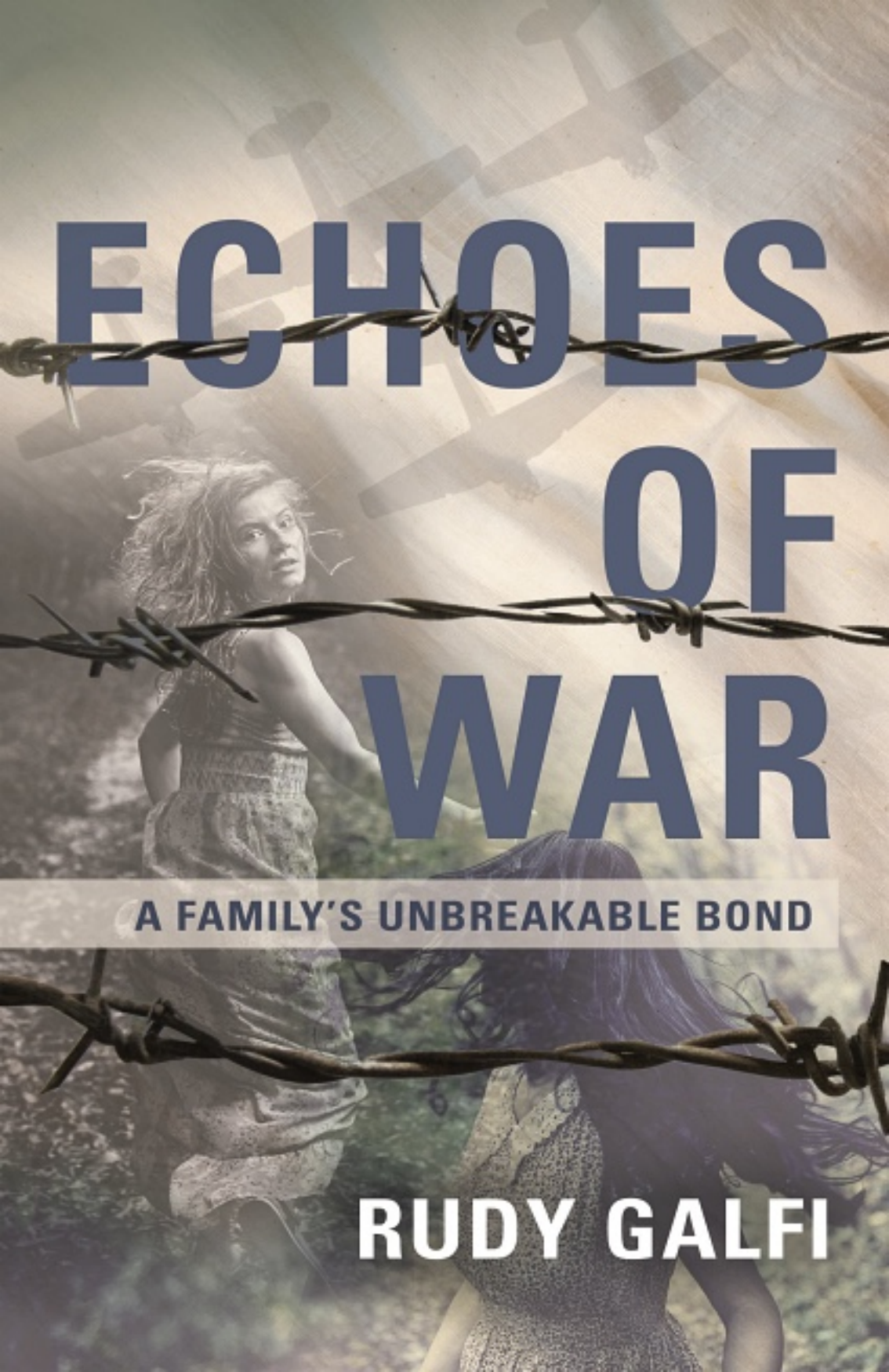


*A true story of one family's survival during World War II, following sisters Hedy and Brigitte from a quiet Yugoslavian village to Nazi-occupied Belgrade, forced labor camps, and war-torn Europe.*

**Echoes of War: A Family's Unbreakable Bond**  
By Rudy Galfi

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# ECHOES OF WAR

A FAMILY'S UNBREAKABLE BOND

RUDY GALFI

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## **Author's Note / Disclaimer**

This book is a work of biographical nonfiction. It is based on true events, drawn from personal interviews, family records, historical documents, and the author's own recollections growing up in the family. The individuals described in this book are real people, many of whom were close family members to me. All portrayals are intended to honor their lives, struggles, and legacies.

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, some dialogue and scenes have been reconstructed for narrative clarity. A few names or identifying details may have been changed to protect privacy. Any errors are unintentional, and solely the responsibility of the author.

Addresses and locations mentioned reflect historical relevance and no longer correspond to current residences.

This book was written with deep respect and love for those who came before us so that their stories might be remembered by future generations.

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# Prologue

## **Early Life in Werschetz (pronounced VUR-chets)**

Werschetz is a village shaped by resilience and tradition, nestled in the valleys of upper Yugoslavia, near the western border of Romania. This serene settlement had been established in the early 1700s by German colonists who left their homeland in search of fertile lands and a brighter future. Among the early settlers were the Ostheimer and Ruckert families, whose dedication to farming and craftsmanship laid the foundation for a tight-knit community.

By the early 20th century, Werschetz had become a picturesque haven, its rolling hills and lush farmlands providing the perfect setting for a life steeped in simplicity. The village's cobblestone streets echoed with the sounds of children at play while its air was filled with the hum of daily labor—whether it was the rhythmic pounding of a blacksmith's hammer, the chatter of women sewing garments, or the gentle rustle of crops in the breeze. Life in Werschetz was dictated by the seasons with planting, harvesting, and celebrations forming the heartbeat of the community.

Karl and Emmi grew up during this idyllic yet challenging time. Karl was born in 1907 and Emmi in 1908, their childhoods unfolding in a world on the cusp of change. Though they barely knew each other as children, their lives were intertwined by the shared experiences of village life. Both families were part of Werschetz's industrious fabric—Karl's father was a carpenter, known for crafting sturdy furniture that graced many homes in the village, while Emmi's mother was a seamstress, her needlework prized for its intricate detail.

From a young age, Karl and Emmi were expected to contribute to their families' livelihoods. By the time he was 13, Karl had already begun an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker, learning to carve and assemble furniture with a precision that would later define his craft. Emmi, meanwhile, spent her days assisting her mother in sewing dresses, her nimble fingers stitching

together both garments and the relationships that bound the women of the village.

Life in Werschetz during this era was far from easy. Political tensions were simmering in the wider world and the village, while peaceful, was not immune to the economic hardships that rippled across Europe. Yet, in the face of adversity, the people of Werschetz remained united. Festivals were a highlight of the year, where families gathered in the town square to share stories, dance to lively folk music, and celebrate their shared heritage. For Karl and Emmi, these gatherings offered a rare chance to step away from their responsibilities, and enjoy the innocence of youth.

It was during one of these festive moments that Karl and Emmi's paths truly crossed. As teenagers, they began to mingle in a group of friends, their connection growing naturally amidst the laughter and camaraderie of shared games and simple pleasures. What started as a childhood friendship soon deepened, nurtured by the rhythms of their shared lives in Werschetz.

The story of Karl and Emmi is not just a tale of two individuals but also a window into the rich history of Werschetz—a village shaped by the determination of its settlers, the bonds of its community, and the quiet beauty of its traditions. Their lives, rooted in the soil of this serene valley, were a testament to the enduring spirit of those who called Werschetz home.

## **Karl's Journey**

Karl Ostheimer was born into a family of skilled woodworkers, a lineage of craftsmen whose hands had shaped the very fabric of Werschetz for generations. From an early age, Karl showed an instinctive connection to the trade. By the time he was 13, he had begun an apprenticeship under a seasoned cabinetmaker—a man whose workshop smelled of sawdust and linseed oil, and whose every movement seemed to echo with decades of experience.

For the next three years, Karl worked tirelessly, learning not just the techniques of the craft, but also the patience and discipline it demanded. The rhythmic hum of tools became his daily soundtrack. Even as a teenager, his hands moved with surprising confidence, turning rough timber into elegant bedroom sets, finely carved panels, and intricate cabinetry. Each finished piece carried his quiet pride, a reflection of his growing skill.



By the time Karl was 16, his apprenticeship had ended but his ambitions were just beginning to take shape. Around that time, in the early 1920s, the outskirts of Werschetz were alive with something new—flight. The village airfield had become a bustling waypoint for British mail planes, their engines roaring like thunder across the open sky. Curious, and drawn to the pulse of this modern marvel, Karl took a job loading mail and cargo. It was a world far removed from the quiet order of the workshop—fast, noisy, and filled with motion.

At the airfield, Karl felt the stirrings of something bigger than himself. Watching pilots navigate the skies, and crews work with mechanical precision, opened his eyes to a life beyond the village's borders. The airplanes connected Werschetz to cities he'd only heard of, stirring a restless energy in him. He still admired the steadiness of craftwork but this new environment gave him something else: a sense of scale.

Then, in 1928, everything shifted again. At age 21, married and with a baby at home, Karl was called to serve when the Yugoslavian government enacted compulsory military service for all young men.

For 18 months, he trained and served—learning a different kind of discipline, one that came with early mornings, sharp commands, and the burden of duty.

Military service wasn't easy but Karl took to it with the same quiet resolve he brought to everything. He met men from all corners of Yugoslavia, gained a broader view of the shifting political landscape, and learned how to endure. What stayed with him most, though, were the small lessons: how to lead, how to follow, and how to adapt.

When his service ended, Karl returned to Werschetz a different man—older in spirit, and sharpened by experience. He had seen the world beyond his village yet it was the familiar rhythm of home that pulled him back. With the hands of a craftsman, and the eyes of a man who had seen more, Karl stood ready—not just to build furniture, but to shape a future.

### **Emmi Ruckert's Journey**

Emmi Ruckert grew up in a family where a needle and thread were as familiar as the air they breathed. The women in her family were known for

their sewing skills and Emmi naturally gravitated toward the craft. Under her mother's patient guidance, she learned the basics of sewing as a child. By the time she reached her teenage years, her hands moved effortlessly across fabric and her keen eye for detail transformed simple cloth into works of art.

Emmi's talent for dressmaking quickly gained recognition in Werschetz. Her ability to create elegant, perfectly tailored dresses earned her a steady stream of requests from women in the village and neighboring communities. Weddings, church celebrations, and town gatherings became showcases for her exquisite craftsmanship. Her designs, known for their fine stitching and thoughtful details, carried an understated elegance that made each piece special.

Her dressmaking wasn't just a passion; it was also a vital contribution to her family's livelihood. The extra income her work brought in helped support her household and she took pride in knowing her skills made a difference. For Emmi, every gown she created wasn't just a garment—it was a reflection of her dedication, creativity, and connection to the women who wore her designs.

Beyond sewing, Emmi was deeply rooted in the traditions of her family and community. She spent countless hours in the kitchen alongside her mother, learning the art of cooking and baking. Her days were filled with the comforting aroma of freshly baked bread and the lively clatter of pots and pans. These shared moments instilled in her a love for preparing meals and she became adept at creating dishes that brought her family together.

But, Emmi's talents didn't stop at sewing and cooking. She had a passion for music and dance, which added vibrancy to her daily life. Alongside her sister Helene, Emmi would spend afternoons playing music, and choreographing dances. Their creativity and enthusiasm filled their home with joy and their impromptu performances became a cherished pastime.

These playful hours honing dance routines paid off when the sisters attended community gatherings. Emmi's lively spirit, and talent for dancing, made her a central figure at these events. She took pride in teaching other boys and girls the steps she had created, turning village dances into moments of connection and shared celebration.

For Emmi, every aspect of her life was a chance to express herself—whether through the precision of her sewing, the warmth of her cooking, or the rhythm of her dancing. These skills not only enriched her own life, but also wove her into the fabric of Werschetz's community. Her contributions went beyond the dresses she made or the meals she prepared; they were a reflection of her vibrant, giving spirit and her commitment to her family and friends.

### **Family Life and the Birth of Their Children**

By the late 1920s, Karl and Emmi were building their life together as a young married couple, having wed in October 1926. Their union had brought together two families with long-standing roots in Werschetz, and it symbolized the continuation of the village's traditions and values. Their wedding had been a joyful celebration in the heart of the community—filled with music, laughter, and the warmth of neighbors who shared in the promise of their future.

Karl and Emmi approached their married life with the same dedication and work ethic that had defined their individual journeys. Their home was modest yet warm, and filled with the echoes of their shared dreams and the promise of a bright future. Together, they worked tirelessly to build a stable foundation, with Karl continuing his woodworking and Emmi balancing her dressmaking with her growing responsibilities at home.

Their joy multiplied with the birth of their first child, Hedy, in 1927. The arrival of their daughter brought light and laughter to their household. As new parents, Karl and Emmi marveled at every milestone, from Hedy's first smile, to her curious exploration of the world around her. They poured their love and energy into creating a nurturing environment, determined to give her a happy and secure childhood.

Three years later, in 1930, the family grew again with the birth of their second daughter, Brigitte. With two young children, their home became a lively hub of activity. Hedy, now a spirited toddler, welcomed her baby sister with wide-eyed wonder and the bond between the sisters began to blossom.

For Karl and Emmi, family life was a source of both pride and purpose. Despite the challenges of the times, they found joy in the simple moments—

meals shared at the family table, evenings spent by the fire, and the sound of their daughters' laughter filling the house.

Their roles as parents were deeply rooted in their values. Karl, with his steady hands and disciplined nature, imparted lessons in patience and hard work, while Emmi nurtured creativity and warmth, teaching her daughters the joys of sewing and baking. Together, they provided a balance that shaped Hedy and Brigitte's formative years.

The village of Werschetz played a significant role in the children's upbringing. Surrounded by the traditions and close-knit community that had defined their parents' lives, Hedy and Brigitte grew up with a sense of belonging and connection. Festivals, church gatherings, and family celebrations became the backdrop to their childhood, enriching their days with music, dance, and the shared history of their ancestors.

Through it all, Karl and Emmi remained steadfast in their commitment to each other and their family. Their marriage was a partnership, built on mutual respect and a shared vision for the future. As they navigated the joys and challenges of parenthood, their love and dedication only deepened, creating a home that was not only a place of shelter but also a haven of hope and happiness.

### **A Move to Belgrade**

In April 1933, Karl and Emmi Ostheimer made a life-altering decision to move their young family from the familiar village of Werschetz to the bustling city of Belgrade. Hedy was five and a half years old and Brigitte was just three when their parents embraced the promise of better opportunities. The move was spurred by Karl's offer to work alongside his brother, Anton, at a prestigious furniture-making company in Belgrade. For Karl and Emmi, this was more than a career move—it was a chance to give their daughters access to better schools, and the cultural enrichment of city life.

The transition from the quiet rhythms of Werschetz to the energy of Belgrade was a stark change. The family settled into a modest home that reflected the realities of city living. Their small house consisted of a single bedroom and a kitchen, and space was tight. Hedy and Brigitte shared the bedroom, while Karl and Emmi made the kitchen their sleeping quarters,

using a sleeper sofa as their bed. Despite the cramped conditions, the house was filled with warmth, love, and the determination to build a brighter future.

City life presented challenges but Karl and Emmi were no strangers to hard work. Karl would walk to the shop where he worked a few blocks from home. He quickly adapted to his new role at the furniture workshop where his precision and craftsmanship gained recognition. Working alongside his brother, Anton, allowed him to refine his skills further, and collaborate on high-quality pieces that were sought after by Belgrade's elite residents. Emmi, while managing the home, also found ways to contribute by sewing, and maintaining the family's daily routines.

For the girls, life in Belgrade opened doors to new experiences. At the age of six, Hedy began her education, first attending kindergarten, and later progressing to primary school. The transition to school was exciting yet daunting as Hedy navigated the unfamiliar environment of classrooms and peers in the big city. Emmi ensured her daughters were prepared, teaching them the values of discipline and curiosity that would help them thrive.

The family's integration into Belgrade life was marked by new friendships and a sense of exploration. The Ostheimer's brought with them the traditions and values of Werschetz, finding ways to stay connected to their roots despite the urban setting. Even in the city, Emmi continued to cook traditional meals, and share stories of their village life, keeping their heritage alive for Hedy and Brigitte.

Weekends often provided an opportunity to explore Belgrade. The family would take walks through the city's lively markets, or visit nearby parks, marveling at the contrasts between their former village and their new urban home. For the girls, these outings were an adventure, filled with the sights and sounds of a world so different from Werschetz.

Despite the challenges of adapting to a new environment, and the constraints of their modest living situation, Karl and Emmi remained focused on their goals. They worked tirelessly to ensure their daughters received a good education and a stable foundation for the future. Their move to Belgrade symbolized their unwavering commitment to growth and opportunity, proving that, with determination and unity, a family could thrive even in the face of great change.

## **The Calm Before the Storm**

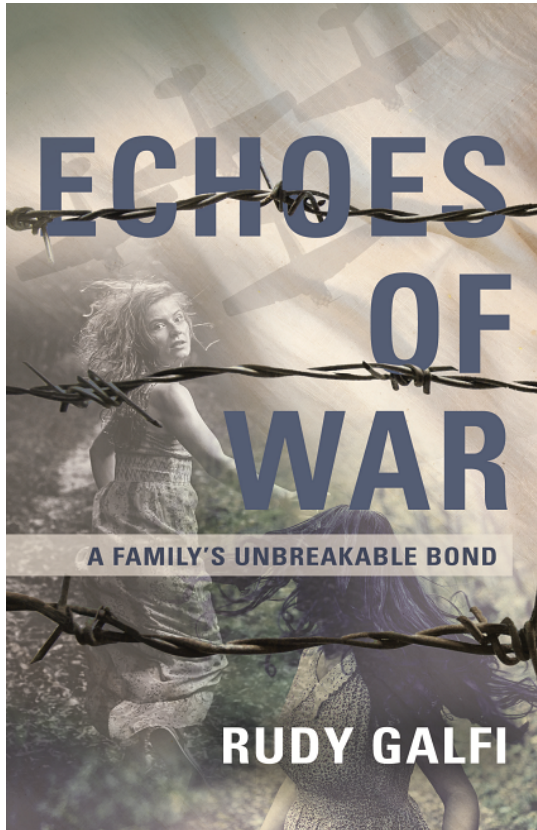
Outside their home, Belgrade buzzed with life. The city's markets, parks, and cobblestone streets offered a vibrant backdrop to their daily routines. On weekends, the family often strolled through the bustling marketplaces, marveling at the array of goods, and soaking in the sounds of street musicians. The city had become their home, a place where their dreams took root and grew.

But, beneath the surface of this peaceful existence, the world was changing. The political tensions that gripped Europe in the late 1930s were impossible to ignore. Conversations in the marketplace grew hushed when talk turned to the rise of fascism and the growing unrest in neighboring countries. The whispers of conflict cast a shadow over Belgrade even as the city continued its daily rhythm.

Karl and Emmi, like many families, focused on what they could control. They shielded their daughters from the darker realities of the world outside, choosing instead to emphasize the importance of education, hard work, and family bonds. Still, there was an unspoken awareness between them—a shared concern for what the future might hold.

For now, the Ostheimer's clung to the life they had built, cherishing every moment of calm. Emmi continued to bake and sew, her hands busy with tasks that anchored her to the present. Karl poured his energy into his craft, finding solace in the familiar process of shaping wood into something lasting and beautiful.

The world outside their door was uncertain but, within their home, there was still peace. They could not know what the coming years would bring but they held fast to the hope that their family would weather whatever storms lay ahead. For Karl and Emmi, these quiet moments were not just a reprieve—they were a reminder of why they persevered, even in the face of the unknown.



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