8

Stand out.

Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow.

After the Second World War, Europeans, Americans, and others created myths of righteous resistance to Hitler. In the 1930s, however, the dominant attitudes had been accommodation and admiration. By 1940 most Europeans had made their peace with the seemingly irresistible power of Nazi Germany. Influential Americans such as Charles Lindbergh opposed war with the Nazis under the slogan "America First." It is those who were considered exceptional, eccentric, or even insane in their own time—those who did not change when the world around them did—whom we remember and admire today.

Well before the Second World War, numerous European states had abandoned democracy for some form of right-wing authoritarianism. Italy became the first fascist state in 1922, and was a military ally of Germany. Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria had been drawn toward Germany by the promise of trade and territory. In March 1938 none of the great powers offered any resistance as Germany annexed Austria. In September 1938 the great powers—France, Italy, and Great Britain, then led by Neville Chamberlain—actually cooperated with Nazi Germany in the partition of Czechoslovakia. In summer 1939 the Soviet Union allied with Nazi Germany and the Red Army joined the *Wehrmacht* in the invasion of Poland. The Polish government chose to fight, activating agreements that brought Great Britain and France into the war. Germany, supplied with food and fuel by the Soviet Union, invaded and quickly occupied Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and even France in the spring of 1940. The remainder of the British expeditionary force was evacuated from the Continent at Dunkirk in late May and early June 1940.

When Winston Churchill became prime minister in May 1940, Great Britain was alone. The British had won no meaningful battles and had no important allies. They had entered the war to support Poland, a cause that seemed lost. Nazi Germany and its Soviet ally dominated the continent. The Soviet Union had invaded Finland in November 1939, beginning with a bombing of Helsinki. Right after Churchill assumed office, the Soviet Union occupied and annexed the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The United States had not entered the war.

Adolf Hitler had no special animus toward Britain or its empire, and indeed imagined a division of the world into spheres of interests. He expected Churchill to come to terms after the fall of France. Churchill did not. He told the French that

"whatever you may do, we shall fight on for ever and ever and ever."

In June 1940, Churchill told the British parliament that "the battle of Britain is about to begin." The German *Luftwaffe* began the bombing of British cities. Hitler expected that this would force Churchill to sign an armistice, but he was mistaken. Churchill later called the air campaign "a time when it was equally good to live or die." He spoke of "the buoyant and imperturbable temper of Britain which I had the honor to express." In fact he himself helped the British to define themselves as a proud people who would calmly resist evil. Other politicians would have found support in British public opinion to end the war. Churchill instead resisted, inspired, and won. The Royal Air Force (including two Polish squadrons and a number of other foreign pilots) held back the *Luftwaffe.* Without control of the air, even Hitler could not imagine an amphibious invasion of Great Britain.

Churchill did what others had not done. Rather than concede in advance, he forced Hitler to change his plans. The essential German strategy had been to remove any resistance in the west, and then to invade (thus betraying) the Soviet Union and colonize its western territories. In June 1941, with Britain still in the war, Germany attacked its Soviet ally.

Now Berlin had to fight a two-front war, and Moscow and London were suddenly unexpected allies. In December 1941, Japan bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and the United States entered the war. Now Moscow, Washington, and London formed a grand and irresistible coalition. Together, and with the help of many other allies, these three great powers won the Second World War. But had Churchill not kept Britain in the war in 1940, there would have been no such war to fight.

Churchill said that history would be kind to him, because he intended to write it himself. Yet in his vast histories and memoirs, he presented his own decisions as self-evident, and credited the British people and Britain's allies. Today what Churchill did seems normal, and right. But at the time he had to stand out.

Of course, Great Britain was only in the war because the Polish leadership had chosen to fight in September 1939. Open Polish armed resistance was overcome that October. In 1940, the character of the German occupation was becoming clear in the Polish capital, Warsaw.

Teresa Prekerowa was meant to finish high school that year. Her family lost its property to the Germans and was forced to move to Warsaw and rent. Her father was arrested. One of her uncles was killed in battle. Two of her brothers were in German prisoner-of-war camps. Warsaw itself had been heavily damaged

by a German air campaign, which had killed about twenty-five thousand people.

Teresa, a very young woman, stood out among her friends and family in her reaction to this horror. At a time when it was natural to think only of oneself, she thought of others. In late 1940, the Germans began to establish ghettos in the part of Poland under their control. That October, the Jews of Warsaw and the surrounding region were required to move to a certain district of the city. One of Teresa's brothers had been friendly with a Jewish girl and her family before the war. Teresa now observed that people quietly allowed their Jewish friends to slip away from their lives.

Without telling her family, and at great risk to herself, Teresa chose to enter the Warsaw ghetto a dozen times in late 1940, bringing food and medicine to Jews she knew and Jews she did not. By the end of the year she had persuaded her brother's friend to escape the ghetto. In 1942 Teresa helped the girl's parents and brother to escape. That summer in the Warsaw ghetto, the Germans carried out what they called the "Great Action," deporting some 265,040 Jews to the death factory at Treblinka to be murdered and killing another 10,380 Jews in the ghetto itself. Teresa saved a family from certain death.

Teresa Prekerowa later became a historian of the Holocaust, writing about the Warsaw ghetto and about others who helped to aid Jews. But she preferred not to write about herself. When, much later, she was asked to speak about her own life, she called her actions normal. From our perspective, her actions seem exceptional. She stood out.