

BIRTH

AT THE

GATES

A FIVE-PART MINISERIES  
BASED ON A TRUE STORY

*A young doctor is separated from his wife and son in occupied Poland during World War II, and – after they both endure the ultimate horror – are reunited against all odds.*



Everyone knows about the darkness of those days. From that darkness, however, come stories with a sliver of light at the end, and because we need hope in the face of tragedy, these stories need telling as well.

The separation and reunification of Noah and Zahava during World War II is one of these stories. It's about a compassionate, idealistic doctor and his strong, resourceful wife, ripped apart by the machinery of war and reunited against all odds. Separated at the start of the war through bad timing and circumstance, our couple spends four long, tragic years apart.

In the city of Slonim, Noah and their extended family endure the full onslaught of Hitler's Final Solution – first marginalization, then ghettoization, then concentration...and at the end, it is only his family's exhortations and the possibility of finding Zahava and their son that lead him to make the harrowing decision to leave their typhus-stricken, two-year-old daughter and escape from the concentration camp, an escape he makes just hours before everyone is deported to Auschwitz.

Meanwhile, Zahava – stranded in the middle of the Eastern front – spends the years fleeing the German onslaught with their five-year-old son in tow, sheltering from air raids, sleeping in cemeteries, and slowly moving East using nothing but her own ingenuity and resourcefulness to eventually find her way to safety.

Though their tale is just one of quite-literally millions from that time, it is proof of how the forces of hope, love and (admittedly) good fortune can, ultimately, prevail in the face of the greatest horror humanity has ever known. Because this is – above all – a story about normal people, about what happens when individuals who just want to live in peace are swept up by history and ravaged by war. Noah and Zahava are two ordinary people thrust into extraordinary situations that destroyed their family and uprooted their lives – but did not kill them. They survived.



But they didn't survive with guns blazing, or through crafty acts of subterfuge. They survived in the same manner as most survivors do in the real world – by taking it one day and one moment at a time, never knowing what the next holds, but never losing sight of the ultimate goal: to find each other.

It is this common thread that ties us all together, this love of family and this desire to live in peace – and in the story of *Birth at the Gates* we will see ourselves and ask “What would I do if...?”

The goal of this series is to stand as a narrative, educational entity, one that engrosses the viewer in a heartwrenching-yet-triumphant story, but also applies the perspective of history to the very real issues we face today. By holding up this mirror, we might – hopefully – open some eyes to the potential danger of indulging those that would allow it happen again.

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## THE STORY

*The only modifications to the historical accuracy of this story are some peripheral characters and locations that have been combined for expedience.*

We begin not at the gates of a concentration camp, but in the Eastern European countryside, where life is normal for our young couple, or as normal as it can be for two Jewish youths from well-respected families in 1920's Poland.

NOAH KAPLINSKY, a young doctor of great promise, pursues the woman he knows to be his future wife – his neighbor and family friend ZAHAVA YOSLEVICH. We follow Noah and Zahava as they build their life together in the town of Slonim. Noah graduates medical school and creates a thriving practice, while Zahava works for her father's business. A beautiful son named ELIEZER is born, then another daughter DOLI. Close with their families, respected by the community – Noah, Zahava, Eliezer and Doli are comfortable, happy and content.

But soon the clouds build...in the form of the start of World War II and the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which annexed Western Poland to Germany and Eastern Poland to Russia. The Soviets move in, and all traces of local culture and their town's Jewish life are suppressed – along with many other things. Noah and Zahava get a taste of life under Communist rule...and it's far from the paradise that is promised. Rumors of the even greater horror to the West, however, create a “lesser-of-two-evils” mentality.

Through three years of Soviet occupation, Noah continues his work, helping patients and trying to adjust to life during wartime. They struggle, and life is different, but with each day they think they've overcome the toughest obstacle.

Until, that is, their son – five-year-old Eliezer – becomes sick, and Zahava is forced to travel with him to a special hospital in the warmer climate of the Crimean Peninsula, a trip of several days. It's early summer, 1941, and they are only to be away for a month...but it is in this window of time that Hitler decides to break the pact and invade Russia.

Zahava quickly starts for home when the news of the invasion comes to her. During the train's stopover in Moscow she loads up with essentials: food, warm clothing...and as many small bottles of Vodka she can buy, bottles which are currency to Russian soldiers. Her train departs, but makes it only as far as Minsk before an air raid stops it – just a few hours away from Slonim. The German machine is swift, and the family is cut off: Noah receives no word of Zahava, and Zahava has no news of what is going on in her hometown. And thus begins a separation with no end in sight.

### ZAHAVA

Zahava is stopped in Minsk, waiting on the train for the final leg to Slonim, when the bombs start falling. She escapes the train with Eliezer and stumbles upon a bomb shelter, filled with residents. For two weeks, they endure the vicious bombing of Minsk – only after food begins to run low do the residents decide to flee.

During a lull in the bombing, the residents make a run for it...but the planes appear in the sky and the bombs start falling again. Everyone except five-year-old Eliezer continues on, running through the open plaza. The child runs back to the shelter, imploring Zahava to follow him. She does...and is forced to watch from the entrance as the open square is hit directly, killing everyone with whom they had sheltered. It is only days later that Eliezer agrees to try to leave again, and they join the throngs of refugees seeking a safer haven out of the town.

She heads East on foot, Eliezer in tow, following the sea of humanity from village to village...but unlike most, she is prepared, thanks to the Vodka currency she carries. With so much “money” she is able to secure a wagon here, or a place to stay there...all the while pushing slowly back to Moscow in the hope that her cousins can take her in.

## NOAH

In Slonim, Noah’s position as a respected doctor helps him as the German authorities set up shop in the town. He’s asked to join the *Judenrat* – the Jewish Council – but is urged to stay away by his colleagues and family...his place is in the hospital, they say. He quickly realizes he can do more good in his position there – a decision that will later prove to save his life.

Since most of the doctors in Slonim are Jewish – and there are only 6 of them for the entire city – the Germans are forced to allow them to maintain their positions at the hospital, and Noah is swept up in the chaos of the first few weeks of the occupation: nonstop casualties, both military and civilian, crowd into the small hospital. Noah works night and day to treat the wounded – even the German soldiers.

As the weeks pass, the new reality of the Third Reich is imposed. It is only Noah’s place as a “necessary Jew” that keeps him alive through the creation of the ghetto and an expanding series of *aktionen*: shadowy, mass executions whose manner and brutality defy explanation. First comes the mysterious disappearance of 60 men, discovered to have been executed on the outskirts of town. Then, a roundup of 1200 people, with no word of what happened. It’s soon uncovered that they, too, have been slaughtered.

The terror among the Jews in Slonim grows– as do the ranks of the partisan rebels in the surrounding countryside. The Germans will execute the families of anyone found helping the partisans, however – and Noah is careful to hide his treatment of the wounded rebels in the hospital.

No one can understand what is happening, or why the German authorities are committing these atrocities. And most of all – no one knows what to do.

## ZAHAVA

Arriving in the small town of Tula after several weeks of brutal marching, she manages to get a telegram to her relatives in Moscow. A four-word reply arrives shortly after: “You cannot come here.”

Dejected, alone and lost, with the threat of air raids every day, Zahava sits in the telegram office, ready to give up.

Then, she remembers a distant relative of a relative who would send letters from Tula - but she can only recall their last name. In the post office, she seeks to find out where they live, but is stymied by the commonality of the name.

Then: a stroke of luck...someone waiting in line behind her takes an interest, and when she describes who she's looking for, he leads them to her distant cousins, whom she hasn't seen in ten years.

They remember her well, though, and there's a tearful, incredible reunion. For now at least, Zahava and Eliezer have a roof over their heads. But no word from Slonim, except for horrible rumors of what the Nazis are doing to Jews.

## NOAH

Slonim – November, 1941. Noah is given a new yellow card for him and his family, along with other Jews in occupations “of value.”

Then, terrifying news reaches Noah in the hospital: The Judenrat has been kidnapped, held for ransom. The ransom is paid...and then they are executed. Had Noah joined them, he would have met his end.

A few days later – on November 14<sup>th</sup> – trucks surround the ghetto and soldiers go door-to-door, rounding people up and making them wait in lines in the freezing cold. Those without a yellow card are shipped off. Twelve thousand Jews in one day...Noah, from the safety of the hospital, can only listen in growing horror as the rumors spread throughout the day.

Later that day, at the Jewish hospital, where Noah has been clandestinely working in the evenings, a woman arrives. Naked, covered in blood and frozen...she reveals the truth:

All of those rounded up were taken outside the city limits to a set of large pits. As German and Belorussian police got progressively drunker, the Jews were stripped, told to face the pits, then gunned down. This woman survived only because at the last second she and her sister embraced, and her sister's body shielded her. She fell into the pits and played dead all day until the Germans and Belorussian police finished for the day.

It is after this final slaughter that the German plans become apparent. The ghetto is consolidated, and Noah's entire family is moved into a four-room apartment with two other families. Zahava's mother and Noah's mother create an underground bakery, using smuggled ingredients to bake bread for the several thousand Jews that remain in the ghetto.

Throughout the winter, Noah continues his duty at the hospitals, rewarded with food from grateful patients, food that he brings back to share with his fellow prisoners in the ghetto.

In late Spring of 1942 – the rumors start: another *aktion* is coming. This time, it's for keeps: the ghetto is emptied and destroyed, burned to the ground, as the remaining Jews in town are rounded up and shipped off. Those who had built ingenious hiding places are forced out by the smoke and flames, and the entire population is lined up in the square. This is, seemingly, the end...

But, frozen in terror in the roundup line, watching people get shot as they try to flee, Noah's family – the ones who remain, including Zahava's mother and his 2-year old daughter Doli – are saved from certain execution by a young German medical student named HANZ ZEIFL, who – having seen Noah's work – pleads with the authorities to let them live. Noah is given an ID card and told to go on his way...and he can't believe his fortune. He decides to flee with his family and head West.

Paradoxically, across the actual German border, which is only 30 miles away, there are rumors of [relatively] benign conditions for Jews. It is only in the occupied zones – the formerly-Soviet areas of Poland known as the *Gevitzcommissariat* – that the Nazis have been slaughtering everyone. The later phases of Hitler's Final Solution have not yet been implemented.

Noah is desperate for any chance at a reprieve from the destruction. They leave at night – and, strangely unhindered by any authorities, successfully march to the town of Valkovisk...which seems as if it's in another world.

The survivors of Slonim are welcomed to the town, but most of the Jews in Valkovisk have trouble believing the stories of the slaughter, chalking it up to exaggerated rumors. Noah is shocked to see Jews living in such quiet – they all wear the stars, and there are occasional beatings and disappearances, but the Jews of Valkovisk have not yet experienced the real terror, and most are in denial about what's to come. Noah has no choice but to settle in, helping at the hospital as best he can, and trying to find a way to track down Zahava.

## ZAHAVA

Months have passed, and Zahava has found a bit of respite with her extended family. Bits and pieces of news trickle in but there is no knowledge of what is going on in Poland. Around the time that Noah is fleeing the Slonim ghetto, the situation in Tula becomes untenable...the German army is making progress, and Tula is next in line for disaster...the air raids at night have been getting worse.

Zahava decides to flee ahead of the war, against her cousin's pleading. She, however, refuses to be part of another mass retreat again.

The day before she is scheduled to leave, a telegram arrives from another cousin of Noah's who has – somehow – tracked her down through the Tula family. A banker, MISHA was sent from Warsaw to Russia for work before the war broke out, and has been cut off from his wife and son. He offers Zahava and Eliezer safe haven in Penza – a train ride away. Zahava is elated and they set off.

After a miserable, disease-ridden train ride, one which takes three days instead of ten hours, they arrive in Penza to find an emotional and relieved Misha. The bombs are not falling here yet, so they settle in to wait out the war.

But soon, it appears that this living will be as hard as any other they've encountered. It's winter now, and the conditions are unbearable. The three of them live in a two-room shack of an apartment, with meager rations and no heat. Eliezer sleeps on the wooden couch, while Zahava sleeps on the floor next to him. The wood is scarce and the apartment is frigid. Zahava works odd jobs – as a maid, as a bookkeeper, as a clerk for a hotel – anything to keep food coming, but it's still not enough.

Soon, Misha is offered more comfortable housing in another town and – unable to handle the conditions – he leaves them alone. Eliezer copes as well as a starving five-year-old can, but they are both pushed to the brink.

At one point, Zahava welcomes a high-ranking Soviet official to the hotel she works at, who flirts with her and asks her where she's from. After telling him, he reveals that he knew Noah before the war... a connection which sends her to pieces. She decides that she's had enough of cold and hunger and utter destitution, and she sets out to contact her relatives in Palestine – a dangerous endeavor during these times.

But fortune is on her side. Her relatives respond and send money, and after a long, bureaucratic nightmare, after countless bribes with Vodka and serendipitous meetings, she's able to secure a visa and an exit permit, and sets out by ship down the Volga to Stalingrad, where she leaves the Soviet Union just days before the Battle of Stalingrad.

## NOAH

Noah's respite is short-lived. By 1943, the machine of death is fully functional, and the transports begin. Jews are rounded up – told by the guards that they're being sent to a "labor camp" – and this time there is no one to save Noah and his family. They join the forced march through the Polish winter along with thirty-thousand other Jews from the surrounding area.

They reach the concentration camp in the middle of the night, in the freezing cold...and as they do, Noah hears a woman's piercing scream. He runs to its source, and – at the entrance to the camp, on the frozen ground – he helps her deliver her baby. As he hands the child to his mother, he sees in her eyes that she knows where they are and what her child's fate must be.

Life in the camp is everything the history books say and more. Crowded bunkers, filth and sickness everywhere...people living on meager rations and dirty water. Every day, there is a selection, and the inhabitants of the camp line up. The weak are pulled from the line and loaded onto trucks, sent away to no-one knows where.

For several weeks, Noah joins the others in trying to create as normal an existence as possible. He befriends a doctor named ISAAC RESNICK and together they tend to the wounded and sick as best they can.

At one point, they are asked to euthanize an entire bunker of "non-transportables" – a request they refuse, even when threatened with death. Somehow, their lives are again spared... but they are held at gunpoint as they stand outside the bunker while it is sealed and gassed – listening to the screams of agony and terror from the sickly inhabitants. They are then forced to clean up the bodies.

In just a month, the camp has been reduced to under one thousand inhabitants, from its initial population of just over thirty-thousand. Somehow Noah, his daughter, his brother Yudel and Zahava's mother Yoheved have all managed to persevere. As it turns out, their town's bunker is among the last to be evacuated...

Isaac approaches Noah with a proposal to escape, but Noah is reluctant to leave his daughter. Everyone knows, however, what is going to happen...and there is still a chance that Zahava is alive. Faced with the certainty of death if he stays – and under extreme pressure from his mother-in-law and his brother – he eventually gives in and joins Isaac to hatch an escape plan.

The key is to get placed on a work detail that leaves the camp, which they succeed in doing. At dawn on the final day of the transports, they accompany a small group of ten Jews and a single German guard to the nearby town to get bread for the transport. Noah says a hurried, inadequate goodbye to his daughter and his family, then follows Isaac to join the wagon. The great gate opens, and for the first time since arriving, Noah is outside the barbed wire.

They follow the empty wagon into town. The townspeople see the yellow stars on the Jewish coats and shout abuse. At the bakery, the baker informs them that the bread is not ready. Isaac asks if he has any vodka as well – for the loyal watchman...

And the guard slumps onto the table, drunk. Isaac and Noah look out the window – but a squad of police loiters outside, near the wagon. They watch the guard stir in his sleep... he will wake soon. Isaac peers out the window again...the police have left. They start toward the door...just as the baker's voice is heard. The bread is ready. The Nazi guard jolts awake.

Noah and Isaac load the wagon, and as it pulls away, they lag behind the other inmates. The guard is groggy and unstable...he holds the side of the wagon for balance. Noah and Isaac walk more and more slowly until they are far behind the group. The wagon turns a corner...and they bolt down a side street.

They run down the street, but Noah slows, then stops cold. He can't go on – he can't leave his daughter – and he tells Isaac he's going back. Isaac – incredulous, but unwilling to head out alone – can't convince him, and he joins him as they catch up to the wagon, their brief escape unnoticed.

They catch up to the wagon train, and return to a camp bustling with activity. People pack and load trucks; sick people collapse trying to prove they're well enough to go on.

It's a terrible sight, and Noah immediately regrets returning. His family is furious with him...but there's nothing to be done now. For an hour, he watches the roundup, waiting for his turn...when suddenly Isaac comes rushing in – they need to send the wagon out again. It's another chance. Zahava's mother leaps at Noah, ordering him to go.

Seeing no other choice, Noah bends down to pick up Doli – he kisses her, then hands her to Yoheved and they all embrace. Yudel puts a hand on Noah's shoulder and leads him, quivering, out of the hut.

Yudel walks behind Noah the whole way to the gate. They do not embrace for fear of arousing suspicion, but shake hands – a brothers' final farewell. Noah follows the wagon outside of the camp, and looks back as the gates close slowly, cutting him off from the rest of the family.

At the bakery, they load up the bread. On the way back, they successfully repeat the morning's actions, bolting down the same alley as before, tearing the yellow stars off their clothes as they run.

## ZAHAVA

Zahava arrives in Iran, where she and Eliezer stay in a meager hotel in the port city... it's palatial in comparison to where she's been. She tries to telegram her relatives in Palestine to plan the next leg of the journey. There's no response, and – worried – she approaches a group of officers in the dining hall to ask how she can contact Palestine. They offer to look into it for her – a little too eager to help.

The next day, she hears her name called outside... the officers are waiting with a taxi, and she's instructed to get in. Terrified, she and Eliezer are taken to a hospital where Zahava discovers who has called for her: a former doctor who was a beneficiary of Zahava's aunt in Warsaw is waiting in the hallway. He graciously expedites their journey and places them in a car to Tehran, where the Jewish Agency has offices.

In Tehran, she's placed in a refugee camp with hundreds of others, all waiting for transit visas. She makes herself as useful as possible as she works every day to secure her travel permit.

## NOAH

Safely outside the town, Isaac and Noah trudge through the harsh winter – freezing, dropping knee-deep into the snow as they walk. After a brutal march in which they both collapse several times and only keep going thanks to the other, they reach one of Isaac's former patients in a tiny village, several miles away. Here they are taken in, hidden by two people in the village, who work selflessly to help.

After a heartbreaking, failed attempt to join the partisans fighting in the Polish countryside, and with the town raids becoming more and more frequent, they decide to settle into real hiding. They set up a small, dual-coffin-sized space under a barn and move in...sitting completely still. They make plans to only receive food and water through a small slot – and in this manner, without moving at all, they begin their long wait.

For 8 months, their benefactors bring them supplies and reading material, as well as news of the war - passed through the slot in the side of the barn. It is here that they learn the entire family – including 2-year old Doli – was sent to a place called Auschwitz – at that point just another city in Poland.

## ZAHAVA

After several weeks of doing her best to make herself useful, the permits come through, and she and Eliezer are loaded onto a plane, a first for both of them.

A terrifying hour of flying brings them to Amman, where they covertly get a transport to the border...and into Jerusalem. From there, it's a short bus-ride to Tel Aviv, where her family is waiting. Cousins she's never met greet her like a sister, and she falls into their arms, sobbing in relief.

Updates from Europe are scarce, and Zahava takes a job taking care of other refugee children – who flood into the country daily.

## NOAH

Spring of 1944 – and with the Russian liberation comes their own. Noah and Isaac emerge from their hiding place, unsure of their newfound freedom and fearful of what they'll discover as they tried to find

their families. As they wander the village, no longer fugitives, two Russian soldiers follow them with curiosity. Noah and Isaac confront him - and the soldier apologizes, but they are the first two Jews the soldiers have seen alive in months. The Russians sit and listen to their story, transfixed.

Sensing an opening, Noah requests help in locating Zahava and Eliezer. He gives them the Moscow relatives' address and the soldiers vow to investigate when they return home.

Free at last but at a loss as to where to go, Noah and Isaac offer their services to the townspeople. After a brief visit to Slonim, they make their way back to Valkovysk and Noah is put in charge of rebuilding the hospital under the new regime. He and Isaac work hard to help...but find themselves in the awkward position of being in charge of personnel from the camp. With great difficulty, they cope as professional doctors, and even find it in their hearts to treat wounded German POWs.

But Noah continues holding out hope that the Russian soldier will come through...

### ZAHAVA

Zahava has settled in with their cousins in Israel. Daily, however, Eliezer asks for his father...and Zahava works desperately to find out what happened in Slonim. She hears of the ghetto and Auschwitz - and has almost given up hope.

Then: the news comes, news that she had almost given up ever hearing: Noah is alive. Zahava's life is renewed, and she and Eliezer eagerly make plans for his arrival.

### NOAH

In his position as the Director of the Municipal Hospital, Noah inhabits the largest office, with a view of the street. During a lull in his work, he happens to glance out the window to see Czerniak, on a horse-drawn wagon...waving a telegram. His heart skips a beat as he runs outside to the good news: Zahava and Eliezer are alive.

He springs into action immediately, and starts off on a six-month journey of bureaucracy, subterfuge, and refugee camps. He and Resnick enlist the help of various agencies who have been tasked with assisting refugees, and his journey takes him deeper into Poland then south into Romania and - finally - on a six-day boat ride to:

### HAIFA, 1945

Noah - as sick as a living human can be - can't take it anymore. He wills himself up from his cot and approaches the official who stands guard at the gangway. The docked ship looks out onto the Haifa port...his wife and son are out there somewhere, tantalizingly close.

The agent is unmoved, unwilling to let Noah pass unless he can prove his membership in a certain political party. The official rattles off several names, none of which Noah can register in his fevered haze...suddenly, he LASHES out, unleashing a screaming diatribe in three languages, demanding he be let off the ship to see his family. Guards come to try to detain him, but other passengers stop them from beating him. Noah keeps screaming, breaking down...he needs to get off the ship NOW!

The agent – in a moment of humanity – relents, and with the help of the guards, Noah half-stumbles down the gangway and through the customs area. Then – a child cries: “DADDY!” and they materialize out of the crowd: Zahava and Eliezer.

In a haze of fever, joy and grief, Noah collapses into their arms as all three break down.

We pull back on the scene to a wide shot of the cramped terminal, as all around them hundreds of other scenes of joyful, horrible reunion take place.

### WHY THIS SERIES?

In today’s political climate, with the resurgent rhetoric of fascism and authoritarianism spreading to places and countries once thought immune to its effects, it is important to remember where that rhetoric can lead, and how it can affect everyday people. It’s far too easy to dismiss fears of real upheaval and strife, to believe that this type of rhetoric or any action that comes from it will never affect *me* – to think, in effect, that *it can never get that bad*.

The truth is that it did, once upon a time, get that bad – not just for Jews in German-occupied territories, but for Soviet citizens, and Polish refugees, and Romanian gypsies, and any ethnic or religious minority who was singled out by leaders trying to gain power through scapegoating and the cynical embrace of xenophobic ideas.

*Birth at the Gates* will stand as a testament to the burden that a population bears when the powers-that-be fan the flames of hatred, division and war. Further, by recounting their triumph in the face of these trials, by holding their story up as proof that love and hope can overcome even the worst of humanity, we can strike an ideological blow against the modern redux of these tactics -and hopefully, we can open some eyes to the potential danger of indulging them.