

Winner of the Prix Sorcières, France's most prestigious award
for children's literature

A Sydney Taylor Honor Book

"Readers don't have to be Jewish to appreciate this beautifully written story and its wonderfully realized characters and fascinating setting."—*Kirkus*, starred review

"A heady plunge into medieval Europe as well as an enlightening lesson about anti-Semitism in a time period long before the Holocaust."—*Booklist*

The streets are eerily empty, and everyone in the Jewish community is terrified of Peter the Hermit. His men, the Crusaders, are moving through the town on their way to the Holy Land. They have been known to batter down doors and burn Jewish houses, all in the name of religion.

This is not Nazi Germany but Troyes, France, in 1096, as seen through the eyes of funny, feisty, twelve-year-old Elvina. She is the granddaughter of the great rabbi Rashi, and she knows how to read and write—which is very rare for a girl of her time. She draws strength from this, as well as from her guardian angel, to whom she regularly speaks.

On a cold Sabbath afternoon while Elvina is alone in the house, three soldiers pound at her door. One of them is wounded. Elvina has only a moment to make a difficult choice that could put her family and the entire community at risk. Can her guardian angel guide her and keep her safe?

My Guardian Angel is a story of compassion and tolerance that speaks clearly to readers of all faiths. Elvina's voice lingers long in memory, and her courage and humor long in the heart.

SYLVIE WEIL is the author of several works of adult fiction and the Elvina trilogy, a series of French novels for young adults. GILLIAN ROSNER has translated many award-winning books for children, including *Secrets from 0 to 10* and *A Book of Coupons*.



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I

My grandfather says that all men have a Mazal: a celestial guide, a guardian angel who speaks up for them in heaven. That is what distinguishes men from animals, who, poor things, have none.

I once asked my grandfather if a girl could have a Mazal, too. At first he laughed and pinched my cheek as he always does, saying that girls don't really need the help of guardian angels, as they have no trouble speaking up for themselves! But then he grew serious and said that every single human being has one.

This means that even though there is nothing special about me, apart from being the granddaughter of the great teacher Solomon ben Isaac, I, Elvina, age twelve (nearly thirteen), have a Mazal of my own.

Perhaps my Mazal will guide me, and I certainly hope he will speak up for me. Why? Because I am unusual. You see, I like to write, and people say this is unnatural for a girl.

I learned to do this at the same time as my brother, Yom Tov, and my cousin Samuel. In my grandfather's house, all the women can read the Bible and write Hebrew, the sacred language of the Jewish people. It's not the custom for women to be able to do this, and some of our neighbors, Jews and non-Jews alike, point their fingers at us and stare as if we were strange. But we're used to that. My grandfather, who had no sons, saw nothing wrong with educating his daughters. If anyone disapproved, he would remind them that our Law does not forbid it.

My mother and her sisters only use this precious gift of writing to keep accounts when they go to market or to make lists of the herbs they need for their potions and dressings. For this, they use wax tablets.

But I, Elvina, am not content with just copying recipes or doing sums on wax tablets. What I love is to write — really write properly on parchment, using a fine quill and good-quality ink. In my grandfather's house, and in my father's house, too, no one can trim and sharpen goose quills as well as I can. My quills are fine and supple, and they don't make the ink sputter. My grandfather's students ask me for them every day.

Of course I keep some of these quills for myself. How could I bear to sharpen them with my own little knife and then dry them with such care and attention if I didn't use them? There is no pleasure, as far as I'm concerned, as great as that of filling smooth parchment with neat rows of perfectly formed letters that

don't rub away like the ones hurriedly scratched onto wax tablets.

This morning I went to my beloved grandfather's cupboard and took out a piece of parchment, a well-sharpened goose quill, and some ink. I wrote down the recipe for a potion that I had just mixed by myself for the first time. To make sure the pen would glide easily and not catch, I smoothed out the parchment with my boar's tooth, a gift given to me by someone whose name I don't want to mention yet. Usually I write recipes on wax tablets, but this time the potion was a very important one. It was for my friend Tova, who is just about to give birth. The formula was complicated, and I worried that one day I might forget it. I can't depend on my mother to always be by my side to tell me such things.

Since there was some space left in the margins and at the bottom of the parchment, I added, "Elvina carefully prepared this potion on a freezing morning in the Hebrew month of Adar for her friend Tova."

I allowed my writing to stretch around the borders of the page, as I've often seen Grandfather do, so as not to waste the slightest scrap. Parchment is very expensive! So is ink — good-quality ink made with gallnuts that doesn't fade or rub out easily. Ink and parchment are reserved for writing commentaries on the sacred texts. And that is what my father, Judah ben Nathan, and my grandfather use them for.

They can't afford the fine, smooth parchment I

have seen in books that rich people order from Spain. The books on which my father and grandfather write their commentaries are made with parchment that is coarse to the touch, torn in places, and patched up with rough stitches. Not all of the pages are the same shape. Some have pieces missing. Once, when I was small and didn't know much, I mentioned this to my grandfather. He laughed warmly and jokingly replied, "You think I'm a king who can afford good parchment? Mine comes from Burgundy, where the sheep are fat. Their skins may not be so fine, but they cost less and are much stronger."

I was writing along and remembering this conversation, when suddenly I heard a voice inside me cry out.

"How can you even dream of imitating Solomon ben Isaac! Who do you think you are, girl?"

Was this *you* talking to me, dear Mazal?

Oh, Mazal, Mazal, if only parchment were free, I would write you letters like the ones my grandfather dictates to me. But my letters would tell you all about *me*. I would use my best writing and tell you everything. That way, you would know me better, and you would be in a better position to stand up for me when I got into trouble.

Maybe you, too, are thinking that an insignificant little girl should not waste ink and parchment writing personal impressions that are unimportant and uninteresting. But I felt so much pleasure writing out my recipe and adding my own little sentence! I write

in Hebrew characters, of course, even though I only know the names of the plants in our everyday French, the language spoken here in the land of our exile. I'm afraid that for the spelling I just have to use my imagination.

The Christians of this country write ballads that tell of the loves of gentle ladies and brave knights. Aunt Rachel adores them and has read some to me. But we Jews are only supposed to use our writing to interpret the sacred texts, as my grandfather does. People are always writing to him, often from very far away, with questions about Jewish traditions and laws.

Sometimes, when his eyes ache, he dictates one of his letters to me. I settle myself in the special high-backed armchair we use for writing, and I forget everything except Grandfather's warm, strong voice and the letters that are taking shape under my fingers.

I love to write more than anything in the world! Sometimes on my wax tablet, which I'm supposed to use for keeping accounts at the market, I start writing about something that has happened to me. I do this just for fun, but after a while I have to rub the tablet clean to write about a more recent event or to make one of my mother's shopping lists. There isn't much room on a wax tablet.

Tonight, for example, I would have loved to write you about how, at dusk, a servant rushed in breathlessly to tell my mother that Tova was feeling her first labor pains.

Immediately my mother cried out, “Quick, Elvina! Get the basket ready! It will soon be dark!”

There was not a minute to lose. Miriam, my mother, and Precious, my grandmother, were already wrapping themselves in their long, hooded cloaks. In their hands they held several little rolls of parchment tied with cord. These parchments were inscribed with verses from the Bible to ward off demons that haunt the night and others that are especially dangerous for young mothers and newborn babies. There was also an amulet containing the names of the three angels: Sanvai, Sansanvai, and Semanglof. They are the only ones with the power to protect the newborn against Lilith, the baby-snatching demon. I have heard my father and grandfather complain that we women use too many magic charms, but they have never actually forbidden us from using them.

I put everything needed for the birth into the basket, including the wolf’s tooth for Tova to hang around her neck until the baby is born, and the dried agrimony with its yellow flowers, which will be tied to her thigh to ease the birth.

I added some rose oil to anoint the baby’s eyelids, and a little boiled honey to smooth onto its lips. And, of course, I packed a little vial of oil mixed with essence of fenugreek, to bathe the baby’s tiny, fragile body.

I carefully wrapped a piece of cloth around a bottle of my potion for Tova to drink as soon as the baby is born. I’m not yet thirteen, but all the women of

Troyes, Jewish and Christian alike, know of my skill with potions, infusions, and dressings.

You might say I've been well trained! I had barely learned to walk when my mother and grandmother began taking me with them to gather herbs from the countryside. As I grew older, they entrusted me with more difficult tasks. And yet tonight they refused to bring me along.

"But Tova is my friend!" I pleaded miserably. "She's like a big sister to me! I *must* go!"

"Certainly not!" my mother bristled. "It's dark—and you know how dangerous things are these days."

They instructed the servant to bolt and bar the door, and they bid Aunt Rachel and me good night. Then, without another word, my mother and my grandmother disappeared into the night.