

CHAPTER 1

Our Life Before the War

I was born in 1924 on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest and most solemn day of the Jewish calendar. Like most of the Jewish population in Będzin, a city in southwest Poland, my parents Hadassa and Meyer Joseph Szpigelman fasted and prayed all day long in the synagogue. They sat apart from one another, because according to orthodox Jewish tradition, women did not pray near the Ark and the Torah or sit with the men in the main sanctuary. Rather, my mother and the other women prayed from the floor above, where they could clearly hear the men chanting and observe the Torah being lifted out from the Ark.

In the late afternoon Hadassa felt her first contractions. Not wishing to disturb her husband, she stepped quietly down the stairs and slipped unnoticed out of the prayer house. She headed home with the knowledge that she could call upon the local midwife, who lived in our building and who came to her at once.

Meyer Joseph prayed through *Ne'ilah*, the day's closing service, as the early October sun dipped below the horizon. It was only afterward that he found out, while waiting for his wife by the stairwell, that she had left hours earlier. By the time he arrived home and heard my cry from the bedroom, I had already been cleaned up and a red ribbon tied in my wispy blond hair to protect me from the evil eye.

I came into my parents' lives rather late. My mother had delivered five children before me, of whom three were alive at the time of my birth. My brother Poldek was 15 years old, my sister Helen was 13 and Hania was 6. Even though my parents were probably hoping for another son, having lost two, they were happy with the healthy newborn daughter that God had given them.

They named me Jadzia, after an aunt, Jachet, who had died when she was over 100 and supposedly had been very clever as well as hardy. For the rest of their lives, my parents called me their Yom Kippur girl, although I could never celebrate my birthday with a party, because everyone would be fasting, meditating and asking forgiveness of God on that holy day. Come to think of it, my family never had birthday parties, and I don't remember going to any, so maybe it simply wasn't the custom.

We lived in an enormous, five-story, double-courtyard building on Kołataja Street, one of three main boulevards that ran through the city. More than a hundred families resided in the building's one- to four-room apartments. Even the basements and attics were occupied by tenants, except on the side of the attic where everyone hung their laundry to dry. Professional people, such as doctors, lawyers, professors, and schoolteachers, lived in the front apartments where the windows faced the street. The rear apartments were mostly occupied by trades people, including tailors, seamstresses, shoemakers, brassiere and underwear makers, and milliners, all of whom worked at home. The building also housed a bakery, a hair mattress factory, a chicken wire fence factory, and a blacksmith, as well as a school for ballroom dancing, a trumpet school, a merchant's organization, a private school for girls that my oldest sister Helen attended, a sports club called *Hakoach*, where I exercised when I was grammar school age, and a *cheder* (a small religious school), where a rabbi taught young boys to read the Torah. There seemed to be a whole city within the confines of this one urban dwelling, a city densely populated with vivid sounds, smells and characters that I have never forgotten.

Almost all of the tenants were Jewish and everyone knew everyone else. After school, the children played ball, hide-and-seek, hopscotch, and other games in the courtyards. A group of Gypsy men and women often came to perform their folk music; on other occasions, a blind man and his son sang and played the accordion. We children would circle 'round to watch a performance, scramble to pick up the coins that women tossed from their apartment windows, and drop them into the musicians' hats. Something was always going on in my neighborhood. But whereas I felt exuberance for the local happenings, my big brother Poldek adamantly kept his distance and tried to restrain my friendships in the apartment

building.

Poldek stood out in our family as the disciplinarian, more rigid and exacting than either of our parents. He used to monitor my actions at home and in the courtyard; for instance, he forbade me to play with children from a poor family that lived in a one-room basement apartment. They were uncared-for and unsanitary, Poldek insisted. A medical student and later a surgeon, he worried that I would learn unwholesome habits and foul language or catch diseases from them. He punished me many times for playing in the courtyard and other such transgressions, and I grew up resenting his iron grip. Along with trying to control my playtime, he pressured me to study assiduously and even had me memorize poems and recite them in front of his friends. While other children played, I was obliged to read books that were appropriate for higher grade levels than mine, books that I didn't understand or care about. Then my brother would test me to make sure I had read them. If I didn't understand a book, he'd punish me. My parents and sisters couldn't protect me because Poldek bossed them around too, and not even my parents could stand up to him. One reason my family treated him with kid gloves is because he was the prized only son, born between the two sons who had died. I recall being able to breathe freely only when he left Poland to study medicine abroad in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

That was in the early 1930s, before the start of the Nazi war, when Polish Jews faced new occurrences of persecution as a result of government policies and popular flare-ups against Jews. Polish universities, for instance, enforced an admissions quota to restrict the number of university placements reserved for Jewish students. Poldek was one of the unlucky ones whose medical school application was rejected in Poland. Nonetheless, in Prague, he rose to the top of his medical class, graduated *magna cum laude* and grew into a skilled surgeon. He returned to Poland filled with hopes and aspirations to practice medicine in Będzin, but because he was Jewish and had studied abroad, he would neither be given a license to practice nor be appointed to a hospital staff anywhere in Poland. His hopes sank. He eventually found a meagerly paid job, working unofficially as a first assistant surgeon in a large hospital in a nearby city called Sosnowiec. Although he performed effectively at the hospital, he continued to torment our family at home. I looked forward to summer vacations when I could escape his control.

During the summer months, my mother would rent a cottage in the Beskid Mountains in southern Poland. We'd bathe under waterfalls, climb mountains, pick berries and mushrooms in the forests, and visit friends and family. Father, who worked as a brewery sales representative, joined us on the weekends. By no means were we a well-to-do family. Father's income barely covered our living expenses, which included the costs of a Jewish private school education for four children. We had no choice but to attend private schools, because admission quotas restricted the number of Jewish students who could attend the public high schools.

But discrimination didn't dispirit the youth of Jewish Będzin. We were energetic and earnest, ready to help others and solve the glaring problem of hatred against Jews. Most young people belonged to Zionist youth movements or sport clubs. When I was eleven years old, I joined a Zionist group called *HaNoar ha-Tsioni* ("Zionist Youth," in Hebrew). My friends and I would meet, learn Hebrew songs, and dance the *hora* and other group dances. Our young instructors—including Israel Diamond, Karola Bojm, Alex Statler, Sheva Ingster, and Sally Gutman—took us camping and introduced us to Jewish history literature and Zionism. From them, we learned that the Jewish people must have their own country, that we must return to Palestine, our Biblical homeland, because it was no longer possible to live peacefully and securely in the Diaspora. Jews were not wanted in Europe.

In the summer of 1939, when I was fourteen, I begged my parents to allow me to spend one month with my friends at the Zionist Youth camp in the Beskid Mountains. Though my brother tried to prevent me from going, I cried and pleaded with my parents—I even refused to eat for two days—until they gave me permission. The Zionist camp experience remains one of the fondest memories of my youth. I befriended young people who shared a common goal and desire to build their own state. I made up my mind that summer to immigrate to Palestine as soon as I finished high school in four years. Several of my older

friends had already emigrated. Others were preparing to go before the end of 1939, but the war erupted and crushed their plans.

More than forty of my family members lived in Będzin and about 150 more resided in neighboring towns and cities such as Sosnowiec, Katowice, Dąbrowa, and Strzemieszyce. Most of the family, especially the older generation, was religious and observed the Jewish holidays and the Sabbath, during which they did not work, carry money or ride vehicles. (Very few families had cars, but trams were available.)

Będzin is located in an industrial region of southwest Poland called Upper Silesia, which borders Germany and used to be famous for its coal mines. Jews had lived in Będzin for generations, reaching back to the eleventh century when the town first began to grow into a center of Jewish life for the entire province of Upper Silesia. By the start of World War II, approximately 27,000 Jews resided in Będzin, more than 50 percent of the total population.

Poldek warned our family that war was imminent. It was near the end of August, he was working in a medical unit that was preparing to head eastward, and he came to see us. I remember he was dressed in uniform and carrying a gas mask. He insisted that we all leave the area and get far away from the German border. Most people did not believe that Hitler would dare to attack Poland. Nevertheless, a few days later, my parents, my two married sisters, Helen and Hania, their families and I fled Będzin. We were a mere handful among thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish Poles, who were making a mass exodus away from the battlefield in the event of an invasion. My family traveled by horse and cart and later on foot to the home of my mother's older sister Gusta, who lived with her family in Jędrzejów, a town sixty miles east of Będzin. In the chaos of travel, my mother and I were separated from my father and two sisters. We kept trudging toward my aunt's town, occasionally getting a short ride on a truck or car. Hearing that the German troops were very close, my mother, some friends and I fled further on foot, traveling day and night through forests and on roads, until we saw a red sky in the distance and heard gunfire and bombing. The Germans were in front of us! Shocked and terrified, we immediately turned around and headed back to Będzin, where we were reunited with my father and sisters.

Germany attacked Poland on the first of September. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on the Third Reich. The two European Allies had promised to defend Poland in the event of a German invasion. But no matter—within weeks, the Polish army was defeated. From Silesia in the south, where we lived, and from Germany and East Prussia in the north, Nazi military units broke through Polish border defenses and marched toward Warsaw, the nation's capital. After suffering a massive encirclement assault, Warsaw surrendered to the Germans on September 28.

In the short time that we were gone from Będzin, the Germans had occupied Będzin and burned down the synagogue and the surrounding old community of Jewish homes. Fortunately for us, our apartment building, which stood outside the Jewish quarter, had not been damaged. The rest of "gentile" Będzin also survived intact. Hitler immediately annexed most of western Poland in October. That's how Upper Silesia, which encompassed Będzin, Sosnowiec, Katowice, Oświęcim (Auschwitz) and other towns, became incorporated into the German province of Silesia. The northern stretches of Poland, including the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk, in Polish) along the Baltic coast, became part of the new German province of Danzig-West Prussia. Poznań and part of Łódź, two major industrial cities, were combined into a new province called the Warthegau. By October's end, the remainder of Nazi-occupied Poland was organized into the "Generalgouvernement" of Poland. As if the German invasion was not traumatic enough, the Soviet Union stormed the borders of eastern Poland on September 17 and overtook those communities in accordance with a secret pact between Hitler and Stalin, which had been forged in August. With eastern Poland dominated by the Soviet Red Army and the rest of the country swept under Nazi control, Poland was virtually erased from the map of Europe. Thousands of people including Poldek who had fled to the east found themselves now under Soviet occupation.