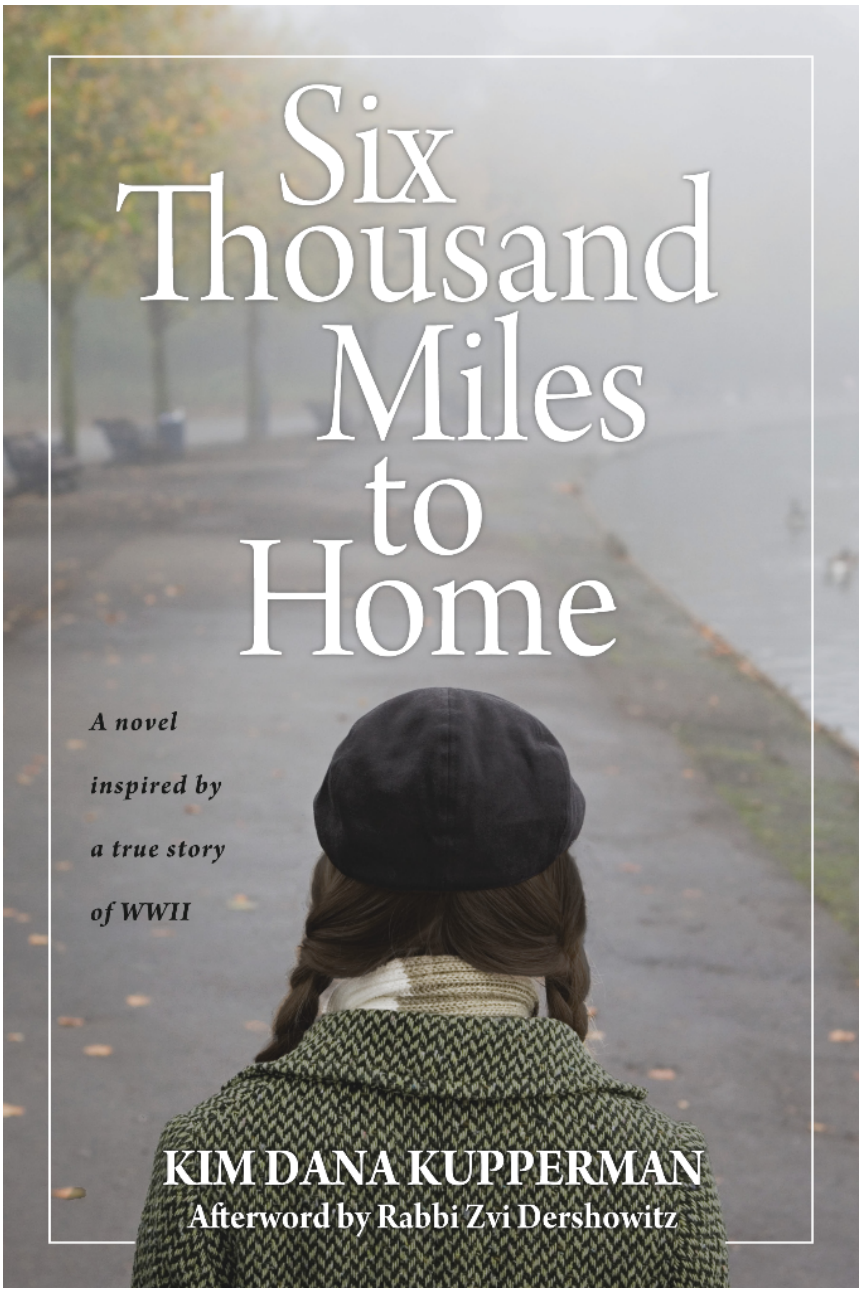
Press Kit

Six Thousand Miles to Home: A Novel Inspired by a True Story of World War II

Kim Dana Kupperman



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What People Are Saying

Praise for *Six Thousand Miles to Home: A Novel Inspired by a True Story of World War II*

"Here are the wages of authenticity: both the pervasive horror of a murderous era and the threatened yet valiant current of humanity. Kupperman puts you there—you see and hear and feel—and realize how a journey into the unimaginable occurs. An inspiring and remarkable tale."
— Baron Wormser, author of *Tom o' Vietnam* and *Legends of the Slow Explosion*

"An enthralling historical novel, both tender and terrifying, about survival, tradition, and love. A Breathtaking rendering of unforgettable characters."
— Eugenia Kim, author of *The Calligrapher's Daughter* and *The Kinship of Secrets*

"Six Thousand Miles to Home illuminates the historical record and conjures a world of man-made horror, where, every so often, cracks of exquisite light are made to shine through."
— Rachel Basch, author of *The Listener, The Passion of Reverend Nash*, and *Degrees of Love*

Praise for *The Last of Her: A Forensic Memoir*

"A feat of impressive storytelling based upon expansive research, excavated memories, and an inquisitive imagination."
— Katie James, *American Book Review*, Volume 38, Number 4, May/June 2017

"Unlike anything I've ever read.... A tragic, bizarre, and achingly human story.
— Peter Nichols, author of *The Rocks*

Praise for *I Just Lately Started Buying Wings*

"Darkly comic [and] deeply intimate."
— Mary Jo Murphy, *The New York Times Book Review*, August 20, 2010

"A voice, both smoldering and meditative, that inhabits every page like an attentive host, inviting us in and offering no choice but to step over the threshold."
— Sue Halpern, author of *Summer Hours at the Robber's Library, A Dog Walks Into a Nursing Home, Can't Remember What I Forgot*, and *Four Wings and a Prayer*

Synopsis

A historical novel set during one of WW II's lesser known episodes, the deportation of 1.5-2 million Polish citizens into the forced-labor camps of the Soviet Gulag.

Meet Suzanna, a thirteen-year-old who escapes Nazi tyranny in Poland with her seventeen-year-old brother and their mother, only to be deported to a Soviet forced-labor camp in the inhospitable wilds of Russia. The family's unexpected odyssey covers six thousand miles, from western Poland to Persia via Central Asia. Arriving in Tehran as refugees with no home, no money, no belongings—and with their family dispersed across the world—Suzanna and her mother discover generosity and hope. This new novel from Kim Dana Kupperman is set during one of the Holocaust's lesser-known episodes, the deportation into the Soviet Gulag of 1.5-2 million Polish citizens, only ten percent of whom were evacuated to Iran in 1942.

Now, thanks to a collaborative effort between the children of Suzanna and Peter and award-winning writer Kim Dana Kupperman, the family's story is recounted in the author's newest book, ***Six Thousand Miles to Home: A Novel Inspired by a True Story of World War II (October 25, 2018).*** Published by Legacy Edition Books, a project of The Suzanna Cohen Legacy Foundation (www.suzannacohenlegacyfoundation.org), proceeds from sales of the book shall support the organization's timely mission—to collect, preserve, publish, and teach the life stories of men and women who marshaled exemplary resilience in the face of forced displacement and to honor the bravery and generosity of those who provided compassion and assistance to refugees, exiles, and persecuted peoples.

Six Thousand Miles to Home tells the astonishing saga of this family as a gripping historical novel. "I have tried to render real people, most of them lost now, by imagining them in particular historical and social landscapes," says Kupperman, a long-time journalist, essayist, and literary editor. "Specifically, I have focused on *how* the women and men in this story might have thought about and responded to the urgencies that unfolded in real time during their lives. Or course it is impossible to accurately depict the emotions and reactions of others, especially when a few recorded memories exist of a particular story set during a disturbing historical period." To that end, Kupperman explains, she relied on facts from historical accounts and analyses, personal, autobiographical, and fictional narratives (told in print, graphic, and film media), the genealogical records pertaining to the Kohn, Eisner, and Cohen families, and recordings and interviews of family members.

As Holocaust survivors pass away, such stories demand attention, Kupperman says, because "the full impact of the Shoah cannot be fully known because so many people's stories have been lost. Many of them will never be told, but some are still available, waiting to be inscribed. It has been a singular blessing to be involved in recording this one."

Inspired by a true story

BEFORE THE WAR
A story about purveyors of leather, bread, and silk: The Kohn family lived in Teschen in western Poland, since at least the mid-nineteenth century and built a prosperous leather tannery. The Eisner family settled in the same area at the turn of the twentieth century and operated a thriving flour mill and bakery. The Cohen family lived in Iran for countless generations; at the end of the nineteenth century, they launched what would become a renowned store in Tehran that sold fine silks and other fabrics.

***Julius and Josefina Kohn*:** In 1939 when World War II began, Julius Kohn was forty-four years old; Josefina, his wife, was thirty-nine. They had been married for almost twenty years and had two teenaged children.

***Peter and Suzanna Kohn*:** Peter Kohn was almost seventeen and his sister, Suzanna, was thirteen when the Nazis invaded Poland, forcing the Kohn family to flee their home in Teschen. With their mother, Josefina, they were deported to a Soviet labor camp in 1940, when Peter was eighteen and Suzanna fourteen. Released from the Gulag in 1942, they landed in Iran on Passover eve.

Soleiman Cohen: Soleiman Cohen was thirty-four when the war began. He lived in Tehran, where he was a successful businessman and the only unmarried son of a well-known and respected Jewish family. In 1942, Soleiman Cohen made a decision that would change his life and the lives of two of the thousands of refugees who came to Iran from the Soviet Gulag.

AFTER THE WAR
After the war, Josefina (Eisner) Kohn, who survived the Soviet Gulag and the arduous trek out of the Soviet Union, married and settled in London. All three of Josefina's siblings—Elsa, Arnold, and Hans—survived the war. Elsa remained in Argentina, where she emigrated in 1939 with her son and daughter. Arnold spent the war in Hungary, west of Budapest, as a refugee and was deported in 1944 to a Nazi concentration camp, which was subsequently liberated by the Soviets. He returned to his wife and daughter in Teschen (which became Cieszyn), where he lived under Communism until he died. . Hans emigrated first to Canada then to southern California, where he worked at CalTech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory during the war. He changed his name to John Emerson.

Suzanna and Solieman Cohen had two sons and a daughter. They lived happily in Tehran and then Shemiran for thirty-six years. With the advent of the Iranian Revolution, they were forced to leave Iran in 1978, and for the second time in her life, Suzanna was exiled from her home country. They settled in Santa Monica, California. They had eight grandchildren and, as of 2018, fifteen great-grandchildren. Suzanna's motto—which she repeated to family and friends, callers and visitors—was "Enjoy your life."

As of 2018, there are over 100 living descendants of the four Eisner children. Peter and Suzanna were the only descendants of the Kohn side of the family who not only survived the war, but who had children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Author Biography

Photo by Irène Jonas

Kim Dana Kupperman is a critically acclaimed writer and the author of *Six Thousand Miles to Home: A Novel Inspired by a True Story of WW II* (Legacy Edition Books, *October, 2018).*

Her books have been reviewed by *The New York Times, Boston Globe, ForeWord Reviews, American Book Review,* and many other publications.

Ms. Kupperman is also the author of *The Last of Her: A Forensic Memoir* (Jaded Ibis Press, 2016) and an award-winning essay collection, *I Just Lately Started Buying Wing: Missives from the Other Side of Silence* (Graywolf Press, 2010). She is the lead editor of *You: An Anthology of Essays Devoted to the Second Person* (Welcome Table Press, 2013) and publisher of the anthology, *Essaying the Essay* (Welcome Table Press, 2014).

Ms. Kupperman is the founding editor of Welcome Table Press, an independent nonprofit devoted to celebrating and publishing the essay. She curates and edits two free pamphlet series, *Occasional Papers on Practice & Form* and *Essaying the Body Electric*.

Ms. Kupperman has been a teacher and editor for over thirty years and has worked as a journalist, writer for nonprofit organizations, and community educator. A former faculty member at West Virginia Wesleyan University's Low-residency MFA Program and Johns Hopkins MA in Writing Program, from 2011-2014, she was the Visiting Writer-in-Residence in nonfiction at Fordham University, and from 2010 to 2015, she was a faculty member at Fairfield University's low-residency MFA. From 2004 to 2011, she was the managing editor of the award-winning quarterly of art and ideas, the *Gettysburg Review*, where she also developed and coordinated an annual summer writers' conference. She currently teaches private creative-writing workshops.

Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals and been anthologized in *Best American Essays* and elsewhere. Awards include the 2013 Normal School Prize, the 2010 Bakeless Prize in Nonfiction, the 2003 Robert J. DeMott Prose Prize from *Quarter after Eight*, and first place in the 1996 Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest.

Critical Reviews

From the *New York Times Book Review*

Review of *I Just Lately Started Buying Wings: Missives from the Other Side of Silence*

"Kim Dana Kupperman seems obsessed with her relatives' ashes. Those of her mother, who killed herself. ('What kind of person keeps her mother's ashes on a shelf in the closet like a sweater that's too tight or a handbag that requires repair?') Of her father, who had long since moved on to other wives. ('I did not want to parcel out my father's ashes. I felt superstitious about dividing a man loved and hated by his two surviving children.') Of her brother, who died of AIDS. ('I take the Metro home with what is left of my brother, in a bag that now hangs from my shoulder.'). [...] These glimpses of Kupperman's mourning can be as darkly comic as they are deeply intimate....The resulting meditations can be unexpectedly lovely...

"Her sentences can be as ethereal and elusive as her subjects, but their descriptive power makes them worth the chase."

From the *Boston Globe*

Review of *I Just Lately Started Buying Wings: Missives from the Other Side of Silence*

"The rise in popularity of the personal essay—the easiest way for a woman writer to get into print—has drawn criticism of self-indulgence, hubris, and oversharing. But Kim Dana Kupperman's debut collection of essays, winner of a 2009 prize from the Bread Loaf writers' conference, goes leagues beyond easy emotion to underline the strange details that lift life into consciousness."

From *Foreword Reviews*

Review of *I Just Lately Started Buying Wings: Missives from the Other Side of Silence*

"In Kim Dana Kupperman's first book, the reader moves through what Kupperman terms 'missives'—short meditations on life that traverse Kupperman's biography and the globe. We hear in 'missives' the shadow of the word 'missiles,' something speeding, something wrenching, and indeed, throughout the book Kupperman visits places fraught with violence past, present, or impending. Post-Chernobyl Russia, a shelter for victims of domestic abuse, and a divorce dispute-turned-suicide all receive complicated, riveting examination in chapters of varying length and format. Kupperman's introspective prose—the book's shining feature—haunts in places and lilts in others, giving readers a glimpse into what Kupperman thinks of as 'the other side of silence....'

"I Just Lately Started Buying Wings ensures this caretaking will continue, uninterrupted and with great beauty, with each new reader of this collection."

Critical Reviews

From *American Book Review*

Review of *The Last of Her: A Forensic Memoir*

"Kim Dana Kupperman delves into the mystique of her mother's past and probes the depths of truth in her latest book *The Last of Her: A Forensic Memoir*. This stunning new memoir is a feat of impressive storytelling based upon expansive research, excavated memories, and an inquisitive imagination. It directly confronts the artifice of life and the artifice of writing and tries with honest vigor to communicate a narrative that conveys the truth once and for all of the life—and death—of Dolores Buxton. […]

"While documented facts are the foundation of this narrative, Kupperman easily refrains from a book that reads like the reports she obtained during the research phase. This is not a book to sit amid the many newspaper articles; the court, law enforcement, and census records; and the coroner's report from which she draws. This is a memoir at its core—a story (or stories) with a narrative arc, dialogue, conflict, and other elements of storytelling that enliven a recorded history so that it stands as not so much a document itself but a reimagining of that which already has been documented. It is as if she took a black and white photo and, with paints, a tiny brush, and a steady hand, added color to the captured memory, carefully filling in the details. With her artistic imagination, she overlays a story onto history—inserting fiction onto fact—in order to enlighten certain angles of [a] life that had remained shrouded in the dark corners of mystery."

From the *Portland Press Herald*

Review of *The Last of Her: A Forensic Memoir*

"Long before the word "post-truth" entered the parlance, Kupperman was waging war against lies and disinformation on her home turf. Not only does her story evoke the collateral damage of suicide, nearly 30 years after the fact. At bottom, this lyrical, probing memoir suggests that knowledge is rarely sufficient and reconciliation is an inside job."

Author Q & A

1. Kim, as an award-winning author, what drew you into the real-life World War II story that inspired your historical novel, *Six Thousand Miles to Home*? As a writer, I am preoccupied with departures and arrivals, the veritable threads in the fabric of private and public histories. I am also fascinated by stories depicting "beautiful accidents," those unpredictable and often dramatic life moments that teach us the elegant harmony possible in being human. Equally compelling is that this story is about people from two communities, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, and two different countries, Poland and Iran, who come together after traveling a dangerous distance in perilous times and who marshaled resourcefulness and stamina to endure the inhumanity of totalitarianism. Finally, how can one not take notice of a story whose ending—crossing a body of water to freedom from slavery—takes place on Passover?

2. Is it a story of survival, tradition or love—or all three? The story is less about survival and more about the quality of "antifragility," which stimulates growth and even urges us toward transcendence in the midst of disorder and despair. Survival means you live after a trauma. Antifragility means you thrive and become stronger as a result of trauma. Love is also very much a part of this story—love between husband and wife, parents and children, siblings as well as those too-brief moments of kindness showed by strangers experienced in times of profound anguish. The bridging of Middle Eastern and Western cultures happens in spite of certain traditions *and* because of them, and results in a love that inspires a tradition of doing good deeds and acting honorably.

3. In your book, a Jewish family flees the Nazis only to be captured by the Soviet Army and deported to a forced-labor camp in what is now known as the Gulag. You write of the harsh conditions of these labor camps. Why is it important to detail the atrocities that took place under Hitler and Stalin? The camps built and operated by the Nazis and their allies—including satellite, transit, labor, and death camps—number over 40,000, yet most people think there were several hundred, or maybe as many as a few thousand. Soviet forced-labor camps first appeared in 1917, were dismantled in 1953, and repurposed as prisons that remained in place until 1987, when Gorbachev dissolved them. Conservative estimates suggest that over 2.7 million people died in these camps, most of them during the war years. Yet such information is largely absent in public discourse, mainly because it wasn't until the opening of archives in former Soviet-bloc countries that scholars started to appreciate the breadth and depth of the camp system and its ruthlessness.

4. Why did you choose to write this story as a historical novel as opposed to a nonfiction narrative? No letters survived, no diaries were kept, and no extensive interviews were conducted. All that remained of this family's narrative was a very succinct account: *When the war started, we went to Warsaw; later, our father was arrested and we were deported to a forced-labor camp where we harvested timber. Then we were released and found refuge in Iran in the home of a generous Persian Jew.* Such a brief story is, of course, interesting unto itself, but narratively speaking, it lacks dramatic tension and does not make for a compelling book. Historical fiction allows us to use all the available facts to construct the plot—

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what happens to the characters—while imagining (fictionalizing) *how* the characters react to the events in which they find themselves.

5. How hard was it as an author to imagine what your story's characters went through under such fearful and harsh conditions? As Daniel Mendelsohn writes, "To appreciate the preciousness of the lives that were saved, it is necessary to have a thorough appreciation of the horror from which they were so miraculously preserved." Whenever I felt despairing or even merely uncomfortable, I reminded myself that what I was imagining had likely happened—to greater and lesser degrees—but for those who lived it, the suffering ended, either through the persistent embrace of life, or from the conscious denial of painful memories. Every act of imagination encourages empathy; thus, I felt close to each person in the story—they became my heroes for being able to not only survive what they experienced, but to create and urge others to a life defined by beauty, compassion, and joy.

6. Why is it important for Jews to read your book, and the stories of World War II? It's important for *everyone* to read stories of the Second World War because they contain warnings about how totalitarianism and genocide materialize. The particularities of this one family's story are, as in all Shoah narratives, unique, though their experiences are not the result of direct contact with the totalitarianism of Hitler but rather with the Stalinist invasion that preceded the German occupation of Poland. Such narratives remind us that genocide is ongoing and that by not acting, we are complicit. Our actions might take many forms: for me as a writer, it is through preserving people's stories; for others, it might mean directly helping a refugee, through the provision of resources such as money or shelter, or indirectly, by charitable donation.

7. Are you amazed at the enduring human spirit it took for those who survived the concentration camps of Hitler and the forced-labor camps of the Soviet Union to rise above their harsh, depressing, and futile circumstances? The enduring human spirit is indeed remarkable. This story has helped me adjust the way I approach daily life. It is very hard to complain about the minor things that go awry—think transportation delays, headaches, a bad day at work, etcetera—once you've immersed yourself in a story in which the worsening has no end in sight. All I have to do to put into perspective a bad day in my first-world life is to think of being loaded, at gunpoint, onto an already overcrowded cattle car where light and air are in short supply and then traveling thusly for weeks at a time, with below minimal food or water and zero privacy.

8. In the end, once released from the severe conditions of the Gulag, the family members featured in your book become refugees in search of a community and dependent upon the kindness of strangers. But we live in a nation that's not as tolerant of immigrants or refugees as it once was. How might your story change our perceptions on this? One finds intolerance toward refugees and/or immigrants both within and beyond our nation's borders. After the Second World War, an estimated 40 million people were displaced in Europe during various periods of the war; at the time, that was a record

Author Q & A

number. I hope this book will help people to pay closer attention right now to the worldwide refugee crisis, which has also been caused by war and hatred. According to the UN, in 2016, 65.6 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, or violence. Every minute, twenty people are displaced. One story cannot change perceptions, but perhaps one person will read the book and commit to helping at least one person who has been displaced.

9. How do the characters in your book drum up the will to live after seeing loved ones killed, possessions confiscated, and destinies crushed while being starved and working as slaves? Many accounts by former prisoners of the Gulag include the stubborn clinging to hope as a critical component of the resilience required to endure and move on. Curiously, in the testimonies of Polish citizens released from the USSR, women were more able than men to maintain hope—of being released, going home, reuniting with their families. As to the real people who inspired this novel, I'd offer some observations: first, Josefina, Peter, and Suzanna were all physically fit at the outset of the war, which provided an advantage in terms of physical survival. Each of them was also possessed of a tenacity to believe that what they were experiencing would end, and that their lives would be normalized.

10. What kind of odds did Josefina and her children face as prisoners in the Gulag? Starvation, disease, and hard labor in adverse environmental conditions combined to make a ruthless environment in which people perished by the thousands. Even with incomplete (and thus inaccurate) statistics from the archives of the former Soviet Department of Prisoner Registration, we know that the death rates from 1941 to 1945 were higher than most years (with the exception of the Great Terror year of 1938). In 1942, an estimated 352,560 prisoners died in the Gulag. And consider these odds: An estimated 1.5-2 million Polish citizens were deported to the USSR. A little more than 115,000 were released, of which 73,000-plus were soldiers, the remainder civilians. Of this total, about 2,000 were Jews, almost half of whom were orphans.

11. The principal characters eventually make the hard journey from Poland to northern Russian to Central Asia and from there, to Iran. Will the family ever find safety and a home? One of the most interesting aspects of this story concerns the odds of surviving a number of events. First: the survival of the terrible bombing of Warsaw by the Nazis. Second: the departure from Warsaw as the Germans rapidly occupied Poland. Third: the arrest, deportation, and imprisonment by the Soviets. Fourth: receiving timely news of the official decree releasing Polish citizens from the camps, and then having the wherewithal to cobble together resources to travel from northern Russia to Uzbekistan. Fifth: the trek from Central Asia to Iran. Finally: for Josefina and Suzanna, the luck to be taken in by a philanthropically minded Persian Jew and for Peter, the luck to survive as a soldier who fought, among other places, at Monte Cassino, one of the war's bloodiest battles.

12. Why is it important to tell the story of the family of Edward Cohen? About six years ago, Edward realized that his mother, Suzanna, was

Author Q & A

beginning to lose her memory. He knew that if he didn't act quickly, the details of her story would perish. He knew, too, that this was an important, inspirational story in the annals of World War II narratives. Largely absent from the literature of the Holocaust are accounts of the Soviet deportations and enslavement of Polish citizens. If the Germans hadn't invaded Poland and displaced Jews from western Poland, those who fled to eastern Poland wouldn't have been subjected to arrest by the Soviets. Also significant in this story, of course, is the generosity of a forward-thinking Persian Jew, which led to the unusual cross-cultural union of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi families.

13. The Nazi invasion of Poland sent the Kohn family on a three-year, six-thousand-mile journey that went to Iran and later to the U.S. What lessons do readers learn both about survival and love? Throughout my research and writing, I kept thinking of an idea proffered by Shoah survivor Viktor Frankl, that salvation for humankind can be achieved only "through love and in love." From his experiences as an inmate in Terezin, Auschwitz, and a satellite camp of Dachau, Frankl observed there were two kinds of people: "decent and unprincipled." Hopefully, readers will learn that surviving an atrocity does not have to involve deviating from ethical behavior—that one can live through the worst moral dilemma, remain principled, and thus preserve and promote decency. And that survival depends on both the tenacious love in a family—among spouses, parents and children, siblings, and extended family and close friends—and the kindness of strangers, a form of beneficence that allows us to love.

14. What kind of woman was Suzanna Kohn, a teenage refugee who lived to be ninety? She was cultured, athletic, and accomplished. She seamlessly integrated into a foreign culture and family. She selflessly cared for her family, extending her generosity to friends and neighbors. Those who remember Madame Suzanne from her days in Tehran recall an elegant young woman whose quiet fortitude and wisdom inspired them. She was, they all say, a role model. In Iran, she told me, "Little children loved to come to my house," and when we spoke—very briefly—about her time in the camp in Russia, she talked about how hard it was on the children who were imprisoned there. Her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren remember her as a woman who nurtured and attended to them. And to all, she imparted the message to "Enjoy life."

15. What does your book reveal about the human condition—both in times of war and peace? Wartime reveals humanity's proclivities toward decency or unethical behavior. In this story, the family's unwavering perseverance ensures not only survival, but against all odds, promotes an abundance of positive spirit, which is the legacy of future generations. Maybe this quality is part of that thing we call life, which is at once real and tangible yet whose origins are still being discovered. Josefina and her siblings lived through two world wars and thrived during the peace between those wars and after the displacement and dispersal caused by the second. This is a testimony to the power of their unwavering perseverance.

16. How did you go about imagining certain conversations and events that could have taken

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place during the war? I started by interviewing family members about Josefina, Suzanna, Peter, and Soleiman. I tried to inhabit the essence of each of them, imagining how they might react to certain real, historical situations and interact with one another in the conditions described by survivors of the Gulag. I looked at a lot of family pictures as well as many images depicting the Siege of Warsaw, the Gulag, Central Asia, and Iran. I read first-person testimonies, historical accounts and analyses, and unpublished memoirs and diaries. Some of the dialogue derives from particular testimonies by Polish citizens who were deported to/survived the Gulag; some of the images of particular events derive from paintings and photos. Please visit the book's webpage at www.legacyeditions.com, for sources cited and consulted.

17. What did Suzanna, her mother, and brother do to survive the Gulag? We can only speculate how they survived the Gulag because they never spoke of it. However, we do know that Josefina sewed silk parachutes in a factory, likely in Margilan, a huge silk-producing area. Suzanna excelled as a seamstress. She and Josefina, like so many of the displaced Polish women who found themselves first in Soviet-occupied eastern Poland and then in a Soviet labor camp, probably took to sewing to make money and then negotiate the "soft" jobs in the camp. Peter was a strong young man at the outset of war, which certainly gave him a physical edge. It is also probable that the family received packages from relatives at home (mail was a celebrated event, and parcels often meant the difference between life and death).

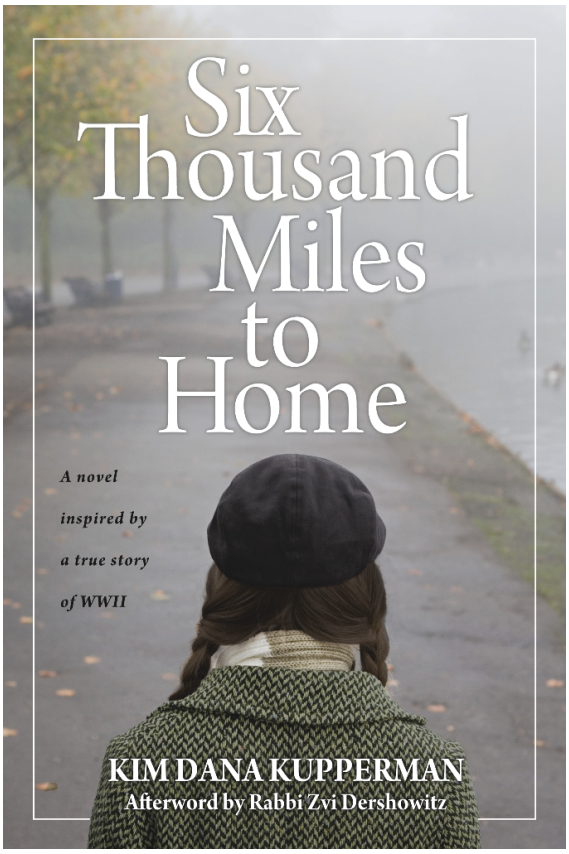
18. As the remaining survivors and witnesses to the horrors of WWII die off, will new generations fully appreciate the conditions they experienced? For myself, I feel a generational responsibility to help preserve the memory of what happened during World War II, and not only the inhumanities perpetrated by Nazis and Soviets but those committed in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Archives in the former Soviet-bloc countries opened relatively recently, and the body of scholarship is growing, which will give us more and more insight as to what really happened. For now we know only part of the entire story, and because so many died without their stories being told or collected, we must try to imagine how they lived and how they perished. What boggles the mind is that no matter how much history we collect about genocide, we seem doomed to repeat it.

19. How can a Jewish person growing up in America today come to grips with the atrocities of World War II? First, by knowing people's individual stories. I'm the second generation in my family to be born in America, and it's taken a lifetime to understand not only how massive a reach the Second World War had, but that it was part of a long history of worldwide genocide. Hitler, after all, looked to the relocation and extermination of indigenous peoples in America as an instructive example for the Nazi campaign to eradicate European Jewry. The Gulag, rooted in the czarist practice of exile, was founded post-WW I, and was firmly in place until Stalin died. As Jews, we are perhaps responsible not only to recall our own tragedy, but to make sure that we heed the warning of the Holocaust and prevent the persecution of others.

Author Q & A

20. How did Suzanna Cohen manage to maintain her faith after nearly being exterminated for practicing it? As one of Suzanna's grandsons so eloquently put it, "The tragedy of her life was caused by her identity, but it was her identity that proved to be her salvation." It must have been significant for Suzanna to cross the Caspian Sea and land on Persian shores on Passover. She had been raised in an assimilated Jewish family with strong ties to the Jewish community. She loved her grandmother Karolina, whose reputation as a devout Jew is recounted by her family today. Finally, she was rescued in Iran by an observant (though modern) Persian Jew whose practice of Jewish traditions with a large, loving family must have provided great solace. Tradition is a form of consistency, which is a critical foundation for healing from trauma.

21. What is the Suzanna Cohen Legacy Foundation? The Suzanna Cohen Legacy Foundation is a nonprofit, charitable organization founded in 2018 to honor the memory of Suzanna Cohen, whose story is the focus of *Six Thousand Miles to Home*. The purpose of the foundation is to collect, preserve, publish, and teach the life stories of men and women who marshaled exemplary resilience in the face of forced displacement, and to honor the bravery and generosity of those who provided compassion and assistance to refugees, exiles, and persecuted peoples. One project of the foundation is Legacy Edition Books, the publisher of *Six Thousand Miles to Home.* Forthcoming books will include other narratives about remarkable survivors and those people who helped them persist and thrive.



Additional Materials

Hundreds of sources were consulted in the making of this book. Complementary historical and cultural materials and bibliography are available for free download at: www.legacyeditionbooks.org.

Selected Excerpts

An Approaching Nazi Threat

Each encroachment by Germany on its neighbors had unfolded at a relatively safe distance from her family's home in western Poland, but it was clear that the Nazi-inspired wave of anti-Semitism was nearing. And, it seemed to her, the hatred was becoming more dangerously accelerated. Had she not been a refined woman, Josefina Kohn might have spit every time she read or heard about Jews made to get on their knees to clean the streets—sometimes with toothbrushes—or the Nazi proclamations in her beloved Vienna. Instead she took to tearing up the newspaper articles about all these awful events. This she did after her husband had retired and the servants had closed their doors.

To Leave or to Stay

"We've discussed this, Finka dear." Julius said. "Should a war break out, we'll pack up and leave. We have resources; we have a car. We have the means to reach safety." It was strange: his voice, like his face, betrayed no anxiety, and she couldn't quite make out if his apparent lack of worry made her feel more or less nervous. How could it be that you were married to a man for almost two decades and were unable, as she was now, to read his voice? And they *had* discussed so many things lately—the refugees from Germany. Hitler and the Nazi Party's meteoric rise to power, the economic strangleholds placed on Jews in Poland.

"And go where?"

"Where would you want to go?"

Kristallnacht: A Warning

When it was over, hundreds of synagogues had burned, 7,500 Jewish shop windows were smashed (the stores looted), and 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and deported to concentration camps. Josefina could not understand—nor would she ever—how this pogrom was possible. Why had no one intervened? she asked herself, over and over again.

"And they are making *us* pay for this *Kristallnacht*," Aunt Laura had said, referring to the fine of one billion Reichsmark levied against Vienna's Jews for the cost of damages—to Jewish property and synagogues—cause by the violence instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials and members of the Storm Troopers and Hitler Youth. "I am a widow. How do they expect me to pay?"

Under Attack

They looked toward Vienna as a center of culture and intellect, and now their cherished city, emptied of Jews, was under Nazi rule. Czechoslovakia, that country just beyond the river to the west, was occupied by the Germans. Jews in the ever-expanding Reich were forbidden to attend schools or universities or to practice medicine or law. They were not allowed to have any of the money they had so honestly earned or prudently saved. They were blamed for all social ills, from the worldwide economic crisis of the early part of the decade to the spread of vermin and disease.

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What If?

"Mother," Suzanna asked discretely, "if, as a Jew, you knew that people wanted to hurt Jews, why would you not shave your beard or get another hat? Or at least dress differently, you know, so others wouldn't see that you were Jewish?"

Another unanswerable question. Or, at least a question Josefina could not possibly begin to parse now. "It's very complicated," she said.

"If someone wanted to kill me for being Jewish and they asked you if I was a Jew, what would you say?" Suzanna was clearly preoccupied with this line of thinking.

In Danger

Josefina hated this moment and all it represented. Not only did she have to transform her daughter into a boyish version of herself, but as a mother, she was obliged to explain to Suzanna how badly certain men—and in particular certain men during wartime—behaved. It was not a conversation Josefina wanted to have, but one she knew had to take place, with words delicately balanced so as not to instill too much fear. She waited until Julius and Peter had left the room.

"You must try to appear as undesirable as possible," Josefina said, "more like a boy than a girl." Suzanna nodded, though her sullen expression exposed her unhappiness at having to comply with getting her hair cut.

Suzi, you are a beautiful girl," Ernestyna said. "It is not your hair that makes you so lovely. But your long hair tells everyone you are female."

Fear and Sorrow

Josefina had imagined and feared her husband's arrest after she and her family first came to Kotlyarska Street almost four months ago. Along with contemplating worst-case scenarios, she had grown accustomed to many other new things since fleeing Teschen: falling bombs; razed buildings; and an endless dust made of plaster, stone, ash. People in bandages and pain, bleeding, screaming, crying. Shortages and long lines; small spaces and worn clothing. Soldiers patrolling the streets. People being taken away. The rank smell of fear. But the arrest of her own husband? She had considered it happening and was frightened he would be arrested, but she couldn't know how she'd react when her husband was actually taken in the middle of the night. And just as soon as he was gone, she felt what she could name only as a dark foreboding. She might never see Julius again. This sensation expanded in her chest and tightened in her throat. Josefina warned herself not to succumb to the full weight of the intertwined fear and sorrow.

Stripped of Dignity

Their captors provided only the most meager rations of gray soup—if it could even be called that—delivered in a small, oily pail. Water was almost nonexistent despite the urgent pleas of the car's inhabitants. These entreaties were met with blows from the guards or derisive comments. Provisions

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packed in larger baskets or suitcases had been taken from most of the deportees at the stations; many of the young men and boys were without shoes because the soldiers had demanded they remove them. Peter had been lucky. The lack of air or room inside the wagon was stifling. The latrine was an exercise in humiliation. At night any relief from the cooler air that came into the boxcar was trumped by the inability to lie down to sleep.

Josefina considered all the other cars on this train, each of them filled, she supposed, with men, women, and children who had been stripped, as she was, of any ideas they might have had about resistance. Or dignity. All of them fighting to not give in to despair, as she felt she might at any moment.

Future in Question

Suzanna had spent the past ten months thinking about all she had known which was now gone. The most important thing to have been destroyed was her sense of belonging to a large and ever-present family whose love sustained her. These thoughts she kept to herself, vowing to never tell them to anyone. She understood why it was more important to think only of what she must do as each new hour unfolded. Danger, danger everywhere complicated the smallest task. Later, yes later…there would be her own family, the quotidian would become peaceful once more, and she would enjoy her life. *There will be an after*, she thought, pressing her feet into the ground. Someone said the word *taiga*, and Suzanna realized she was standing on that almost limitless, forested territory she had once seen on a map in school. She recalled learning about the thick, boreal Russian forest, the world's largest taiga, which stretched about 3,600 miles, from the Pacific Ocean past the Ural Mountains.

Survival

"Instead of making things worse, you should be collecting rain to drink," Josefina said to Herr Auerbach. "Who knows when we will next be given any water." She purposely neglected to mention food, which was obviously not forthcoming.

All of the deportees turned their heads then and looked at her. Or, as she recalled later, they looked *through* her. She wanted nothing more than to not see them. Their eyes were already sunken, and their mouths were set in grim lines. She hoped her face did not appear like theirs, but she doubted it could look like anything else. A collective movement began, the search for something in which to catch the lightly falling rain. Not all of them had tin cups, but all of them had something—a plate, a bowl, their cupped hands—and those who had vessels set them out on the hard ground where they sat, disheveled, exhausted, forlorn, vacant, and nearing hopelessness. Their faces turned to the sky.

A Shared Agony

Together they had suffered the indignities of deportation: the crowded boxcar, the airlessness, the lack of privacy, the salted fish given them by the soldiers, which made them thirst in ways no one could imagine. Together they had listened to the babies screaming and then the wails of mothers when their children grew silent. Together they smelled the death that took the very young and very old and also someone his mother's age. Together they had shared provisions packed in the things they carried, stuff in

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pockets, tossed to them by the citizens of Lwów just before the boxcar doors were closed and locked. Together they understood this act of generosity as a macabre farewell. Together they had told one another it wouldn't be long before they were released and then listened as one and then another among them went mad and raved about how they were all going to perish, sealed in this forsaken boxcar. Together they went silent and then wept. Together they shared the rag stuck into the boxcar's roof when it swelled with rainwater. Together they rejoiced in air or light coming through the one tiny window, a window from which they took turns watching the landscape transform into a majestic vista. *God's country*, Peter thought. A place God had touched once and never returned to and then abandoned, he thought later.

The Gulag

"You work to eat," he said bluntly. They would work from six in the morning to six in the evening. He didn't explain how they'd be awake at 4:00 AM, counted before the morning meal, marched into the forest, marched back to the camp after sunset, and counted again before and after the evening meal. But he did say how generous it was for the state to excuse them from laboring if the temperature fell below minus 60° C or if they had a fever of 102.2 degrees or more. They would enjoy one day of rest every ten days, and on that day they would bathe, have their clothing disinfected, and attend meetings where they would learn about the heroic proletariat. Any young children in the settlement would attend school. There would be no practice of religion of any kind, nor would they talk of going home. *This* was their home. The Mariskaya ASSR. The boreal forest known as the taiga. Where the mosquitoes and bedbugs were starving, too. The wolves waiting. Where weather and Spartan living conditions fortified the working person.

"Not to worry," he added. "You'll get used to it." The interpreter added, "And if you don't, you'll die."

Desperate

"Why don't you have enough money, you stupid Pole?" she heard one clerk ask an elderly woman who had somehow managed to survive not only the trains but the subsequent imprisonment in the labor camp. The Polish woman, emboldened by her liberty and old enough not to care anymore what the punishment the Soviet state might mete out, simply looked up at the clerk.

"I forgot, citizen chief, that freedom must be purchased," she said. "How foolish to think the work I've done here was enough to set me free."

"You don't have enough for transit papers. Your request to cross the frontier is denied," the clerk said.

The burden of the mundane was elevated to unknown heights in the Soviet Union, Josefina mused. If buying bread was, for the average citizen, a daily lesson in uncertainty and shortages, for a *zek* to request permission to go anywhere was an exercise in irrationality. Josefina felt nauseous. What if *she* didn't have enough money? She didn't have a pass to stay overnight in the city, and even if she did, where would she stay? This meant returning to the camp like a dog with its tail tucked…only to figure out how to come up with more rubles and then make all the arrangements all over again to come back to the city.

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Separation

His sister cried soundlessly when they embraced good-bye. *What if we never see one another again?* he wondered. "You be careful, Suzi," he said. Though he tried to sound cavalier so as not to arouse his sister's fear, Peter was suddenly afraid she would be harmed without him there to protect her. "I wish I could stay with you both," he whispered in her ear. At that, Suzanna began to sob, her thin body heaving in his arms. It was the first time in a very long time that any of them allowed such feelings to surface and be expressed. Peter looked to his mother, and he understood all at once the terrible burden of being a parent who is forced to watch a child suffer.

"I'll be very careful," Suzanna said at last, pulling away from Peter and wiping her face on her sleeve. "I'll miss you, dear brother."

A Generous Host

Their host, this generous Mr. Cohen, was a man possessed of what her parents called *character*, a quality visible in his posture, grace of movement, the angle of his head as he listened intently, a way of speaking that was considered. Mr. Cohen was a gentleman, and in the sense of the word Suzanna had learned from her family—he was both refined in manner and robust—of opinion, of mind, of body. Suzanna had felt instantly at ease during their meal.

A Record of Life

Suzanna had not appeared in any photos since the age of thirteen. Like so many who fled and survived during the war, she brought to her place of refuge no pictures attesting to her childhood, no proof of ever having lived before *now*. If one did not capture an experience with words, how did one contain a memory without pictures? She wondered how important it really was to have such artifacts. What did people do in ancient times, when there were no means of keeping a likeness or preserving the written account of an event? Of course she knew they recorded only the collective stories—history and mythology, legends, most of these oral, some notable for having been written, such as her people's Torah or the cuneiform-etched stone of the Code of Hammurabi. But how did they remember everything?