

Justyna Bednarek, *The Story of Magnolia Street*

Translation: Zofia Sochańska



## Part One

The day was sunny and warm, as if the summer hasn't ended yet. Only the red crowns of maple trees looked properly autumnal. Dad handed Michałek a broom and asked him to sweep the pavement. As the boy shuffled the leaves, he admired the fence he had painted green with his parents, to match the entrance door and the window frames.

They moved into this house only a few weeks ago. It was a rather small, two-storey brick building. There were ten houses just like this one along Magnolia Street. Michael looked carefully into the neighbouring yards, hoping to see someone he could play with. The ideal candidate would be 9-years old and keen on biking.

And yet, instead of a boy, he spotted an elderly man who stood at the opposite side of the street and watched Michałek attentively. The boy thought he was smiling, but he wasn't sure. Michałek looked down, pretending to be very much taken by the twirl of the leaves he was sweeping. The man must have noticed the boy was abashed, as he called out to him in a friendly voice: "Hello! Nice work you're doing!"

"Hello" Michałek replied without looking up.

"You must be wondering why I am standing here," the man continued. "I was born in this house and I come here sometimes to look at it."

All of a sudden, Michałek got interested. "Really? You were born... here? 8 Magnolia Street? Very nice to meet you. My name is Michałek."

"Oh, is that right?" the man smiled. "My name is Tadeusz."

Michałek remembered something: "Oh, wait! Perhaps you know what happened in the basement?"

"In the basement?" Tadeusz looked baffled.

"Yes!" Michałek replied enthusiastically. "There is a trap door in the kitchen and it leads into a room. A shelf for jars stands there, right next to the wall. When my dad and I moved the

shelf, we saw a hole that had been bricked up. We are very eager to find out what it is all about. Perhaps you know something?”

The old man frowned but then he raised his eyebrows and said: “Of course! During wartime, there was a hideout there, and...”

## Part Two

Before I tell you more about the hideout in Michałek’s basement, we need to travel back in time to the year 1939, more or less 82 years ago. Magnolia Street looked a tad different back then. The houses lining the street were brand new, and the linden trees planted by the Sonnenfelds (at 2 Magnolia Street) looked like small bushes. The residents didn’t hear car engines; instead, they were woken up at the crack of dawn by a rooster (Mrs Pasterz at 8 Magnolia Street kept hens in her garden as she wanted to have fresh eggs for her three little boys).

“If you keep hens, you must have a rooster, too. Otherwise, the hens never stop to fight,” she repeated endlessly whenever one of the neighbours asked her to keep the obnoxious rooster quiet. Then she would add: “You don’t seem to be overly bothered by Mr Sonnenfeld’s bird, do you?”

Mr Julian Sonnenfeld, employee at the State Radiotechnical Plant, had an original hobby, namely exotic birds. He used to keep two parrots with grey feathers, and recently he has acquired a black exotic bird named Wiktor who displayed a great knack for languages. Mr Sonnenfeld taught Wiktor how to speak and sing, but the bird loved the sound of a kettle whistling much more than opera arias Mr Sonnenfeld would play for him on his gramophone. Wise Wiktor noticed that whenever a guest appeared, Ms Wanda, the lady of house, would put the kettle on. When the kettle whistled, she would serve tea and cookies, which—it goes without saying—interested Wiktor the most. His cage stood on the window sill; with time, as soon as he noticed a person approaching the Sonnenfelds’ house through the window, he would start to whistle. And he was twice as loud as the kettle itself!

“This bird is the best burglars’ alarm there is,” Ms Wanda used to say jokingly. “He’ll let us know before a burglar enters the house.”

Suffice to say, Wiktor was a true local attraction and Maryjka, the Sonnenfelds’ daughter, had to entertain a lot of guests, especially that the bird was very fond of children and was eager to show off his skills in front of them.

“Say: Helena,” the children would ask, and the bird repeated: “He-le-na!”

The first syllable was elongated, the second and third were swift and melodic.

Helena Rofe, Maryjka’s best friend, lived opposite. Her mum, similarly to Ms Pasterz, was a teacher at a local school.

It so happened that all residents of Magnolia Street formed a tightly knit community, most friendly towards one another—perhaps with the exception of Mr Wilk who lived at number 5. He was extremely conceited and spoke with his neighbours only when he wanted to brag. He had Aza, a black German Shepherd dog, who was rather hostile towards people. Not only children were afraid of her.

One day, Helenka and Maryjka accompanied by Tadzik, the Pasterz family’s eldest son, sneaked into Wilk’s garden to collect mirabelle plums. There were loads of them that summer and it was heart wrenching to see them laying on the ground. The three kids climbed over the green fence and promptly started to pick up fragrant golden fruit.

“A couple more and we’re out of here,” whispered Maryjka excitedly. Alas, as they were about to climb the green fence they heard growling. Aza was standing right in front of them, baring her teeth. The children froze, petrified, and the dog took a step forward, as if she was about to take a jump. At the same moment, a whistle could be heard, and then someone called out:

“Aaaaa-za! Aaaaa-za!”

It seemed Mr Wilk was calling the dog, at least the voice sounded just like his. Aza looked in the direction from which the voice was coming, and then, to the children's enormous relief, it turned back and ran away.

The three of them climbed the fence as fast as they could, dropping most of the plums in the process. They reached Maryjka's house (it was the closest). As soon as they threw themselves on the sofa in the living room, exhausted, they heard the voice again:

"Aaaa-za!"

Yes. It was Wiktor. The clever bird saved the kids. Seemingly aware of what he'd just done, he looked at them intensely from his cage standing on the sill by the open window.

Towards the end of the spring of 1939, Helenka's mum rented a room to her husband's relative, Henryk Infeld. Henryk was a young art teacher and, as a token of gratitude, he painted her portrait. He also started to give art lessons to all the local children who were interested. It took him only a few days to realise that Helenka was exceptionally gifted. When she painted a portrait of Wiktor, the entire street was full of praise.

"What a talented child!", "The bird looks as if it were alive!" Mr Pasterz expressed his admiration.

"I am sure she will grow up to become a famous painter," the professor added. Maryjka, whose talent for painting was rather mediocre, felt a tinge of envy.

"Don't worry!" Helenka cheered her up. "I shall paint pictures for you till the end of my days."

### Part Three

During the summer holidays, Henryk organised art classes en plein-air in Maryjka's parents' garden. Mrs Pasterz baked scones with raspberries for the children and Mr Sonnenfeld fixed an old swing especially for the occasion, so that they could use it. Oh, what a lovely time that was!

Alas, everything started to change already in August. The radio and newspapers were full of disturbing news. Everyone kept fearfully repeating the word "war." People were afraid that Adolf Hitler's army would attack Poland. In September, it rained bombs in Warsaw, and towards the end of the month German soldiers entered the city. To be sure, returning to school was out of the question.

"We're so lucky to be living practically outside of the city," residents of Magnolia Street would cheer one another up. "Perhaps the war will never reach us here. We will hide in our homes and wait until this horrible time is over."

Alas, there was no way of waiting it out. The Nazis made themselves at home in Warsaw and began to introduce a new order. They kept venturing further and further from the very centre of the city, into narrow lanes, also those in the suburbs.

One day the children were sitting in Maryjka's kitchen playing ludo when they heard a piercing whistle.

Helenka quickly glanced at the cooker where the kettle was. But the whistle came from a different direction.

"It's Wiktor! He is whistling, because he can see someone approaching."

It was a policeman. He brought a notice saying that all Jews were to vacate their accommodation and move into the ghetto. Should anyone try to cheat, they were in for a severe punishment.

The sky darkened over Magnolia Street. Helenka's dad was Jewish, therefore she was, too. They had to move out.

"We cannot allow them to throw you out!" Maryjka wept, hugging her friend. "I will hide you, Maryjka, I won't let you leave."

"I won't let you, I won't let you," repeated Wiktor who sat in his cage on the window sill. His navy-blue eyes glowered.

## Part Four

It was a sad time on Magnolia Street. Helenka's parents hid in the countryside, together with Professor Infeld. Nobody knew them there, nobody was looking for them. Maryjka's family tried to go on living as if nothing had happened. One day, however, her dad, an engineer, was summoned to the office of his new German boss.

"You are a very good worker," the manager began to speak.

"Nice of you to say so," Mr Sonnenfeld replied.

"I would like you to sign a document confirming that you are a German."

"I cannot do that," Maryjka's dad shook his head.

"Oh, is that so? Aren't you afraid that such an impudent response will get you into prison?"

"Very much so. But I am more afraid of what my wife would say if I agreed."

It seemed that the only person happy about the Rofe family's departure was Mr Wilk. He kept walking his black dog, peeping into people's gardens and into their kitchen windows. He behaved as if the entire street belonged to him.

"An order has been restored, at long last!" he rejoiced. "I didn't like the Rofes," he would add after a while. "Very uninteresting people."

"You're uninteresting yourself," Maryjka thought to herself while Wiktor, as if to confirm her words, whistled louder than usual.

## Part Five

A lot of time had passed. One evening Maryjka was already in bed when she heard a noise downstairs. Half asleep, she walked down the stairs. In the living room, there were her parents in their PJs, bearded Professor Infeld frozen with fear, and....

"He-lena! He-lena!" Wiktor shrieked.

“My dear, you’re back! Oh how much I missed you over these long months!” Maryjka couldn’t help but rejoice.

Helenka, however, didn’t look particularly happy. Her dress was all torn and dirty, she had scratches all over and she was crying.

It turned out they had left their hiding place in the country some time ago. Helenka’s grandparents, her dad’s parents, were in the ghetto, weak and poorly. That is why her dad decided to move to be near them. The rest of the family followed suit.

“The only thing worth fighting for in this world is love. And the people we love, and who love us,” Professor Infeld said, lifting a cup of hot tea Maryjka’s mother had served him. He took a sip and continued. “You must know that an uprising broke out in the ghetto. Brave, fearless people are fighting for their lives as we speak. So is Helena’s dad. Her parents asked me to lead her out of the ghetto. Somehow, we managed to get out. We had no place to go, though.”

“We will hide you here,” Mr Julian whispered. “I’m not sure where yet, but we will!”

## Part Six

When Maryjka woke up the next morning, Helenka and Professor were gone. Instead, two German soldiers were sat at the kitchen table, accompanied by Mr Wilk.

“You claim that no one came to visit you last night?”

“No one. A beggar asked for food, and apart from that, nobody called in,” Mum looked very calm. Dad, on the other hand, was so nervous his knees were shaking.

“I’m sure I saw...” Mr Wilk began speaking, but at the same moment Wiktor—as always watching the whole scene from his cage on the window sill—started shrieking: “Fool! Fool!”

Now Mr Wilk got properly angry. “You freaking bird!” he yelled and pulled out a gun.

Maryjka cried out in horror. Dad wanted to cover the cage with his body, but he moved too



violently and instead knocked it over. The cage door opened and Wiktor flew out, straight into the springtime blue sky. The girl broke down into tears, disoriented soldiers tried to restore order, mum shouted at Mr Wilk that his grandma must have been turning in her grave seeing what had become of him, and Wilk himself seemed to have suddenly lost his confidence. A moment later irritated soldiers left the Sonnenfelds' apartment and Mr Wilk returned home, sulking.

Good thing that's how it all ended. Thanks to the commotion, it didn't occur to the soldiers to look into the larder where Professor Infeld and Helenka were squatting behind a shelf full of jars. A couple of hours later they were gone. Where to? Maryjka didn't know. Because of all the emotions, she came down with fever and ended up in bed.

She was ill. Very ill.

## Part Seven

A doctor came by the Sonnenfeld's house every day. Maryjka lay down delirious with high fever. She kept calling out to Helenka and Wiktor.

"I am really worried about her," the doctor said. "Couldn't you find another bird, similar to the one who flew away? Or perhaps there's another friend who could cheer Maryjka up?"

Unfortunately, there was only one Helenka in the whole wide world, and only one Wiktor.

That night the moon shone particularly brightly, much brighter than the gas lamps lining Magnolia Street.

"Is there someone by the window?" asked Maryjka, who woke up and grabbed the hand of her mother sitting by her bed.

"There's no one. Go back to sleep, my love," Ms Sonnenfeld kissed her daughter on the forehead and closed the curtains.

## Part Eight

When she opened the curtains the following morning, Maryjka saw Wiktor. He was sitting in a hawthorn bush that grew on the opposite side of Magnolia Street.

“He’s back, you see?” the girl whispered with relief. “He’s back, but he’s hiding in the bushes so that stupid Wilk doesn’t find him.”

Indeed, it looked as if the bird found a comfortable spot inside the bush, near the wall of the house. Or at least that’s what it looked like from afar.

“He’s watching over me,” Maryjka was over the moon.

This is when she started to recover. She grew stronger by day, but when she finally got strong enough to go out, it began pouring with rain. It rained cats and dogs for an entire week. When it finally stopped, it turned out that Wiktor was gone.

“He must have flown away. It’s good, he probably found a safe place where he’s not in any sort of danger.”

That’s what Maryjka was thinking. It didn’t even cross her mind to approach the spot where she had seen the bird. She would have noticed the remains of a painting on the wall. A magnificent portrait painted by a very talented pair of hands.

## Part Nine

“And? What happened next? What happened to them all?” inquired Michałek.

“Helenka and Maryjka were really lucky, even though the war continued for some time. When the ghetto uprising was over, the Warsaw Uprising broke out. Still, all the children from Magnolia Street survived the war. You have probably guessed that Helenka painted the bird on the wall opposite Maryjka’s window. Things you’d do for the sake of friendship, eh? One can overcome the strongest fear for that.

“And you... you said you had been born in this house?”

“Right. It was me to accompany the girls to Wilk’s garden. My mum offered shelter to Professor Infeld and Helenka in our... I mean, in your basement. They hid there until Ms Sonnenfeld found a better hideout for them.”

“Now I like our home even more,” Michałek whispered.

“Yes. It is nice to live in a friendly place which can serve as a shelter to those in need,” the elderly man spoke, and then he smiled and walked away down Magnolia Street.

**POLIN**  
Museum of  
the History  
of Polish Jews

6 Anielewicza St.  
PL-00157 Warsaw  
Poland

T +48 22 471 03 00  
@ polin@polin.pl

Iceland   
Liechtenstein  
Norway grants

Ministry of Culture and  
National Heritage

 POLIN  
Jewish  
Cultural  
Heritage

## Author's note

The story about Maryjka, Helenka and the rest of Magnolia Street residents has been made up, albeit not completely.

I will tell you what really happened.

15 years ago, I moved to Karska Street in the Old Bielany district of Warsaw. My husband and I inherited a small wooden hut—alas, it was not suitable for living, therefore we had to pull it down and build a new house.

In the course of the demolition, we discovered a den in the basement, and in it—medicine vials, an old cup. We had no idea what the room had been used for.

A few years after the house construction had been completed, my husband, Michałek, was sweeping leaves from the pavement. That is when an elderly man approached him—just like it happened in the story. He said that he had been born in a house at the very location where we built ours. My husband asked about the hideout. “Ah,” the man responded with a smile, “Professor Infeld resided there during the war.”

Who was Professor Infeld? I have no idea. I found one scholar under this name in the encyclopaedia, but it is definitely not him. The only thing I do know is that "our" Mr Infeld survived the war thanks to the aid he had received from his neighbours.

Maryjka Sonnenfeld is a real person. She did not live in my street, but in the neighbouring one, virtually a few steps from my entrance door. Her mum hid Jews during the war and was honoured with the Yad Vashem medal for that. Her dad's story is true, too—he really did tell his German boss that he was more afraid of his wife than he was of the consequences of refusing to sign a document stating he was German.

Mr and Ms Pasterz lived in a house next to mine. They were both teachers at a school on Elbląska Street, today the prestigious S. I. Witkacy High School. Helenka also has a prototype in real life—I am thinking the late painter Wisna Lipszyc who, together with her family, lived

in a street parallel to mine. Maryjka Sonnenfeld was friends with her when they were both little.

Wisna's mum, Aldona Jastrzębska, had a Jewish husband. She helped many Jews during the war and was also honoured with the Righteous Among the Nations medal. To think that all these people lived so close—virtually several dozen metres apart!

Alas, the world is not made of good people only—even if we wish it were so. Mr Wilk also has a prototype in real life. I don't know his name, and perhaps it is only for the best. He lived on the other side of my street.

**POLIN**  
Museum of  
the History  
of Polish Jews

6 Anielewicz St.  
PL-00157 Warsaw  
Poland

T +48 22 471 03 00  
@ polin@polin.pl

Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway grants

Ministry of Culture and  
National Heritage

**POLIN**  
Jewish  
Cultural  
Heritage