Script of Three Promises

During the Second World War, the German Foreign Office took special precautions not to use words that would connect their ministry to the genocide committed against the Jews.
In 1943, however, a German diplomat, Franz Rademacher, submitted an expense report for his trip to Serbia.
The reason he gave: "Liquidation of the Jews of Belgrade."
More than 90% of Belgrade's Jewish families were murdered during the Holocaust.
This is the story of one of them.
THREE PROMISES
What we have here is a tale of love and war in Serbia, and about three promises:
The promise a wife made to her husband
The promise a priest made to that wife and her two daughters
And a promise one of those two daughters made to herself.
It is, then, a story about keeping your word, no matter what the consequences. Those daughters—Matilda and Breda—will take us back to the world they were born in.
Matilda
My name is Matilda Kalef Cerge and I'd like to begin as all good family stories begin—with a love story—about how my parents met.
It was in 1927 when my mother, a Catholic girl, Antonija Ograjensek, came from Slovenia to visit her family in Belgrade.
That's when she met Avram Kalef, a Sephardic Jew. Antonia didn't care that he was handicapped and confined to a wheelchair. And Avram didn't care that Antonija wasn't Jewish.
So in 1928, the family from Slovenia came down for the wedding of Antonija and Avram and they met the Kalefs of Belgrade.
There was a wedding; Antonia had decided to convert to Judaism and she changed her name to Dona Bat Kalef.
The young married couple moved into the old family house at Gospodar Jovanova nr 3—in the Dorcol section of Belgrade.
Chapter one: The Kalefs of Belgrade
The Kalefs were like all Spanish Jews—we had been expelled from Spain in 1492. And our family can trace its roots back in Belgrade more than 300 years.
This photo is real treasure—my great grandmother Rahela Kalef. She must have been born in the _____
Avram, Jakov, Lenka and my grandmother Matilda who I am named after.
The Kalef family was not what you would call rich, but it was certainly not poor. At one time, they had three textile stores in Belgrade. The biggest one was on Kolarceva street—and everyone worked there.
Avram and Vukica started their family first.
And here is Jakov Kalef at his wedding with Lenka Almozlino. They moved into the house just next door, at number 5 Gospodar Jovanova.

They had two sons: David and Mile.
Of Rahela's two daughters-- Lenka married Josip Koen
And my grandmother Matilda married Nisim Kalef.
They had three sons -- but Nisim died a very young man, and then two of her sons died.
That left Matilda Kalef with a business to help run, and a son to raise. But soon she had to cope with Avram's problems—he had both diabetes, and a degenerative muscle disease.
But nothing slowed my grandmother down—she oversaw the shopping every morning, worked at the store, and at our lunch—everyone ate together: our Slovak cleaning woman, the Albanian woman who did the wash, the ethnic German who looked after dad – and the whole family – which was enormous!
Chapter two: Our Serbian Jewish World
So this was the family I was born into in 1928.
Breda arrived one year later—and the two of us made a lovely pair
Our Jewish grandmother doted on us in Serbia and so did our Catholic Aunt Minka and the relatives in Slovenia.
Dad was restricted to his wheelchair, but he went with us everywhere. And he really did – all over Slovenia and Serbia.
Breda and I went to the Jewish kindergarten and then we started in a public school.
I loved school and studied hard and every afternoon, I would rush home and tell my father about school, about my friends.
In this world of ours, our Jewish community was the center of everything.
There were 10,000 Jews in Belgrade when I was growing up—80% of them were Sephardic Jews, like us, the rest were around 20% Ashkenazi—from northern Europe.
We had youth clubs and schools. We had famous patriotic army officers who had served in the Serbian army in the First World War and beautiful synagogues.
To me, such a young girl, everything seemed fine, but then I noticed how nervous people were getting.
In 1938, the Germans had taken Austria, then Czechoslovakia. In 1939 Poland fell and in 1940, France, Belgium and Holland also fell to the Nazis.
Cousin Isak had joined the Yugoslav National Army and so did Mile.
Belgrade was filling with Jewish families from the north—hoping to find refuge here.
Chapter three: When hell came to Belgrade
On the night of 6 April 1941, the Germans bombed Belgrade.
And the German army arrived in Belgrade six days later.
Soon, things went from bad to worse.
Very quickly there were curfews against Jews and Jews were forced to go out and start cleaning up the rubble from the bombing.
David and Mile had to clean up the rubble, with the Germans standing over them.
They came home every night but one night they didn't, so their mother, Lenka, when looking for them. She went to the site to ask the Germans about her sons. We never saw them again.

Then Uncle Jakov was picked up along with Uncle Josif Koen.
By this time, Dad was getting ever weaker. He could barely move and he told mother to take us to safety.
Then Dad and his mother stayed together, waiting for that knock on their door.
While we were in hiding, we heard they had been taken to the Jewish hospital, and my mother did something unbelievable.
With our false papers, she took my sister and me to the hospital. She walked up to the guard—he was a Serb—and he let us in. We found my father and my grandmother and smothered each other in kisses, and I remember what Dad said to Mom,
"Dona, protect my children. You've got to take care of them for me." I will, she told him, I promise.
Mom was almost crazy with grief, so she kept going back to try and be with Dad, but it was impossible. So one morning she took Breda and me to the house across the street from the hospital.
She asked someone to let us in and peeking from behind the curtains — that's when we saw it—a big van—yes, like this one.
That's the day in March 1942 they emptied out the Jewish hospital— the doctors, the nurses, the patients and put everyone in that van.
Only later we found out, it was one of those infamous gas vans.
The Kalefs of Belgrade were disappearing into Nazi Germany's war machine. They took the old, they took the young and entire families.
So how did our mother make good on her promise to protect us—when the world had become a living hell? I'd like my sister to tell you that.
Breda
Our mother took us to a monastery in Banovo Brodo and she knocked on the door.
A priest by the name of Father Andrej Tumpej, a Slovene Catholic, opened the door.
My mother asked: "Can you help us?" And Father Tumpej just looked at us and said: "Of course I promise to protect you."
When we arrived in the monastery, Father Tumpej gave us false papers—here is mine. My name was changed from Rahel to Breda, and Matilda became Lydia. And we went back to my mother's maiden name because it wasn't Jewish. For the time we stayed in a tiny room in the attic.
And what did Father Tumpej ask us to do while we were in hiding? He asked us to sing and we sang.
Every day the girls in the monastery and boys from nearby would get together and we would sing our hearts out—to chase away the fear, to chase away the hunger.
And Father Tumpej told me, now Breda, you have a wonderful voice – you really should become a singer.
Chapter four: Starting over
In October 1944, Tito's Partizans and the Soviet army liberated Belgrade and we were able to return to our home.
But it was nationalized and we were allowed only to live in a tiny portion of it for many years.
And Matilda and I started to put our lives back together—we were the last of the Kalefs

Matilda, who had been called Lydia while we were in hiding—changed her name back to Matilda.
Onton Cerge, a young man Matilda met at Banovo Brdo, came looking for her. When he proposed marriage, Matilda said yes, but only under the condition that Father Tumpej marry them and they went all the way to Bitola, in Macedonia.
Afterwards, Matilda and Onton settled down, had a daughter, Edyta, and started their family, although unfortunately Matilda lost Onton in 1982.
Our mother lived well into her 90s, just long enough to greet the moment when her house on Gospodar Jovaniva Street was finally restituted.
And me? I could not give up the name Father Tumpej had given me. I came to him as Rahel but because he called me Breda, I decided to keep it. After all, he gave me more than just a name—he gave me a life.
And what have I done with that life? I married Branislav Simonovic in 1958. We had a daughter Simonida.
By the 1960s, Father Tumpej had returned to Belgrade and I would meet him to give him money, not for him, of course, but I knew that there was always someone he needed to help.
That advice Father Tumpej had given me? Well, I can honestly say that I took his advice and that I am very happy because of that.
Breda Kalef became one of Serbia's most famous opera mezzo-sopranos.
She sang in Eugen Onegin in Tel Aviv.
She performed with Placido Domingo and Franco Corelli.
Shortly after Father Tumpej died in 1974, Breda Kalef promised herself that she would honor Father Tumpej.
Breda wrote to Israel's Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, asking that Father Tumpej be awarded a Righteous Gentile Award a special award given only to those who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.
Not long after, Breda and Matilda received word Father Tumpej would receive his award.