldest

families. The marriage was solemnized in the rites of the Helvetic Reform Church, apparently acceptable to both the Roman Catholic Skarbeks and the Goldfeders, who were non-observant Jews.

The wedding caused a scandal, albeit a minor one. No one in Warsaw had any doubts about the bridegroom's motives, and there were some knowing smiles when the society pages chose to celebrate the Goldfeder family as belonging to 'a class of financiers actively involved in the task of the material reconstruction of our martyred nation'.[7] Jews, once sheltered by the Polish Commonwealth, had been heavily discriminated against by the Russian occupiers, and although there was a small assimilated Jewish intelligentsia, most Polish Jews spoke a different language, ate different food and wore different clothes. They were a source of curiosity, to be patronized or avoided. Even assimilated Jewish families were still subject to social ostracism, and if Jewish doctors and lawyers were popular it was partly because they brought with them a certain sort of professional distance. Once Jerzy and Stefania's wedding ceremony was over, the members of the nobility and those of 'the financial circles' went their own ways, each with good reason to frown upon the motives of the other in this union. But while it was said that Jerzy did not marry Stefania, but rather he married her money, it is perhaps equally true that Stefania married the noble Skarbek name. The following year Jerzy bought a grand country estate at Młodzieszyn, which he felt both befitted a married man of his station, and was far enough removed to soften some of the noisier Warsaw gossip.*[8]

The Goldfeders were not without their own conceits and connections, however, mostly among rich merchant bankers and industrialists. Christine would later laugh that while her Skarbek cousins had names reminiscent of the marble plaques adorning Warsaw's churches, the Goldfeder relatives were even better known, displayed as they were among the shop signs in Warsaw's most fashionable

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* Jerzy Skarbek is listed as the landowner of the Wechadlow estate, in the Pinczo district, where Christine probably lived until she was three years old, when they moved to Trzepnica.

streets. The Goldfeder bank itself was a beautiful three-storey building, with French windows on the upper floors leading to balconies overlooking the broad streets in the centre of the city.* But the Goldfeders also had respectably cultured connections. Stefania had two younger brothers. One married the sister of André Citroën, the motor magnate; the other became the Polish honorary consul for Japan. Their mother, Roza Goldfeder, the unchallenged matriarch of the family, lived in considerable style between her houses in Warsaw and the country – a style that Stefania was keen to maintain. Stefania's furs and dresses were imported from Paul Poiret in Paris, her pleated negligees from Mario Fortuny in Venice. Guerlain supplied her perfume, as they had Queen Victoria's. Her eau de toilette came from Lubin, historic Paris perfumiers to the Empress Josephine, and to supplement her heirlooms, Stefania's jewels were created for her by Bulgari in Rome. All of this show Jerzy Skarbek understood. He too liked the fine things in life: his Bunting riding boots, 'for the hunt, polo and the park', were imported from London and Paris, and his bay rum hair tonic came from Vienna. Together Jerzy and Stefania toured Europe with a large retinue of servants, collecting small business cards and paying large bills.

However, beyond their love of luxury and deep respect for social status, the newly-weds had little in common. Not only was Stefania Jewish, she was also intelligent and well educated, having been immersed in European culture, and she was essentially kind-hearted and 'much respected and liked by everyone'.[9] One story has her arranging for the daughter of the family's cook to have a prosthetic leg fitted after discovering that the girl had been hidden away for fear that her parents might lose their jobs. She then employed the girl for many years. Once the newly-weds had returned to Poland, Stefania yearned for the peace in which to read literature and poetry, and the time to listen to music. She did not mind the country-house hunts and shooting parties, or even Jerzy's visits to

* The Warsaw address of the Goldfeder bank was ul. Zielna 45. It formed part of the ghetto border before it was destroyed during the war.

the casino, but she could not find lasting happiness with a husband who fundamentally did not respect her, and who refused to curb his womanizing upon marriage. But, so long as appearances were maintained and funds were available, Jerzy saw no reason to change his lifestyle to suit anyone other than himself.

Stefania, at least, was fulfilling her side of the marriage bargain. Having restored the family fortune, in 1900 she completed her duties by producing a Skarbek heir. But Jerzy was disappointed in his son, Andrzej, who seemed to lack his own robust constitution and lust for life. Perhaps most damningly, Andrzej was not keen on riding, and would shelter behind his mother's skirts at the very sound of approaching horses; whether it was the arrival of the horse or the rider that caused him most anxiety is not recorded. It would be another eight years before Stefania safely delivered Christine. Although slight enough to cause concern at her birth, and staying slender as she grew, Christine soon proved herself to be tough and strong-willed and was drawn at once to her powerful, charismatic father. Jerzy meanwhile liked to think that Christine, unlike his son, had inherited his Skarbek good looks. Delighted to see his reflection in his daughter, he gave her his almost exclusive affection, calling her his 'Happiness' and his 'Star'.

At the beginning of 1912, when Christine was three, Jerzy bought another manor house, this time at Trzepnica in the Łódź uplands whose rivers run into the Vistula. As Stefania was named joint owner in the deeds it is likely that the 200,000 roubles it took to buy the estate from a famous Polish opera singer came from the Goldfeder fortune. The Trzepnica house followed the traditional style, built in rendered brick, long and low, and given distinction by a colonnaded portico, under which the family's dogs would greet arriving guests, 'their eager paws leaving sandy imprints on their clothes'.[10]

The formal family rooms, with their polished parquet floors, ornate stucco ceilings and French windows, were heated by a huge and beautifully painted porcelain wood-burning stove. Family portraits in gilded frames, some adorned with heraldic coronets, covered the walls. It was all very fine, but Christine rarely gazed into her ancestors' eyes or sat in the Biedermeier chairs, and she learnt early

on not to risk setting even a vase of flowers on the rosewood-inlaid table from Zelazowa Wola, upon which her great-grandfather was said to have held the infant Chopin to be baptized. These rooms, filled in summer with a soft green light filtered through the maples beyond the windows, and in winter with 'the shadowless reflection of snow on the lawn', were Stefania's sanctuary, and held little appeal for her energetic daughter.[11] More fun were the annexes for guests, tutors and nurses, and the numerous kitchens and larders that kept the estate pretty much self-sufficient.

The house was surrounded by acres of beautiful gardens, the more formal lawns bordered by roses, flowering cherries, maples, and ancient oaks so large that four men clasping hands could not reach around them. Beyond, a meadow led to a series of paddocks, woods and farm fields, all with their own outbuildings, and all belonging to the manor. In fact the estate was so large that it contained three small villages: Trzepnica, Jelica, and, two kilometres away, Bęczkowice, the steeple of whose parish church could be seen, rising above the flat horizon, from the porch of the house.

For a few years Jerzy revelled in the role of local landowner, holding grand house parties, hunts, dinners and receptions for his two brothers and his sister, his distant but wealthy Skarbek cousins from Lwów, and his society friends. He would show Christine off at these occasions, at first proudly lifting his pretty dark-haired daughter high to the ceiling, or standing her on a table and asking her to sing to them. Later he enjoyed watching his guests choke back their often coarse vocabulary to fit the sudden presence of the young lady now curtsying before them, her almond-shaped eyes demurely lowered but still taking it all in. Their 'cogs were visibly screeching', Christine would later laugh.[12]

Despite such distractions, Jerzy quickly grew bored with his country seclusion, and was already tired of his socially questionable wife. Much as he loved his fiery young daughter, even Christine did not suffice to keep him home for long, and his visits to friends' estates and to Warsaw were ever extended. Even there he could not entirely disassociate himself from his wife. A scurrilous song popular in Warsaw at the time ran: 'Listen Count and take heed, not to step

into debt. It may land you in a stew, having as a wife, the daughter of a Jew.'[13] His response was to drink hard, and laugh harder. As a child Christine could never understand why people would laugh at her father's jokes recalling family stories about Chopin and causing hilarity with his imitations of Polish Jews speaking Polish, and yet when her grandparents spoke with the same accent it wasn't funny. And when his friends praised Jerzy as a master at 'little Jewish jokes', he would only reply darkly that he had paid dearly for the knowledge. Stefania responded by retreating increasingly to the sanctuary of her upstairs room, laid low with migraines.

Too young to understand the dynamic between her parents, Christine felt more and more irritated, and slightly embarrassed, by her mother and her constant indisposition. Her father, conversely, seemed strong, handsome and obviously wonderful. Widely adored but unconstrained by those around him, delighting in life and yet wearing it lightly, to Christine her father embodied the romantic, courageous and fiercely independent spirit of Poland. Spending time with Jerzy was exciting and challenging and yet, unlike Stefania, he never had quite enough time for his daughter. Christine was already developing deeply divided feelings towards her parents, and forming a complex picture of love, loyalty and courage.

When Jerzy was at Trzepnica, Christine led a charmed, and very privileged, childhood, basking in her father's attention, and supported behind the scenes by her mother's love and money. Bright, adventurous and supremely self-confident, she had quickly eclipsed the older but more gentle Andrzej in Jerzy's affections, and as a child she was indulged with every opportunity and freedom. In summer she roamed the estate from sunrise until dusk, spending hours trying to spot deer or buck, searching for wild strawberries or climbing the great oaks. In winter she would be ferried between the snow-covered trees in a sledge drawn by horses straining at their bits, the coachmen holding the reins taut and standing erect, or she would seek out warmth and stories in the stables or servants' quarters. Sometimes, for instance after the leatherworkers' annual call to carry out repairs to the harnesses, she might even receive a present, such as a whip or a riding crop.

Ignoring Stefania's protests, Jerzy mounted Christine on a pony almost before she could walk, teaching her to ride confidently astride a horse like a man. She also learnt to hold a gun, use a knife, and tend to the estate animals. Alike in many ways, father and daughter loved nature, above all sharing a passion for dogs and horses, with whom they seemed to have a deep natural connection. Christine was rarely without a hound at her heels, even – to her mother's chagrin – inside the house.

The first races Christine watched were dachshund 'steeple-chases', set up among the topiary hedges on her aunt's sweeping lawns. But Jerzy was an enthusiastic horse-breeder whose colts ran on Warsaw's racetracks, and it was not long before Christine was racing first ponies, then her saddle-mare, Liza. She loved pleasing her father with each new achievement and soon learned to take pride in them herself. At one house party Jerzy walked his guests over the field to the stables, only to find that his fierce black stallion, Satan, who had thrown his last rider and broken the man's legs, was missing. The groom feared the horse must have been stolen, but after a while they noticed that Christine was missing too. Aged only twelve, she had saddled up the forbidden horse and was finally seen riding him back. Clearly, for Christine, there were already worse things than the risk of serious injury, such as being bored or perhaps being ignored. Later she would ride competitively with such success that one of Jerzy's younger friends, Colonel Bobinski, was reduced to unscrupulous tricks like distracting her horse by bringing out its stable-mate, to try to protect his bets. Christine just laughed at him. When she came in first her father would tell her not to take credit for her horse's victory, from which she understood that he was proud of her, but that she should also wear her pleasure as lightly as she took her knocks.

Christine always loved the exhilaration of competition, but she was equally happy riding out to inspect the Trzepnica fields with her father, and occasionally with her brother. She had quickly realized that with charm she could coax whatever she wanted from people. Animals responded to her. Land demanded greater respect. Like her father, she grew up to believe herself to be the lord, and

protector, of all she surveyed. But it was still the stables where she felt most at ease. One afternoon in 1919 she showed off the Skarbek stud to the young son of one of her father's friends, whom she had been left to entertain while the adults talked horses, business and politics. It was then, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, that a precocious eleven-year-old Christine first met Andrzej Kowerski, a boy of seven, who had also been riding since the age of three. Although not particularly notable at the time, it was a meeting that they would later recall quite differently: she with some amusement, he with a sense of the prophetic.

Two million Polish troops had fought with the various armies of their three occupying powers in the First World War, sometimes in opposing forces. Over half a million died. By then in his forties, Jerzy Skarbek was too old to have been called up, but he celebrated in style as the Russians were finally driven out of Warsaw in 1915, when Christine was seven years old, and three years later when the defeated Germans were also forced to withdraw. But although the capital was quickly festooned in red and white flags, and Poland was a nation once more, the end of the Great War did not mean the end of the conflict.

In the winter of 1919 the Bolsheviks prepared to export their revolution through Poland to Germany. By August the following year, the Red Army had reached Warsaw's defences and defeat seemed inevitable. But the Russian front collapsed in the face of a daring assault led by the country's newly appointed regent, Józef Piłsudski. In the 1880s Piłsudski had spent five years in Siberia supplying Lenin's brother with explosives to throw at the tsar, but he wasn't about to support Communism above the independence of his own nation. His brilliant attack on the Red Army outside Warsaw, which became known as the 'Miracle at the Vistula', crippled the Russian forces and brought an unexpected and decisive Polish victory. In Lenin's own words, the Bolsheviks 'suffered an enormous defeat' which effectively ended Soviet hopes for a cascade of Communist revolutions in Poland, Germany and other countries economically devastated by the First World War. Piłsudski was, in the words of one Polish historian, 'a national hero, embalmed in

the legend of a life of struggle for the freedom of Poland, embodying rebellion as well as authority'.[14] This celebration of the Marshal, as he became known, and all he stood for, made a deep impression on Christine.

Despite the inevitable years of political instability and economic depression that followed as war-torn Poland rebuilt itself as a cohesive nation, Warsaw quickly became one of the liveliest cities in Europe. Music, film and theatre flourished. The aristocracy might have lost many of their ranks and much of their property, but in Warsaw they continued to live in high style, Jerzy among them. One warm evening in 1920, he was distracted from a production of *Tosca* by the stench emanating from a soldier in some nearby seats. This young man was still in his uniform, with the heavy leather boots that were worn not with socks but strips of cloth, or webbing, wound round the feet. On his chest he wore the Virtuti Militari, Poland's highest military honour. Noticing that all the ladies nearby were turning their heads and covering their noses, Jerzy stood up and announced that the smell of a national hero was a perfume. He then invited the soldier to join him for vodka after the performance. The young man's name was Stanisław Rudziejewski and, only eight years older than Christine, he was soon a firm favourite of both father and daughter, and a regular at the Warsaw races and Trzepnica house parties. He also became an early confidant of Christine's, and someone to whom she would later turn in one of her greatest moments of need.[15]

Jerzy Skarbek was not known for his piety, so when, in 1920, he took Christine, then aged twelve, to Częstochowa at Jasna Gora, the Polish equivalent of Lourdes, it was as much a statement of patriotism as a journey of pilgrimage. Like thousands of others, Jerzy was giving thanks for the 'Miracle at the Vistula'. Whatever his motives, on arrival father and daughter did what every pilgrim did: offered a bow to the icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa and a nod to the priest, who then gave Christine a medal of the Madonna, believed to protect worthy bearers from misfortune. The famous Black Madonna of Częstochowa, 'Queen and Protector of Poland',

was brought to Poland from Jerusalem in 1382. According to legend, when it was stolen by Hussite plunderers just fifty years later, the horse carrying the icon refused to move. One of the thieves threw the painting to the ground, slashing it with his sword until it bled, whereupon he died in agony on the ground beside the bleeding image. Terrified, the other Hussites retreated. Christine treasured the medal, revealing perhaps a faith, or an inner vulnerability, that she otherwise chose to keep well hidden.

In 1921 Poland signed a peace treaty with Russia and the Ukraine, defining her eastern boundaries. Anticipating a period of stability, Jerzy and Stefania sent Christine hundreds of miles away to a well-known convent boarding school in Jazłowiec, a town that had been won for Poland with, it was believed, the help of the Blessed Virgin, after a long and bloody battle between Poland and the Ukraine.* Christine was fourteen, but as she was starting school two years later than most of her peers she was put into a class of twelve-year-olds. It was an inauspicious start. She was clever. She quickly excelled in French, the language in which the nuns took classes and corresponded with parents, and which well-educated Poles spoke amongst themselves when hoping to prevent their children from eavesdropping. She also enjoyed Latin, maths, drawing and singing, and was often top of her class in history, geography, nature studies and sport – all subjects that would stand her in good stead later in life. However, not used to having to toe the line, follow routines, or take instruction, Christine was naturally indisciplined, fractious and often bored. The school did not cater for this type of clever but 'difficult' child.

Established for the daughters of the Polish aristocracy, while their brothers were tutored at home or educated at boarding schools, lycées or militaristic boys' academies, the school aimed to turn out young women who were the embodiment of discipline and decorum. The girls were unquestioning thoroughbreds, privileged from birth and socially conservative, and although they formed

* The region around Jazłowiec fell under Soviet control with the outbreak of the Second World War. The town is now in the Ukraine.

a close-knit group, there was a clear hierarchy. Christine did not at first understand why, but it quickly grew obvious that she did not entirely fit in: something about her was embarrassing. The truth was that the girls of the 'best' families looked down on her for having a Jewish mother. However, it was also the case that few spirited girls were happy at the school. One of Christine's friends was expelled for imitating a dog barking during lessons, another first for standing on a pudding to prove it was inedible, and then refusing to wear her modesty-saving nightdress while having her bath.[16] A third was removed for climbing the trees in the grounds – not an offence in itself, but made so when done without knickers.

Perhaps Christine saw these examples as a challenge. Early every morning before breakfast, the girls had to attend mass. Almost all of them saw this as an ordeal. One dark winter morning Christine decided to test the priest's faith by setting light to his cassock. This was fairly easy to achieve as all the girls carried candles at mass. Would he stop his catechism, she wondered, or would he be saintly and keep going? Realizing – with unwarranted surprise – that he was on fire, she quickly helped to beat out the flames. The priest chose to be kind about the incident, even laughing with her about it. The Mother Superior, however, was not amused. Christine was expelled for unruly behaviour.[17]

She continued her education at a series of prestigious schools that included the Sacré Coeur at Lwów, in eastern Poland, eventually learning the useful ability to conceal her true feelings, and applying herself sufficiently to leave the system with some dignity when she was eighteen. She never considered submitting herself to any kind of further education, however. For her, real life was at Trzepnica, with or without her increasingly serious and silent older brother, or with her father in Warsaw. As she grew older, Jerzy began to take her to the opera. Once, when she was sixteen, she made him laugh when, after watching *Carmen*, she scrawled rather precociously across her programme, 'Love, it's blood, always blood'.[18] That same summer, on a family outing to pick mushrooms, she worried her mother by writing in the dusty path with a stick, 'I am waiting for you'. When Stefania asked to whom she was

referring, Christine replied she hadn't met him yet, but she was quite sure that the future held adventures.[19]

While Christine was moving from school to school, spending the holidays either at home or staying with her young Skarbek cousins, whom she dressed up as soldiers and enthralled with 'fascinating little stories', mostly about the horses at Trzepnica, Jerzy Skarbek continued to enjoy a lavish lifestyle, and invest in his stud. But the depression that followed the First World War not only made the farm at Trzepnica unprofitable, it also eroded the Goldfeder fortune. In 1926, when Christine was eighteen, the family bank went under and her parents were forced to auction first their furniture, including the Zelazowa Wola rosewood table, then the great oaks in the park, which broke Christine's heart, and finally the land, farms and house itself, all at a considerable loss. Being forced to leave Trzepnica was Christine's first, and perhaps bitterest, experience of exile. By the time that so many other families were uprooted from their ancestral estates during the Second World War, she had already, to some extent, been acclimatized to such upheavals. For her, that later invasion of her country would be an assault on her childhood memory of a perfect Poland, an idealized picture of oak trees, servants and stables – and of freedom, that in her heart she knew was already lost to her.

Three years later, Christine, now twenty-one, joined her mother and brother in a small apartment in Warsaw, closely hung with the family portraits.* Jerzy abandoned his wife and retreated to a series of health spas, treating his losses as a temporary inconvenience and openly living with another woman.† By now even Christine had to accept that her once beloved father had slowly descended into little more than an 'anti-Semitic drunk', a pathetic figure without the

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* Address unknown. Between 1931 and 1932 they lived at 6 Chocimska Street, Warsaw, and later Stefania moved to 15 Rozbrat Street.

† An undated Skarbek genealogy among Maryś Skarbek's family papers, probably produced by Jan Skarbek, and based on Jerzy Dunin-Borkowski's *Almanach Błękitny* (*Blue Almanac*), mentions a second wife for Jerzy Skarbek, listed simply under her family name: Kresiolowska. Jerzy could not have married Kresiolowska legally, but may have been living with her as his wife in Switzerland.

strength of character to sustain him through the disgrace of the forced sale of Trzepnica.[20] As a child she had adored him; now there was little left to admire. Another great oak had been felled, and try as she might Christine would never be able to replace it. Jerzy spent the next few years at Baden near Vienna where, 'after long and severe suffering', he died of tuberculosis in December 1930.[21] In death as in life, despite his reversal of fortune, no expense was spared for his comfort, and his body was returned to Poland to be buried in the family plot in Warsaw's famous Powązki Cemetery.

Christine's education had left her qualified for little other than being a good society wife. Her family's impoverishment, combined with her Jewish roots, now considerably reduced her chances of making a good marriage. But Christine was defiant, determined, wilfully independent and, though not classically beautiful, very aware of how far her handsome looks, charm and sheer force of personality could take her. The future was a challenge, and that was perhaps its greatest appeal.

2: TWO WEDDINGS AND A WAR

The snow fell softly on Poland's plains and pine forests in the long autumn and winter of 1929, creating the annual hush that was broken only by the muted sounds of hoofs, sleighs and church bells. But Warsaw was immune to the silence. Although the snow fell in the broad streets of the capital, great nets and street sweepers prevented the residents from being snowed into their apartments, and the church bells here competed with more insistent tram-bells, the screeching of wheels, and electric motors. Horse-drawn carriages clattered down the cobbled streets, and there were cars too, mostly luxury models, adding their own distinctly modern noises. As the evenings drew in, lamplighters would come ever earlier to light the street lamps. The summer's soda-water sellers had given way to vendors carrying trays of hot dumplings and roasted chestnuts, the balloons that hung from their poles lending some colour to the streets. Even in winter the city was still full of hawkers, barrel organs with shivering monkeys, kitchen-door callers, and elderly men registered as messengers with the city authorities, displaying their permit numbers on dark red-visored caps, who were willing to take on all types of tasks from delivering flowers or love letters to collecting parcels or buying theatre tickets.[1]

Christine was twenty-one years old, and ready for Warsaw's winter season. Being a Skarbek, she was invited to all the society parties, like those at the Wilanów Palace, where balls always started with a polonaise, debutantes wore floor-length white dresses, and all the ladies would be gloved. But for Christine, these evenings were often uncomfortable, as she was well aware that the older women were gossiping behind their fans about her family's recent misfortune and her Jewish blood. She soon preferred spending her

evenings in Warsaw's cinemas, smoky restaurants, pavement bars and poets' cafés, places called Piccadilly, Picador and, more tellingly, Oasis, Bacchus and Mirage. Polish society dictated that ladies should be chaperoned in such places, but Christine – shockingly – chose to go alone or accompanied by a variety of young men. Her long hair was soon briskly bobbed and set in precise waves to frame her heart-shaped face. Her lips were painted, and above her dark almond eyes her brows were plucked and brushed into pencil-thin strokes. Her high cheekbones and strong features carried the style remarkably well: at once modern, boyish above her slender frame, and yet sexy, it was a look that could have been tailor-made for her.

Life in Poland was changing, and where success had once been measured in immutability, it was now marked in the pace of transformation. The old Polish order, dressed in stiff collars, frock-coats and patent-leather shoes, was giving way to a new, more relaxed, generation, arriving at the theatre on bicycle rather than by horse-drawn cab, skiing, and taking tennis with their house parties. As women's knees appeared from under their skirts, men's faces also braved the new dawn, clean-shaven after generations of beards. And yet certain manners and social etiquettes were maintained. At large social gatherings men could be seen planting one kiss after another as the ladies remained seated in rows, the backs of their hands raised expectantly. The great Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz, who was only four years older than Christine and moved in the same circles, remembered a rowdy friend once 'sprawling on the sofa' with her and her friends at one such house party, before teasing them with a twinkle in his eye, 'You are not really fit for anything. It is not clear what you should be used for . . . we could tie you to the end of a rope for when furniture's being hoisted to an upper floor . . . or perhaps you ought to be planted, like a radish.' Sadly Gombrowicz did not record Christine's reaction to this banter, but it is unlikely that she found his friend as 'charming' and 'entrancing' as he did.[2]

While still enjoying her new-found freedom, but determined not to be a burden to her mother, Christine took an office job at

the capital's impressive Fiat dealership – a workplace that could hardly have been better chosen for meeting wealthy young men hoping to pick up a status symbol. Still, spending days being nice to potential clients and watching the city's street life through the huge display windows would have been dull for any girl who loved to be in the middle of the action, let alone a snobbish member of the once landed gentry with no experience of earning her living. What made it considerably worse was that Christine was slowly being poisoned by the exhaust fumes that rose up from the garage below. They left a permanent shadow on her lungs along with a lifelong aversion to office admin.

But it was at the Fiat offices that Christine first met Gustav Gettlich, a short but wealthy businessman of German origin, who was soon distracted from the Italian cars by the Polish receptionist. Four years older than Christine, Gustav was a very respectable director of a curtain company, who lived with his widowed mother. His father had been a Lieutenant Colonel and successful businessman from Pabianice, in central Poland. Gustav was now looking for the perfect '*pani domu*', a wife who would be an elegant hostess, entertain his clients, cook his meals, and provide him with children. Then he met Christine, who, over a series of evenings watching Garbo films in smoky cinemas before dining in Warsaw's finest restaurants, swept him off his sensible feet.

Soon after they met, her doctors advised Christine to spend time at the fashionable skiing town of Zakopane, high in the Carpathian mountains, whose clear air might help offset the damage caused to her lungs in the Fiat offices. Zakopane was a popular rendezvous for the wealthier Polish intelligentsia and Gustav now regularly checked into the exclusive Hotel Bristol there, before joining Christine on her guesthouse veranda. There they would relax in deckchairs, wrapped up in furs to watch the sun set after a long day in the mountains on heavy wooden skis. Then they went on together to the resort's many restaurants and bars, where they drank vodka and listened to live jazz late into the night. Christine's guesthouse was run by nuns, for girls from good families, and she

must have given them plenty to talk about as well-heeled young businessmen, officers and poets swarmed around her. She was 'absolutely beautiful', one writer recorded in his memoirs.[3]

But the close-knit Zakopane scene was not as anonymous as the bars of Warsaw. Christine's acquaintance Witold Gombrowicz later wrote – in rather patronizing terms – about 'the unfortunate creatures', as he called them, born of aristocratic marriages with Jews, who 'were never fully accepted in the salons'. Christine was 'a lovely young woman', he wrote, but 'in her presence Jewish topics were shunned . . . just as one never speaks of the gallows in the house of a hanged man'. One evening, when Gombrowicz and various young aristocrats had joined Christine on her Zakopane veranda, an older Jewish woman, 'broad in the beam and rather garishly dressed,' walked past. Seeing Christine she called out to her, 'Krysia, Krysia!' 'The company was immobilized with fear', Gombrowicz recalled. Ashamed of herself in more ways than one, Christine pretended not to hear until the woman shouted, 'Krysia Skarbek!' Sadly we don't know if Christine overcame her social paralysis: Gombrowicz leaves her there, staring at the ground.[4]

When Gustav and Christine got back to Warsaw, Gustav happily returned to soft furnishings. His business gave him all the stability and financial security he needed. When he was not at work he was out with Christine. If anything he was even more entranced by the apparent vulnerability he had seen beneath her usual show of confidence. She, though, was more unsettled than ever. To reassert some personal pride, in 1930 Christine entered the 'Miss Polonia' contest, which had been established the previous year. The prestige accorded to the competition, open only to unmarried ladies of 'good conduct' between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, was helped by the endorsement of the well-known poet and society figure Tadeusz 'Boy' Zelenski. Its popularity was guaranteed by extensive coverage in the *Express Poranny* (*Morning Express*) newspaper, whose readers were entitled to vote. The number of entries exceeded all expectations, with seventy candidates reaching the final gala. Christine sent in a glamorous photograph taken at one of the capital's most fashionable photographic studios. In it her dark eyes

challenge the viewer with a steady gaze, proud, knowing, and coolly seductive. Four weeks later she learned that she was on the short-list. In the event a rival beat her to the crown, but Christine was declared a national 'Star of Beauty', which was quite enough to confirm her to Gustav as a thoroughly desirable catch.*

Two months later their marriage banns were announced at their local churches. No objections were received, and Christine and Gustav were married on 21 April 1930 at the Spiritual Seminary Church of Warsaw. Christine signed the register 'Marja Krystyna Skarbek'. Her brother Andrzej served as her witness.†[5] It was not a large society wedding, but Christine wore an elegant white gown and carried the traditional bouquet of orange blossom with some satisfaction. Gustav was twenty-five, considerably shorter than her, infatuated, untitled but hugely wealthy. Christine was twenty-one, an aristocrat, albeit marginalized, officially beautiful, and rather relieved at how things had turned out.

But while Christine now had the financial security that her mother, in particular, had been desperate to secure for her, Gustav was quickly realizing that his own prospects were not at all as he had imagined. Inexplicably to him, after their marriage Christine continued to prefer nightclubs to cooking, and showed no interest at all in starting a family. She was not, after all, an elegant society hostess-in-the-making; indeed, she was mostly absent. Over the next year, Gustav began to understand that though Christine's compulsive desire for amusement stemmed from insecurity, it was not something he could change, and his infatuation began to cool. Christine, too, faced a bitter realization. The security that Gustav offered did not make her happy in the way she had thought it would. Her marriage had not restored the freedom of her childhood; it had brought new and unwanted obligations. Feeling unloved and increasingly ignored by her husband, whom she considered to be obsessed by his work, Christine spent more and more

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* Miss Polonia 1930 was Zofia Batycka from Lwów, a young actress who went on to represent Poland at Miss Europe 1930, before trying to carve out a Hollywood career.

† Gustav's witness was Andrew Szarski, later a famous war hero.

time in the picturesque mountains of Zakopane. She could already ski better than Gustav and most of her friends. Now she satisfied her need for excitement by dodging the border patrols to smuggle cigarettes across the frontier peaks into Poland, so coming to know a number of the mountain highlanders, or gorals, who would later set up the mountain soldiers' unit during the war.

In 1931 Christine was crowned 'Miss Ski' in a Zakopane version of the Miss Polonia contest. Perhaps sensing that the circle had closed, Gustav decided that they were incompatible and their marriage a mistake that needed to be rectified. They divorced in 1932, travelling to Wilno in Polish Lithuania where, having converted to Protestantism, they could obtain their legal freedom.[6] Christine kept both her married surname of Gettlich and a postal savings account into which her former husband paid a monthly deposit. Although Gustav remarried in 1938 and enjoyed the respectable family life he craved, he never quite forgave Christine for not being the woman of his dreams. Over twenty years later, when pushed, he would describe Christine only as being 'dotty, romantic and forever craving change'.[7]

Christine's brother, Andrzej, seemed to be having better luck. In 1930 he had married and, just as Christine's divorce came through, he and his wife Irena gave Stefania some good news: on 3 August 1932 Irena gave birth to their daughter, Teresa Krystyna. As it is customary in Poland for a child's second name to reflect their godparent, it seems likely that Andrzej invited Christine to act as his daughter's godmother. If so it was not a role she undertook with any great enthusiasm; if anything her first experience of the ties and responsibilities of motherhood put her even more firmly off the idea of having children of her own.*

Half-Jewish, impoverished and now divorced, Christine had little social status left to lose. In some ways this meant that she had more freedom than ever. With Gustav's settlement to pay her rent

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* There are unconfirmed rumours that Christine had an abortion in pre-war Warsaw, and stories of other abortions or miscarriages later. If true, this might be one explanation as to why she never had children, even when contraception was hard to come by.

and keep her in silk stockings, she moved to a small but central apartment and threw herself into Poland's more bohemian scene.* Champagne-fuelled evenings were now spent flirting with writers and artists across Warsaw and Zakopane. Christine was 'exceptionally charming', one young journalist remembered, but even to the party crowd it was obvious that she 'was full of odd issues of self-esteem relating to her family'.[8] Things came to a head when she fell passionately in love with a handsome, charming, well-born but equally impoverished bachelor called Adam. 'Love will forgive you everything' ran the theme tune of the Polish blockbuster film *Spy in a Mask*, released in 1933. It must have seemed a good soundtrack for Christine's own life as she and Adam broke with convention yet again by publicly flaunting their romance. Reasoning that Christine made a perfectly good mistress, Adam's worldly mother turned a blind eye to the affair, but when the relationship deepened she invited Christine round to meet her. Her words were as clear and scalding as the lemon tea she served: as a penniless divorcée Christine had no hope whatever of marrying her son. Despite her recent personal history Christine was stunned. It would be a difficult, rather character-building, few years before someone with an independent fortune and absolutely no regard for the social niceties would step into her life. . .

As a teenager, the well-born, brilliant and unpredictable Jerzy Mikolaj Ordon Giżycki had been put off school after witnessing a fellow student being shot and stabbed by Cossack guards after testing home-made bombs in the woods outside their town. Jerzy grew up to be a moody and temperamental young man, given to violent fits of rage. Prevented by his wealthy father from studying art in Paris, he flunked an engineering course and boarded a steamer for America. There, travelling from state to state, he found work as a cowboy, trapper, gold-prospector and chauffeur for J. D.

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* Christine lived at Filtrowa 25, Warsaw, a small flat in a good part of town. Stanisław Rudziejewski remembered her passion for silk stockings with the seam up the back.

Rockefeller, and, until his patience wore out, even aspired to be a Hollywood film extra. Although he had plenty of personal vanity, Jerzy did not have the onerous sense of family heritage that plagued Christine. At one point he happily sold his gold signet ring with its family crest to pay for a friend's rail ticket. He was driven above all by his appetite for adventure and self-improvement.

A talented linguist and socially adept, by the 1920s, when he was in his thirties, Jerzy was established as a secretary in the newly opened Polish Legation in Washington, developing a new interest in intrigue. 'The activities of our legation had no secrets for me,' he later boasted, 'I was the only one . . . who had the key to the safe where we kept our codebook.'[9] Jerzy would always maintain warm links with Polish diplomatic circles, but after a few years of conspiracy, and regular tennis matches with the Ambassador, Prince Kazimierz Lubomirski, he left the service to visit New York and London. There he joined the team preparing for Poland's first national participation in the Olympics. In 1924, carrying a huge Polish flag, he led the athletes into the Paris Olympic stadium. The following year he took part in an expedition to West Africa, acting as secretary and photographer to the Polish explorer Anton Ossendowski. It was a trip that instilled a deep love of Africa in him, and that led to the first of a series of books. Having done his part to contain the local elephant population, and contracted malaria, Jerzy felt he could tick off the main safari activities, and returned to Poland in 1932.

But Poland disappointed him. It was ten years since the heroic war with Russia that had followed the First World War, but Marshal Piłsudski's peace had not brought the economic stability or social improvements that Jerzy, like so many Poles, had expected. A natural enemy of conformity, he began to criticize the country's leaders and formed a brief friendship with General Sikorski, who, since Piłsudski's coup in May 1926, had been unpopular among the political elite and who Jerzy felt had been particularly 'shabbily treated'.[10] In between games of tennis, and escorting Sikorski's daughter, Zofia, to her riding lessons, the two men discussed the future of their country, and the roles that each might play in it. But despite this friendship, Jerzy found Warsaw life 'normal, uneventful

. . . and devoid of excitement and emotional elements'. He soon moved on again, to Zakopane and what he called his 'beloved Tatra Mountains'.[11]

Jerzy knew the Carpathian mountain range well, having spent some months skiing them with his mother and three sisters when he should have been studying engineering. He now settled down to ski some more, hike, write, and socialize with the great and the good who came to stay in Zakopane. Although independently wealthy, Jerzy was unable to resist the call of the Polish Foreign Office, and at one point he spent ten months in Ethiopia ostensibly as consul, but secretly to report back on the possibilities for Polish colonialism on the basis of the Italian experience.* After a brief stop in Rome, where he added another language to his collection while fraternizing with the local business, diplomatic and intelligence communities, Jerzy returned to Poland.[12] While he was never entirely settled, Zakopane would remain his base until the Second World War.

'My constant companion there was Countess Krystyna Skarbek', Jerzy later wrote in his memoirs. 'Excellent horse-woman, fair skier, and the most intrepid human being I have ever met – man or woman.'[13] In those days the wooden skis, buckled on with leather straps, weighed a ton, and without steel edges they would slide almost uncontrollably across ice. Story has it that Christine lost control of her skis during a perilous descent in a blizzard so fierce that the forest trees 'rose and bowed in waves as though a field of wheat'.[14] Jerzy, who, though approaching fifty, was nearly six foot tall and as strong as an ox, reached out and literally grabbed hold of her. One account even has him saving her with a lasso, catching her like a heifer on the American plain, before whisking her off for some vodka to steady her nerves.[15] However he did it, and despite

* In 1935 Italy had claimed Ethiopia for the Italian empire, having invaded with the support of Nazi Germany. Despite the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie's impassioned pleas to the League of Nations, within a few years Japan, France and Britain all recognized Italian control in Ethiopia. Unimpressed by arguments of empire, and unconvinced by the likely ability of Polish smallholders to settle effectively in Africa, Jerzy argued strongly against Polish colonial ambitions, but was ignored. Poland bought territory in Liberia, but those Polish immigrants who survived the colonial experiment were quickly repatriated.

being nearly twenty years her senior, once Jerzy had caught Christine he refused to let her go.

Intelligent, financially and emotionally secure, well connected and patriotic but not hugely political, Jerzy neither needed nor wished for anything in life except to satisfy his appetite for freedom and adventure. He had spent half a century avoiding commitments of any kind: study, work, political party membership, alcohol except in moderation, and relationships. 'Fortunately there were no women on the ranch,' he had pronounced as a young cowboy, 'so we lived peacefully and harmoniously.'[16] But Christine was not only young, sporty and very attractive, with good legs, bone structure, posture and deportment: she was also possibly the only person in Poland less domesticated than Jerzy. He was sunk. Theirs was not a one-sided affair though. Jerzy was the only man other than her father who ever dominated Christine, and she would later refer to him as her 'Svengali'.[17] Like Count Skarbek, Jerzy was a handsome, powerful and popular figure, larger than life and not a man to be easily contained, but unlike the count he was intellectually rigorous and had no regard for convention, or prejudice, of any kind. 'We liked each other, and despite some considerable difference in our ages, we became lovers', Jerzy recorded simply. 'Then we got married.'[18] In fact Christine did not marry Jerzy until November 1938, at Warsaw's Evangelical Reformed Church, by which time their relationship was well established.*

Christine and Jerzy made a charismatic couple, and both before and after their marriage were regular guests at Zakopane's many parties, which were attended by a wide circle – including well-brought-up young women from 'good homes' who enjoyed the thrill of mingling with authors, journalists and politicians. With Jerzy in a good humour, Christine's confidence sailed high, and she enjoyed winning over any audience. And if his mood grew dark or bullying, or simply when she got bored, Christine could just as

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* Jerzy and Christine's wedding took place on 2 November 1938, at the Evangelical Reformed Church in the Leszno area of Warsaw. The church archives were destroyed during the Second World War.

effectively withdraw, in time developing the useful ability to blend into a room that she had captivated only moments before.

Both essentially restless, when they tired of Zakopane, Jerzy and Christine travelled through Poland, calling in at parties and press clubs in Warsaw, Kraków and Cieszyn, where Jerzy introduced her to writers, painters, and the Diplomatic Corps. It was about this time that the first rumours began to surface that the unfathomable Christine was working for British intelligence. Then they headed to Europe, Christine finding a use for her most sultry Miss Polonia photograph in her new passport. Long months were spent in Paris, then they travelled across France to Switzerland where, having broken his collarbone in an accident, Jerzy wrote books and visited clubs, while Christine improved her skiing, perfected her French, and played at being a journalist. The peripatetic but moneyed lifestyle suited her, and she wallowed in the freedom she now enjoyed. Routine domesticity would never have suited her. She was happy, and despite the pleasure she got from mixing in a more intellectual and international set, she gave little impression of paying any attention to Jerzy's heated arguments about the rise of fascism, the pros and cons of Poland's various international alliances, or the developing crisis in Europe in general.

Towards the end of 1938, the Polish Foreign Office once again called on Jerzy's services, this time to open a consulate in Kenya with responsibility for Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar (now Tanzania), and Nyassa (now a province of Mozambique), which together formed a territory about the size of Western Europe. Jerzy was to serve his country as a senior diplomat in a colonial state full of European émigrés and upper-class British officers, lending an aristocratic tone to the white settlements flourishing on the revenue from tea and coffee plantations. Christine was not perfect diplomatic-wife material: she was too edgy and unpredictable for that; but, determined, attractive and increasingly socially adroit, she was definitely an asset in the male world of diplomacy. Despite Jerzy's concerns about colonialism, with his love of Africa and Christine's love of luxurious adventure it must have seemed an ideal future for them.

Their first stop was London, where, while waiting for the official formalities to be concluded, they spent some weeks accepting Embassy invitations and catching up with friends from across Europe. But while Jerzy was in his element, Christine began to feel claustrophobic – their relationship was increasingly intense and demanding. She started to spend more time with friends of her own such as Florian Sokolow, the London correspondent of the Warsaw Press, and son of the Zionist leader Nahoum Sokolow, who had been 'very fond' of Christine.[19] As Florian had his hands full, being attached to the BBC, the Warsaw Press, and also contributing to Zionist papers, Christine even overrode her dislike of office work to offer him some secretarial support while she was in London.[20] As a result, and perhaps for the first time, she began to consider the alternatives open to Polish Jews, the growing anti-Semitism that faced them across Europe, and the attractions of Palestine.

After some weeks in London, Jerzy and Christine finally boarded a steamship to South Africa, Jerzy overseeing the safe stowing of the British estate car, fitted with extra petrol tanks, that was to take them the 2,500 miles from Cape Town to Nairobi. On arrival in South Africa they spent some time with the Polish consul general before heading north. Like Jerzy before her, Christine now found that the wide horizons of South Africa quickly got into her blood. As winter faded into spring, the countryside came into its own. Once across the mountains north of Cape Town they were in the Karroo, 'the land of great thirst'. These usually dry rolling plains would just have been bursting into flower as Christine and Jerzy drove between the few ranches in the shallow valleys. At one point some ranchers used their mules to pull the car through a river, swollen by the last of the winter season's heavy rains. Some of the baggage got soaked but Christine just laughed, stretching her legs out to dry with their clothing in the sun as Jerzy tended to the car. They were making slow but mainly very pleasant progress.*

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* This is the route outlined by Jerzy Giżycki in his memoir. Other accounts, including those by Masson and Ledóchowski – both indirectly informed by Christine,

Having driven nearly 900 miles they reached Johannesburg, a city 'full of Polish Jews', Jerzy recorded, at the end of August 1939. On 1 September Hitler invaded Poland, without a declaration of war, on three different fronts, and with one and a half million troops. Two days later Britain, quickly followed by France, declared war on Germany, the only nations to take the initiative and not wait for a direct attack.

Although in 1934, the year before he died, Poland's Marshal Piłsudski had signed a pact of mutual non-aggression with Hitler, within five years it had become clear that Germany coveted both Gdansk and Poland's prosperous western territories. In March 1939 Britain gave Poland an assurance of support should their independence be threatened, and the two countries signed a treaty of mutual assistance in August that year. Unknown to them, that same month Germany and Russia signed a non-aggression pact, which included a secret protocol, detailing a new partition of Poland, and this now spurred Hitler into action.

In Poland the summer of 1939 had been long and hot, a last glorious hurrah before the country descended into a war for which they were ill prepared. The first reserves only began to receive their army summons towards the end of August, when call-ups started to arrive daily. One of Christine's friends later remembered a romantic last view of 'unploughed stubble in the fields, [which] shone in the golden sunlight', before reporting for duty.[21] This sense of nostalgia was percipient: they were leaving behind a young nation but one still proudly steeped in the traditions of centuries. The German invasion ended nearly twenty years of freedom and independence for Poland, but also a social structure that, for better or worse, would be completely destroyed.

Having received no instructions from the Polish Foreign Office after the German invasion, Jerzy and Christine turned their estate car round and headed back for Cape Town. Any dreams they might

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and by Larecki, present routes through Rhodesia or by steamship to Mombasa and then train to Nairobi. Neither Christine nor Jerzy is a reliable witness, but in this case Jerzy's account carries more weight.

have had of a diplomatic role in the sunshine, and perhaps of land, freedom and horses, disappeared overnight. Despite their connections, like most Poles they were stunned by news of the German invasion, but unlike most they were over 5,000 miles from home and unable to play any role in the defence of their country. The return drive was miserable. Hot, exhausted, shocked, terrified for his country, and in a rage at his own impotence, the worst side of Jerzy's domineering character came to the fore, and Christine, who could be equally fierce in her own distress, was no longer in a mood to humour him.

In Cape Town they sold the car and, after a frustrating wait, managed to buy passage on a mail steamship bound for Southampton.* It was, in Jerzy's words, 'the most nightmarish trip'.[22] German submarines had been sighted along the western coast of Africa, so they were forced to travel in convoy, their speed set by the slowest cargo boat, and they stopped for days in different ports on the way. Every morning, news of the latest Polish defeats, and the rapid advance of the German Wehrmacht into Polish territory, was posted up on the ship's bulletin board.

Germany had gained air supremacy within twenty-four hours of invading Poland, bombing both the Polish air force on the ground and targeted sites within Warsaw later the same day. Working through a well-prepared plan, key bridges were then destroyed, trains derailed and refugee columns strafed from the air. Polish troops mounted a constant attack, with some incredible acts of heroism against German armoured tanks, but the wonderful Indian summer worked against them. 'Hitler's weather' they called it, while praying bitterly for rain to fill the marshes and hold up the German tanks.[23] But the clear skies held, and by 6 September the Polish Command was forced to abandon its courageous defence of their frontiers. With a huge advantage in both numbers and technology, and few natural defences to impede their progress,

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* Christine and Jerzy travelled on the *Cape Town Castle*, arriving in Southampton on 6 October 1939. Jerzy was listed as being with the Polish consulate, Christine as 'housewife'. See TNA, BT26/1186, UK incoming passenger lists 1878–1960.

Hitler's Panzer divisions now rolled with relative ease across Poland's plains.

Warsaw was surrounded within a fortnight. Under the terms of their agreement with Britain, Poland had been asked to hold out for two weeks before the Allies would launch a major offensive. Instead Britain's only action was an air campaign that dropped thousands of 'perfectly useless' propaganda leaflets on German cities, and which as even the head of the British Mission to Poland, Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart, raged, 'had no physical effect on the Germans, and no moral effect' on the Poles.[24] Then, on 17 September, just as Poland was beginning to show signs of withstanding the German assault, the Soviet army crossed Poland's eastern frontier 'uninvited and unannounced', and the Polish president, government and commander-in-chief were forced to cross the border into Romania to evade capture.[25] Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, claimed to be taking measures to protect the Polish population, with the result that many Polish regiments welcomed Red Army troops only to be marched into Russia as prisoners: 181,000 in all. It was Poland, not Germany, that now faced a war on two fronts. Within a week of entering Warsaw, at the end of September, Wehrmacht troops were the victorious occupiers. Poland had been crushed between two invading armies, both better equipped and prepared for war than herself.

On 28 September, the day that the Polish capital fell after a brave defence mounted by both the military and civilians, the bulletin board on Jerzy and Christine's ship announced: '*Lost* – a pair of lady's pink panties. *Lost* – Warsaw'. 'A sample', Jerzy wrote bitterly, 'of the famous British sense of humour.'[26] Poland had lost at least 60,000 troops in the September battles, and many more civilians both in the fighting and in the campaign of terror that the SS Death's Head Division now unleashed on the population while hunting down Jews and other 'suspicious elements'. In the industrial town of Bydgoszcz, 800 individuals were immediately arrested and shot, the first victims a group of boy scouts aged twelve to sixteen.[27] The figures were even more terrible in Warsaw. Jerzy had no idea what had happened to his mother and sisters, and Christine had

had no news of her young Skarbek cousins, let alone her mother, who she could only hope had found shelter when needed in the basement of the nearby Prudential Building, or her brother Andrzej, who would certainly have joined the defence of his country.

By the time that Jerzy and Christine reached Britain, on 6 October 1939, Polish casualties were estimated at 200,000. Christine felt the humiliation of her country deeply, but although Poland was being brutally occupied, the Poles had never officially surrendered to the Nazis. The words of the national anthem, 'Poland has not yet perished, so long as we still live', must have been ringing in her head. There were no instructions waiting at the Polish Embassy in London, but sitting out the rest of the war in Britain was not an option that either Christine or Jerzy would countenance. It was too late to enlist in the army at home, but they could still offer their services abroad to help defeat a common enemy.

Before 1939 few Poles knew much about Britain except that it had a large fleet and a vast colonial empire. Only the very well-to-do, like Christine and Jerzy, had visited. France, however, had long-standing political and cultural ties with Poland, dating chiefly from the Napoleonic era, and until June 1940 France was widely regarded as the most likely agent of Nazi Germany's defeat. It was there that the Polish army was re-forming under the leadership of Jerzy's old tennis partner General Sikorski, and there too, in Paris, that the fledgling Polish government-in-exile would soon be established. Jerzy travelled to France but, to his disgust, although he was on the reserve list, at over fifty and with several serious ski injuries behind him, he was rejected for military service. He tried to join a Red Cross unit in Paris, but was again rejected.

Christine was just as determined and impatient to help her country, but she too was barred from active service – because she was a woman. It would take her just a few weeks, however, to find a brave and innovative way around this seemingly insurmountable barrier. Unlike Jerzy, Christine would soon be employing her gift for languages, her adroit social skills, formidable courage and lust for life directly against the occupiers of her homeland.