



Inspired by *In My Hands*, by Irena Gut Opdyke  
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*Winner:*  
*Artist Fellowships, Byrdcliffe Colony, Woodstock, NY*

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# Stefania

## Synopsis

### **Prologue: The court of the Highest Tribunal, eastern Poland, summer 1947.**

This scene gives us the history and background of the opera. Stefania and Avram, a young Polish couple, have been summoned to testify in the war crimes trial of former Ghetto Commandant Wilhelm Hildebrandt. Stefania, under oath, flashes back... (Orchestral Interlude I)

### **Act I**

#### **i. The ghetto square in the same town under Nazi occupation, December 1942.**

Stefania is caught smuggling medicine into the ghetto for her devoted friend, Rachel. The penalty, even for a non-Jew, can be death. Stefania is forced to humiliate and renounce Rachel publicly, and becomes the maid to Hildebrandt, believing that by doing so, she stands the best chance of saving her friend. (ENCLOSED)

#### **ii. A church a few weeks later.**

*Stefania realizes she can't trust the newly appointed priest to hide Rachel or to give sanctuary to any Jew. She realizes she must trust no one!*

#### **iii. The Colonel's quarters overlooking the ghetto, a month later.**

*Hildebrandt is told by the newly arrived SS officer, Birmelin, that he will be demoted and transferred. Hildebrandt protests, resists, then—bowing to politics—concedes. Stefania overhears the plan to ship all Jews to their deaths.*

#### **iv. The Colonel's house near the quarry, a month later.**

*Now Hildebrandt's housekeeper in his new quarters, Stefania has not compromised herself to him, although she must bear the shame of accusation. Threatened by the Jewish Ghetto fighter Avram, hiding in the basement, Stefania reveals the imminent death transports and asks Avram for help in saving Rachel. In spite of his mistrust, Avram feels something for Stefania.*

#### **v. The ghetto square, two days later.**

*Beginning of the death transport. Uprising! Surprise attack of the resistance led by Avram. Jews escape. Many Germans die. Birmelin orders the burning of the ghetto!*

#### **vi. The Colonel's house, the same night.**

*Hildebrandt, humiliated and drunk, harasses Stefania. Afraid for her safety, Avram appears from the basement. His intervention leads to Hildebrandt's discovery of Jews Avram has rescued from the Ghetto, including the ailing Rachel. Hildebrandt threatens Stefania, who calls his bluff. Stefania ultimately strikes a bargain with the Colonel: "Protect Rachel and I will be your mistress."*

Intermission

## Act II

- i. The vestibule of the convent, a few days later.

*In order to fulfill his part of the bargain, Hildebrandt secretly hands Rachel over to the nuns, who agree, after some hesitation, to take her in and protect her.*

- ii. The same, a few months later.

*As the Russians advance on Nazi-occupied Poland, Stefania is briefly reunited with Rachel in the convent. Birmelin, who is convinced that the nuns are harboring Rachel, tries every means to discover her identity.*

- iii. The Colonel's house, the next day

*Dénouement: Birmelin accuses Stefania of aiding the Jewish girl and threatens her. Hildebrandt, afraid for Stefania's life and jealous of Birmelin's youth and power, kills him. The first Russian mortars are heard, signaling the Liberation is near.*

*(Orchestral Interlude II: The refugees scatter; Avram flees with Stefania.)*

- iv. The courtroom, 1947 as in the Prologue.

*Three years later. Hildebrandt is on trial for war crimes. We learn that the convent was destroyed; did Rachel survive? Was Stefania's Faustian compromise for nothing?*

### **Epilogue: The witness room, immediately afterwards.**

*Stefania returns to the witness room, stunned and silent. Avram, who knows nothing of Stefania's bargain, desperately repeats his declaration of love for her as he is led into the courtroom to give testimony and learn the complete truth. End of opera.*

**(PLEASE SCROLL DOWN TO READ THE PROLOGUE.)**

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# Stefania

## *Prologue: A Courthouse in eastern Poland, Summer 1947*

*(A gray textured trapezoid about the size of the stage, which will be the main playing area, the courtroom, the main square of the Ghetto (Aktionsplatz -- "Deportation Square"), lit with textures and shadows. A scrim is in front; we don't see the scrim at first.*

*Opening of the opera: When the house lights go down, there is a crossfade to the scrim and the lights fade to black on the square.*

*In front of the scrim: A dank waiting room of the Court of Highest Tribunal. Lights come up on **Stefania Zielinska**, a Polish Catholic woman, age 24, stage left, facing away, and her husband **Avram Markovicz**, a Polish Jew, age 28, stage right, behind her. The pants and boots of two guards are visible upstage right and left.*

*After a silence, in hushed tones):*

Stefania

*(without much expression, looking straight ahead)*

We were almost there ... across the border...

Avram

*(gesturing to her furtively) Please, Stefania!*

Stefania

...just a few more days ... [and] we would have been free....

Avram

*(crossing behind her, whispered) We will still be free.*

*(The sincerity of his words rouses her. She turns her head to him and touches his face reassuringly. A few beats. She steps away again and looks around, crossing right)*

Stefania

I thought I'd never see this town again. I hoped...I prayed...

*(Beat. Spotlight upstage on **Wilhelm Hildebrandt**, a former German Wehrmacht colonel, in his late 50s, in the dock of the courtroom, dressed in a somewhat worn, somewhat shabby brown or gray suit, and a bow tie. Neither Stefania nor Avram sees him.*

Avram

Every time you look at him, think of me.

Stefania

*(still looking ahead) That's all I think of, Avram –*

Defense Attorney

*(cutting off Stefania's line, voiceover, spoken or recitative) The defense calls Stefania Zielinska Markovicz.*

*(Stefania and Avram turn to each other. Hildebrandt reacts briefly to the sound of Stefania's name, then catches himself. Guards step forward to escort Stefania to the courtroom.)*

Second voice (offstage)

Stefania Zielinska Markovicz.

*(Stefania and Avram move towards each other to embrace. The guards move forward and the couple hesitates.)*

Third voice (Court Officer)

*(offstage, then entering the courtroom) Stefania Zielinska Markovicz. He waits to usher Stefania into the courtroom).*

*(Stefania and Avram embrace and kiss briefly. Stefania separates from Avram and stands between the two guards. Spot on Stefania.)*

*(Lights out on Avram; exit R. Set pieces for the courtroom, namely, a witness box, and a lectern and two chairs and two tables for the two Attorneys, slide in and are dimly seen. **Polish Defense Attorney** and the **Polish Prosecutor** enter in blackout also. Guards glide the witness box forward and seat Stefania in it. Neither she nor Hildebrandt looks at each other.)*

*(Increasingly visible in the courtroom as the lights come up are attorney's lectern with a microphone SR, facing slightly DS as if the attorney is speaking to the court; behind which are two tables facing onstage and chairs. The role of Head Judge is a voiceover. Two guards are dimly visible to the rear and either side of the witness box and the defendant's dock. Standing at the lectern is the Polish Defense Attorney in a long dark legal robe. Behind the upstage table, seated, is the Polish Prosecutor, in full military dress.)*

*(Court officer holds up Bible. Judge – in voiceover -- gives the oath to Stefania:)*

Judge

*(spoken? Recit?) Do you swear before God and this Holy Bible that your testimony will be the truth, and only the truth?*

Stefania

*(hand on Bible. Stefania responses are very careful, but her voice is sure. When she places her hand on the Bible, it is with great devotion and reverence.)*

*(spoken /recit?) I swear.*

Judge

*(spoken) So entered in the record. (gestures to S to sit. She does so. Exit Court officer with Bible.)*

Defense Attorney or Judge (spoken)

Please state your name for the Tribunal.

Stefania

*(sung recitative) Stefania Zielinska Markowicz.*

Defense Attorney [lines in brackets to be omitted]

Is that your given name?

Stefania

*(solo spot on Stefania. Rest of stage dark) I was born "Stefania Zielinska." "Markovicz" is my married name.*

Defense Attorney

Your date of birth?

Stefania

Born April eighteenth, nineteen twenty-three.

Defense Attorney

Your place of birth?

Stefania

Bilgoraj ("BEE-U-GO-RA-EE"), Poland.

Defense Attorney

Your current address?

Stefania

Jesuit Street number four, Bilgoraj ("BEE-U-GO-RA-EE").

*(Start singing:)*

Defense Attorney

Do you know the defendant, Wilhelm Hildebrandt?

Stefania

Yes, I do.

Defense Attorney

How do you know him?

Stefania

*(slight pause)* I was his housekeeper in the Ghetto here.

Defense Attorney

When did you work for him?

Stefania

From November nineteen forty-two, until spring nineteen forty-four.

Judge

Please give your testimony to the court.

Stefania

*(sung as opposed to recitative)* I came here to go to school, and I worked in the Landau bakery, Szwolezerow ("Schfoh-leh-ZHEH-roof") number sixteen. The Landaus...and their daughter, Rachel--

Judge (interrupts)

*(spoken or recit.)* A Jewish family? *(Stefania nods.)* How long did you work for them?

Stefania

*(spoken or recit.)* Spring nineteen thirty-nine, until the Landaus were sent to the Ghetto... nineteen forty-one.

Judge

*(interrupts, spoken)* During the Nazi occupation?

Stefania

Yes.

Judge

Were you friendly with the Landaus?

Stefania

Rachel was the sister I never had.

*(Beat.)*

Judge

Please continue.

Stefania

*(Pause. Sung again. Orchestra more excited)* One day I was out in the street) German planes came out of nowhere. Bombs exploded! People were screaming. Blood was everywhere. Suddenly, there was Rachel...pulling me into the cellar with her and her family.. From that day on, we were friends for life. *(Pause. New color, faster tempo)* When the Landaus were sent to the Ghetto, they left me with the store. *(Lights start to fade, Stefania dry and slyly deliberate)* I kept one eye on the bakery...one eye on the Ghetto. *(Orchestra starts to take over. Stefania angry)* I learned what went on in there. The Landaus died of typhus ... and Rachel ... was very sick...

*(Stefania's voice disappears into the orchestra. Fade to black onstage. Long orchestral transition into Act 1, scene I, (allow for quick change for Stefania and Hildebrandt) from measured, chordal music, without rhythmic energy, of the courtroom, gradually building into the chaos and underlying terror of the Ghetto Square) (Attacca:)*

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