

## Preface

This is the true story of a Russian-American woman named Nonna Lisowskaja Bannister.

The material within these pages comes from the private, handwritten transcripts that Nonna made of her diaries from childhood, World War II, and the years immediately following the war. She expanded and compiled them during the late 1980s, with further commentary based on her memory of events. Translating into English from her original documents, which were written in five languages, Nonna wrote her life story on yellow legal pads and kept them hidden from everyone, including her husband, Henry.

In the 1990s, after decades of marriage, Nonna finally told Henry about her secret past. She also made him promise that he wouldn't share any of her hidden material until after her death. Henry kept his promise to Nonna, only now making her writings public after her death in 2004.

Nonna had kept a lifetime of secret diaries. She began writing as a young girl and received a diary of her own from her father when she was nine years old. In this childhood diary she described her life, her family, and her dreams, and she included some of her poetry. She also kept a formal diary during the latter years of World War II, when Catholic nuns at a German hospital hid her from the Nazis and nursed her back to health. She continued this diary in the years immediately following the war.

Nonna L. Bannister

During World War II, when Nonna left the Ukraine and traveled to Nazi Germany, she kept a pillow made of black and white ticking tied around her waist. In this small pillow, she kept her thin childhood diary, various bundles of paper scraps on which she kept notes of her wartime experiences, and several photographs and family documents. In addition to the written record that Nonna left of her memories—transcribed onto pads of paper and then typed by Henry Bannister—the Bannister family has in its possession one of Nonna’s diaries, dated 1947–48; postcards from Nonna’s mother, dated 1944–45; and many other personal documents and photographs from the World War II era.

Fluent in at least seven languages, Nonna did the translation work herself. She transcribed her diaries from the various languages in which she had written them into English, one of the last languages she learned—which may account for some of the awkwardness of English grammar and sentence construction in her memoir. Also, transcribing the diaries years after the events described in them and adding her own present-day commentary in places, she did not always adhere to a linear progression. Thus, though translation was not necessary, some minor editing was. Efforts were also made to bring Nonna’s family names to a consistent spelling, though it was not possible to maintain any one style of transliteration.

The editors have in some cases combined into one place events that Nonna recorded in different places in her transcripts, as well as giving explanation to the historical chronology in the appendix. Throughout her text, editorial comments have been added where an explanation seemed helpful for better understanding of the transcripts, the historical settings, and Nonna’s

XII

Copy

## THE SECRET HOLOCAUST DIARIES

family. Some of this commentary comes from Henry Bannister's remembrances of Nonna's stories.

Though similar to other memoirs of the war and the Holocaust years, Nonna's account provides a rare glimpse into the life of a girl who was born to a wealthy family in the Ukraine, experienced great suffering in Stalin's Soviet Union, and eventually lost her family and her own freedom at the hands of Nazi Germany. It is a story with unusual significance as one of the few firsthand accounts of a girl from a once-privileged family, who fell into the ranks of the *Ostarbeiter*—the primarily Ukrainian “Eastern laborers” transported to Germany during the war as slave labor under Adolf Hitler's regime. The fact that she not only survived such turmoil and tragedy but also moved on through faith in God to forgive those who took away so much makes her story all the more remarkable.

*Carolyn Tomlin  
Jackson, Tennessee*

*Denise George  
Birmingham, Alabama  
Summer 2008*