

PROLOGUE

Belarussian Front Line

July 1941

The pit I was ordered to dig had the precise dimensions of a coffin. The Soviet officer carefully designed it. He measured me with a stick, made lines on the forest floor, and told me to dig. He wanted to make sure I'd fit well inside.

As I chopped up the tangled vines and hacked out the roots, the officer followed my movements with keen eyes and mounting agitation. He appeared to be about the same age as me: his face smooth and rosy in the waning light; his blond hair sticking out from his cap like flax.

"Faster!" He jabbed the stick into my ribs. "We haven't got all night!"

I tore frantically at the remaining debris, then pitched the shovel into the soft black soil. The oily earth clung to my boots and stuck to the shovel, which I beat against the ground. I imagined swinging at the officer's head, wondered if I could strike him before the pistol went off, but he seemed to know what I was thinking. The gun was pointed at my face. I thrust the shovel into the ground harder and faster, keeping the angles of the pit straight and the walls vertical, just as the officer commanded.

As the pit took shape around me, I saw myself lying face down, bound and bloody, a bullet through the base of my skull. I imagined the heavy dirt on top of me, the ants and worms eating my flesh. I didn't want to die. I didn't deserve to be shot in secrecy.

Darkness had fallen. The pit was waist deep. "Toss the shovel over there," the officer ordered.

I threw the shovel a little ways from the pit.

"Sienia, I need you for a moment." A soldier appeared from the woods. "Help me tie him up."

The soldier jumped down in the pit and pulled my arms back so tightly he nearly tore them from their sockets. He bound my wrists and ankles, told me to kneel, and pushed me into the dirt. My thoughts raced. What crime had I committed? My battalion, a heavy tank division, had been covering for other army units as they retreated, and I had accidentally rolled my tank onto its side during a river crossing. But this was a mistake, not a crime; I had repaired the tank and was ready to fight. As a Polish Jew, I hated the Nazis. Germany had invaded my homeland the previous year, and my hometown had been rescued at the last minute by the Soviet Union. Six months later I was drafted into the Red Army.

Now the Nazis were everywhere—in the air, on the roads, in the forests; invading Soviet towns with their tanks, trucks, and motorcycles. They had almost certainly taken over my hometown. I pictured my parents, my sister, and my young wife sitting on the sofa next to the wood-burning stove in the dining room, my mother's favorite place. I saw Taubcia before me, her green eyes scared and inquiring; our first anniversary was just two weeks ago. I envisioned my mother hugging her, just as she did when I left for the Red Army; my father pacing his office, trying to find a way to keep the family safe. Were they still alive? in hiding? in a Jewish ghetto?

I pressed my forehead into the soft earth. With each breath I inhaled the fragrances of the forest, aromas I had learned so well as a child, when I used to hunt for wild mushrooms. These would be my last breaths, I thought. I waited for the shot, waited to feel the cold barrel of the gun against my skull, the bullet penetrating my brain. I didn't feel sorry for myself, only sorry that my loved ones would never find my grave. I waited, waited—but there was no sound.

Night passed, with no hint of a moon or stars to brighten my dark cocoon. The night and earth and sleep and death had merged. All felt the same.

September 1939

Early in the morning on September 1, I was drawn out of sleep by a penetrating, high-pitched whistle lasting several seconds and ending in a distant, thunderous explosion. I'd never heard such a sound and snapped upright.

Sleep and terror slowly loosened their grip, and I was able to think. I'd been up late the night before with my family; my girlfriend, Taubcia; and several friends talking and listening to the radio. My father had closed his dental office early in the afternoon and appeared, pale and nervous, to tell us that Nazi invasion was imminent. He'd heard from one of his patients that Marshal Rydz-Smigly, chief commander of the Polish armed forces, had put all units on full alert for war with Germany.

All afternoon we switched back and forth between Radio Warsaw, French Radio, Radios Kiev and Moscow, and the Polish edition of the BBC, following negotiations between the Polish and German governments. Around seven P.M. close friends came over. They were frequent guests in our home, and each brought new information about the crisis. As we ate, our attention shifted from the radio reports to a tense conversation about what we would do if the Nazis invaded.

Conflict with Germany had intensified during the summer of 1939, culminating in August, when Germany gave Poland an ultimatum to cede the city of Gdansk (Danzig in German) and the entire Danzig Corridor or face invasion. The Danzig Corridor, Polish territory along the Vistula River that separated East Prussia from Germany, had been in dispute between Germany and Poland since the Middle Ages. After World War I, under the Treaty of Versailles, Gdansk was given the status of a free city, with Poland having administrative governance over it. The legislative assembly, however, was mostly German, and with Hitler's rise to power in 1933 the assembly became more and more hostile toward Poland. In 1938 Hitler demanded that Gdansk and its region, the Danzig Corridor, be given to Germany in order to unite East Prussia with Germany.

Threatened by Hitler's increasing hostility, the Polish government signed a defense treaty with England on August 25, 1939, hoping that this agreement, in conjunction with a long-standing one with France, would discourage invasion. However, the strongly anti-Communist Polish government made no effort to establish a defense pact with the Soviet Union. By the end of August, Germany had assembled its military forces on the Polish border. In response, the Polish government secretly amassed 700,000 troops but didn't announce a general mobilization, not wanting to alarm the public or provoke Germany into war.

For Jewish people, the prospect of a Nazi takeover was particularly disturbing, though opinions varied about the likelihood of such an event. Many of our friends believed Hitler would never invade Poland, because that would mean starting a war with France and England as well. Others thought that if Hitler did invade, only wealthy Jews would be persecuted, and the rest of us would be left alone. These hopeful scenarios ignored the fact that persecution of Jews was already well underway. Since the mid-thirties, Nazi ideology had been streaming across the border and had become woven into everyday life. Jewish students at the universities were forced to sit or stand on the left side of the classroom and were often beaten and slashed with glass or razor blades. Some were thrown from second-story balconies and win-

dows. The police and local authorities didn't intervene, nor were the culprits arrested or tried.

In 1936, harassed by my Polish classmates, I was forced to transfer from the state school to the private Jewish gymnasium. A widespread boycott in my hometown, Włodzimierz-Wołyński,* closed many Jewish-owned stores and businesses, and in 1937 my father was requested to prove the equivalency of his Russian diploma and license to practice dentistry, something that had never been questioned since he'd begun practicing in Poland in 1921. The Polish authorities repeatedly demanded documentation from the dental school in Kharkov, even though it had been closed since the October Revolution.

My father was the first person in our family and among our friends to realize what might happen to us if Hitler invaded. During the summer of 1939, as Hitler's intentions became apparent, my father transformed from his usual upbeat, energetic, optimistic self into a solitary figure consumed by his thoughts.

On August 31, Radio Warsaw provided little information about the anticipated invasion. Instead it played bombastic military marches interspersed with official government announcements that Poland would not give in to the German ultimatum nor relinquish an acre of land and that France and England would support Poland if war did break out. But we knew that, given Germany's military might, Hitler would certainly annex Gdansk and the Danzig Corridor. As worried friends arrived at our flat and huddled in front of my parents' newly purchased Phillips radio, the only questions were these: how much more Polish territory would Hitler want; how would Poland protect itself; and how would we protect ourselves?

My father touched the end of another cigarette to the one he was smoking, then suddenly stood and walked over to the window. His hands were jittery. I'd never seen him so nervous. "What's on the radio is all propaganda," he said, puffing on the cigarette. "The government knows we can't keep Hitler from invading,

* Pronounced "Włodzimierz-Volinsky" in English.

and I'm afraid to think of what will happen to us given what's already happening to the Jews in Germany." The words burst from his mouth in an angry, tense barrage. We all knew about the concentration camps and *Kristalnacht*, or "the night of broken glass." This pogrom, inspired by Hitler, took place in Germany and Austria on November 9, 1938. Jewish homes and businesses were vandalized, synagogues were burned, and nearly one hundred Jews were killed. We had read and heard about how Jews in Germany were being persecuted, their children expelled from public schools. Walking the streets had become dangerous there.

My father looked back and forth between the group and the dark, quiet street in front of our flat. Light rain hit the windowpanes. A car occasionally splashed through puddles on the deserted street. My mother suggested we listen to the Polish edition of the BBC and bent toward the radio slowly and stiffly, searching the dial. The dim light from the crystal chandelier cast a warm glow on her tired, pale face. She'd been diagnosed with colon cancer three months before and had undergone major surgery; her bobbed hair had grayed, and it pained my heart to see her so ill.

My father, bald and husky, remained standing at the window, fiddling with his black mustache. It was unusual for him to be so silent. He loved to tell stories, give advice, play cards, and talk about new business ventures. He had many friends, and our house was always full of people. My mother attracted a different group, people interested in politics and the arts. Although my father lacked the intellectual insight of my mother, he was very well known, liked, and respected. I had never seen him so full of despair, and it was more than a little unnerving.

Sioma Malski, a tall, slender law student visiting from Prague, reminded everyone of Germany's unopposed annexation of the Sudetenland, the western part of Czechoslovakia, in 1936. "The same thing can be expected here," he said sharply. "The Nazis are well organized, with modern tanks and aircraft. Poland is no match for them. And Hitler's ideas and propaganda are gaining

ground in Poland. We will be in mortal danger when the Nazis invade.”

“I don’t think so,” Mr. Bristiger interrupted. An erudite, well-dressed bachelor, he’d been a daily guest in our house for many years. He sat in his usual place, next to my mother, and leaned back in his chair, refusing to give in to the anxiety and apprehension. “Poland has the largest Jewish population in Europe, and the Jewish communities are strong here, especially in Warsaw, Lodz, and Krakow. They present a formidable force. We’ve got three and a half million Jews in Poland, while in Germany there’s only half a million. I don’t believe that in the middle of the twentieth century, three and a half million people can be exterminated like ants.”

“I disagree,” my cousin Lenia, a hunchback, said in a shaky voice. His intelligence and soft-spoken manner made him my mother’s most favored friend. “I live in Warsaw, and I know how Poles are harassing Jews. I’ve been refused service in restaurants. In classes I have to sit on the left side with other Jewish students in the ‘bench ghetto.’ I’ve been shoved and hit while walking down the street. My friends have been slashed with razor blades. Never in Polish history has there been such hostility toward Jews. If the Nazis invade, every Jew in Warsaw will be in danger. There is no ‘formidable Jewish force.’”

“I agree with Lenia,” my mother calmly interjected, diffusing some of the tension. Although her gray-green eyes looked sad and tired, she spoke clearly, precisely, and logically about recent events. As in her friendships, she avoided superficiality in conversation. “I know anti-Semitism is strong here, but I don’t think the majority of Poles are anti-Semitic. Many of my Polish friends have told me we can rely on their help if necessary. I know that some of our friends are planning to leave town when the Nazis invade, but I don’t think we’ll have to.”

Fear washed over me. I realized that my mother, a decisive woman, had already made up her mind to stay home if the Nazis occupied our city, and I wasn’t at all sure her decision was right. I had always admired my mother but was never close to her. She fa-

vored my older brother, Julek, who physically and intellectually resembled her idolized older brother, Marcel, a professor of neurology in Odessa. Left outside of her immediate attention, I developed my own interests and friendships, many of which met with her disapproval. She was an intellectual—always reading, listening to music, and analyzing politics and the arts. She had been raised in a highly accomplished family in Odessa, and she brought to our home an admiration for great poets, artists, writers, and scientists. Her uncle, two brothers, and three cousins were university professors in Odessa, Moscow, and Paris. She was fluent in four languages, having received a diploma in linguistics, and our living room served as a salon for her artistic and intellectual friends. Only now do I realize that she was never really happy in Włodzimierz-Wołynski. Although I never heard her complain about our provincial town, she missed the intellectual environment and rhythm of big-city life and often traveled to Warsaw, Lvov, Krakow, Prague, and Paris to attend exhibitions, concerts, and plays. An atheist with strong socialist sentiments, she supported the Polish underground leftist movements and literary journals and instilled in me a sense of social justice and admiration for the Soviet Union.

Dr. Ojcer, a close family friend, shook his head as he listened to Mr. Bristiger and my mother. He had recently moved from Warsaw and was an active member of Bund, a Jewish leftist organization. He was a gynecologist in private practice, though not by choice; as a Jew, he couldn't get a position at the hospitals in Warsaw. "The situation of the Jews in Poland is hopeless," he said. "It doesn't matter if Poland gives up the Danzig Corridor or even the entire Silesia region, Hitler will not be appeased. He plans to conquer the world and exterminate Jews. Right here in Poland he has the largest Jewish population, and he won't stop until he kills us all. There are only two solutions: to emigrate as soon as possible to any of the Western countries or seek refuge in the Soviet Union. Since we're so close, I'm planning to go to the Soviet Union."

This conversation stirred up fears that had been building in me for many weeks. I'd been discussing the same issues with my

friends but couldn't make up my mind about what I would do if the Nazis invaded. The question awakened me on many nights and haunted me through the days, even as I tried to distract myself by spending as much time as possible with Taubcia and our close friends.

As I walked Taubcia home that night, I was frightened in a way I never had been before—afraid of the dark, the people on the street, and a danger I couldn't see but felt swiftly approaching.

That night I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, only to be jolted awake five hours later by the piercing whistle and its final, thunderous blast.

The watch on my nightstand read 6:30 in the morning. I heard my parents talking in sharp but hushed voices as they went into the dining room to turn on the radio. By the time the third and fourth blasts shook the building, I was dressed and running downstairs past my father. "I'll be right back. I'm going to see if Taubcia is all right."

"No! Don't go anywhere! The Nazis are bombing the city!" My father stood at the top of the stairs in his pajamas, looking lost and unsure of what to do. I ran out the door. Neighbors ran in and out of their houses, hugging and crying, still dressed in nightclothes. They picked up rubble and stared at the burning houses. I rushed blindly past them, running all the way to Taubcia's without stopping.

I had met Taubcia three years before, when I transferred to the Jewish gymnasium. Although she was two years younger than me, she helped me outgrow my childish preoccupations with raising and stealing pigeons, riding my horse, and playing hooky. She charmed me completely with her round, smiling face, long blond hair, and green eyes. I was deeply in love, spending every free moment I had with her. Under my influence she became an atheist and a member of the underground anti-fascist organization to which I belonged. She loved my mother and confided in her more than in her own parents, who, as Orthodox Jews, were initially opposed to our friendship. For a few months her parents forbade her to see me, but Taubcia persisted, and they finally

gave up. The anticipation of the Nazi invasion intensified our love. We dealt with the encroaching danger not by fearing the worst but by savoring the precious hours and days we had together, planning our future as though we were destined to be free, our lives secure.

Taubcia's house had not been hit by the bombs. Her mother was in the dining room, crying, holding her face in her hands, while her father lowered his head in prayer. After a short while the bombing ceased, though for all we knew it might resume at any moment. Taubcia and I walked back to my house, holding each other closely, and talked about heading for the Soviet border.

Wladek Cukierman, a close friend and the nephew of our next-door neighbor, was waiting for us in front of my house. He lived in Warsaw but came to visit his aunt every summer, and during these vacations we became close friends. We both admired the Soviet Union and wanted to fight for social justice. In 1936 we had planned to join the Spanish International Brigade to fight Franco and his ultra-right-wing Republican Guard. My parents opposed the idea, and we never did go, but the dream stayed with us for as long as the fighting in Spain continued. We also dreamed of emigrating to France, Palestine, or South America, as many of our friends had done, and living in a commune, but our dreams crumbled under the weight of the frightening reality around us. We both applied to Polish universities but were rejected because we were Jews, and war broke out while we were still searching for what to do with our lives.

Wladek, Taubcia, and I listened to the latest communiqué by the Polish military: "At dawn, the German army crossed the Polish border at several places and is now moving east toward Warsaw. The Polish army has counterattacked on all fronts." Nearly every minute, the communiqué was interrupted by coded announcements: "TD 72 is approaching," "TK 41 and 42 passed," "TP 75, 78 are approaching." Although the phrases were cryptic, they left no doubt that a real war was in progress, and they terrified me as much as the bombs that had fallen in the morning.

Wladek and I knew that the poorly equipped Polish army, consisting mostly of cavalry, couldn't stand up to Germany's modern

tanks and air force, but we both felt compelled to do something to defend ourselves and our families and agreed to volunteer for army service. We and another friend, Chaim Ochs, went to the recruitment office that afternoon. A tall, well-built captain dressed in a crisp green uniform asked us to fill out several forms. His cropped blond hair looked like beard stubble, and he was deeply tanned from his collar to his hairline. The captain slowly rubbed his square chin, as though seriously considering our applications, then looked up and glowered at us. "You're all Jews—so why are you so eager to defend Poland? Why don't you go fight in Palestine?"

Three lower-ranking officers laughed. One of them chirped, "You Jews need curved rifles so you can shoot from behind corners—that way you don't have to see the enemy!"

"Listen," the captain said, "there are enough good Polish soldiers to defend the country. We'll call on you when we need you, but for right now go home and hide with your families."

Stunned and humiliated, we didn't talk much on the way home. Feeling more vulnerable and frightened than ever, I wondered how we were supposed to protect ourselves from the Nazis and whether we could expect any help from our compatriots. Although I had grown up in a secular family in the Polish culture, as time passed I became more and more aware of my Jewishness. In school I sensed that my classmates didn't truly accept me; I felt I was a stranger among them. Some called me names and made me feel that I couldn't live happily among Poles because I was Jewish. I was welcomed in Polish homes as a "nice *Jewish* young man" because my father was a popular local dentist, but the ethnic qualifier kept me from feeling integrated and hampered my social interactions, especially with girls. Not until I transferred to the Jewish gymnasium at the age of sixteen did I feel at peace with myself and among my peers.

The Polish army's rejection of our offer to volunteer served as a stinging reminder that Jews were still outsiders. We could only sit by helplessly as the Nazis attacked our town. For the next several days the Nazis dropped bombs in the early morning or afternoon. Everyone remained tense and frightened, constantly antic-

ipating the penetrating whine of the air-raid siren. Three large military units—two infantry regiments and one artillery regiment—were stationed in Włodzimierz-Wołyński, and the barracks were repeated targets of bombing. Houses were destroyed, citizens were killed, and the streets were badly damaged.

As Nazi tanks and ground troops penetrated deeper into the country, throngs of Jewish refugees fled the western and central parts of Poland and began to arrive in Włodzimierz-Wołyński. Most came from Warsaw and Łódź. Some stayed only a day or two and then moved on toward the Romanian or Soviet borders; others stayed longer, finding quarters with Jewish families in town. My parents took in several refugees; my sister, Rachel, and I moved into my parents' bedroom to let guests sleep in the rest of the house. The bedrooms were taken first, then the two couches in the waiting room of my father's office, then the Persian rugs in the dining room.

During the days the dining room became a gathering place for my family, our friends, and the refugees staying with us. With every update on the Nazis' advancement and France and England's anticipated defense, we discussed what to do next. Many refugees struggled with the harsh reality that the home they had left behind was destroyed, that the lives they'd had the week before no longer existed. The hardship of traveling in a war-torn country with no place to stay, no means of transportation, and no money to buy food led many of them to return home. My father, convinced that returning to Nazi-occupied territory was suicidal, encouraged them to persevere and offered many of them financial help.

Most of the refugees stayed with us only for a few days, long enough to rest, bathe, and prepare for the final leg of the journey to the Soviet border. A few of the wealthier ones, frightened by the Soviet Union's anti-capitalist rhetoric, chose to go to the Romanian border, even though it was twice as far away as the Russian boundary. As I passed the refugees in the hallway in the morning and listened to their stories at night, I wondered where we would go if we, too, had to leave and whether there would be anyone to take us in.

Communiqués from the front line became more and more disturbing. Poland had been left alone to defend itself; England and France, although they declared war on Germany, failed to send any troops. By September 9, Warsaw was surrounded and under siege. In many areas on the Vistula, Bug, and San Rivers, Nazi ground troops had broken through and were advancing more quickly than the Polish army could withdraw. On September 10, Marshal Rydz-Smigly attempted to coordinate the increasingly confused units east of the Vistula River, and on the same day the German Third Army breached the Bug River defenses. The Polish army quickly disintegrated, leading Marshal Rydz-Smigly to retreat toward the Romanian border. The Nazis were now at the Bug River, only twelve kilometers from Włodzimierz-Wolynski.

One afternoon at the dinner table I suggested that we go to the Soviet Union to stay with relatives in Kiev and Odessa. We talked about how long it would take to get there and planned the best route but made no decision. A few days later, when we learned that the Germans had crossed the Bug River and were on the outskirts of town, my father asked me to take a walk with him in our backyard.

The sun was setting. A light autumn breeze brushed our cheeks and blew through my hair. We walked in silence for a while, then sat down on a bench in the dark, leafy orchard behind our house. My father put his arm around me and pulled me close. His deep brown eyes were sad and wide with worry. "Your mother is sick," he began, "and my parents are very old. None of them can survive the harsh conditions of travel. There are no trains, and although I could get horses and a wagon, the trip to the Soviet border would take several days. The roads are dangerous, filled with Polish army deserters and Ukrainian bandits. I can't leave them here alone, and I can't take them with me. When the Germans arrive, you'll be the one in the greatest danger because of your age and well-known leftist activities. I want you to leave tomorrow morning for the Soviet border. I'm sure the Soviets will open it to Jewish refugees."

My father was repeating what the Polish High Military Command had been ordering for many days—all men between the

ages of eighteen and fifty-five were to leave the cities and head for the Soviet and Romanian borders. I had heard these announcements but ignored them, acting as if they didn't apply to me. I thought my family must stay together and was stunned by my father's request that I leave.

"Papa, how can I leave you alone to take care of everyone? I don't want to go alone."

"Janusz, listen to me. You must go. It can be very dangerous for you and for the whole family if you are caught."

I felt a lump in my throat and made an effort not to cry. I had never felt so close to my father. We sat for a while hugging each other. "Let's talk about this tomorrow morning," I said. "Maybe we'll come up with some other solution."

Rumors spread that Nazi tanks were heading toward town from the west and south. On September 10 and 11 the local police and civil authorities left the city, afraid of being captured by the Nazis and of being hunted down by people they had prosecuted in the past. The chief of police, who played cards with my father, came to say farewell and encouraged us to leave immediately. He was wearing civilian clothes, and I was shocked to see him and other policemen nervously trying to blend in with the local citizens.

The local officials' abrupt departure threw the town into a state of anarchy. Ukrainian nationalists with pro-Nazi sentiments wasted no time organizing a local militia to loot Jewish stores and homes. In response, my friends and I, as well as members of the Jewish sports club, Amatorzy, organized a defense group. The fear of being attacked, robbed, beaten, and killed was so overwhelming that no one could go out on the street or rest peacefully. Conflicting reports about the German army's whereabouts added to the chaos.

On the afternoon of September 12, members of the Fifth Column, Polish citizens of German ethnicity who secretly collaborated with the Nazis, donned German uniforms and strolled back and forth down Farna Street. I recognized the Schoen brothers, Bubi and Rudi, friends of my youth and sons of the local pastor.

They didn't look at me as we passed, and I ran back home. Our close friendship, which had begun in grade school, had cooled over the years as they spent their summer vacations in Germany. In one of our last conversations, nearly two years before, Bubi told me I should leave Poland with my family because bad things were going to happen to Jews.

I got home and found my mother sitting alone in the dining room. She took my hand and said, "There's nothing to discuss anymore. You must leave immediately. I don't believe they will harm women or old people. We'll survive and be together again, but you must leave town tonight."

My heart was torn, but I knew she was right. It was rumored that Nazi forces had surrounded the town and would occupy it in the morning. If I was to escape, it would have to be now. I went to say goodbye to Taubcia and stayed with her until dark. She also encouraged me to leave. We held each other, crying bitterly. I asked her to come with me, but she didn't want to leave her parents.

I returned home and began to prepare a backpack with some clothes. My father came into my room. He looked sad but smiled, patted me on the shoulder, and reassured me that we would be together again soon. He told me to be careful and to call as soon as the phone lines were back up. When I finished packing, he hugged me. "I know you can take care of yourself. I've always believed in you and am very proud of you. I know you don't want to leave, but it's better for you and for us that you not remain at home."

I could hardly hold back the tears as we hugged again and again. He gave me twenty gold coins, two rings, some Polish money, and a special belt in which to hide the coins and rings. My mother packed some food, and I took my hunting knife and the little revolver I had acquired when I'd begun to be physically harassed. I went to get Wladek, and at 2:30 in the morning we mounted my small motorcycle and rode to Kowelska Street, which led out of town. The night was pitch black—the sky was cloudy, and the streetlights were out to deter nighttime bomb-

ings—yet the thoroughfare was as busy as at midday. Throngs of refugees on foot and in carriages and wagons had overtaken the road and sidewalks. Everyone was heading east. It was impossible to weave through the thick crowd, so we got off and walked the motorcycle. Bicyclists weaved between people and wagons and cut in front of the slower travelers. Wladek and I were in a hurry to get out of the city, hoping the crowd would thin out in the countryside. The motorcycle's front wheel and handlebars poked people ahead of and alongside us, and two angry men shoved me onto a yard in front of a house. I fell down on top of the motorcycle, and it took a minute to get back up. Wladek tried to calm me down; my temper was raging, and my patience was running out.

The drivers of wagons and carriages whipped their horses and shouted for people to get out of the way. Refugees on foot moved as fast as they could, but their bags, backpacks, and suitcases kept getting tangled and caught on wagon wheels and bicycles. Women carried infants in their arms or held the hands of young children, yanking them out of the horses' paths. A pair of horses, spooked by the refugees running in front of them, reared back and whinnied, their hooves clawing the air. They pulled up short and stepped to the side; their driver whipped them repeatedly and cursed. The horses knocked over several people, then found an opening and galloped forward, parting the throngs with amazing speed. Behind them, a woman and her husband searched for their daughter, who'd become separated from them. "Hannelah! Hannelah!" the woman cried, tearing through the crowd. It was impossible to see the ground, and the current of traffic kept pushing them forward, farther away from the place where they'd lost her.

Wladek and I rejoined the mainstream, walking the motorcycle with one of us on each side to keep it steady. The horses and wagons set a brisk pace, pushing the slower travelers to the shoulders and ditches. Parents walked with babies strapped to their backs; men pulled carts carrying small children and elderly people; old people pushed wheelbarrows filled with their belongings; the infirm hobbled along with canes, traveling lightly, hold-

ing on to a single bag or backpack. The refugees who had traveled the farthest were the dirtiest and most exhausted and often abandoned their bags at the side of the road. They wiped the sweat from their faces, shook out their arms, and rejoined the stream without so much as a whimper.

As we reached the outskirts of town, the sky began to lighten. Wladek and I started the motorcycle and turned onto the road that led to Kowel, fifty kilometers away. We planned to reach Ostrog on the Soviet border, going through Kowel, Rowno, and Zdolbunow.

The throngs of refugees thinned out as morning wore on. Many of them sat on the edge of the road, stretching their legs or taking off their shoes and socks to wrap blisters. Some people had spent the night in the ditches and were getting ready to resume their journey. We passed several abandoned cars that had run out of gas. Some had been stripped almost bare. Others were being pulled by horses. With little luggage and a motorcycle full of gas, Wladek and I felt light and mobile.

When we were more than halfway to Kowel, the whistling of falling bombs pierced the monotonous hum of the motorcycle engine. Wladek shouted in my ear, "Get off the road!" I drove through a ditch and into a nearby woods. We hid the motorcycle in the brush, dove under bushes, and covered our heads with our hands. Everyone else left the highway and scattered into the trees and ditches. The airplanes flew parallel to the road and blasted it with machine-gun fire, then circled back and made the same run. I had never felt more helpless. For the previous twelve days, as I listened to the sound of bombs, I always had the distinct feeling that each one would hit me, no matter where I was hiding. Now, with almost no shelter, it seemed the bombs were exploding inside my head. My temples throbbed. I had never known such terror. The thought of being maimed frightened me more than the thought of death, and I prayed that my life would end instantly if I should be hit. I lay with my face in the dirt and covered my ears as machine-gun fire rattled close to me. The barrage swept across the road and ditches, seeking out refugees, and I felt certain that my life would be over in seconds.

After two more runs the droning engines faded into the distance. Wladek and I picked up the motorcycle and headed back to the road. As we drove through the ditch we saw a group of elderly people lying in a pool of blood, their lifeless bodies riddled with bullets, their bags and backpacks strewn about them. I began to cry when I saw them because it made me think of my parents and grandparents. Timidly, survivors emerged from the woods, and the flight continued.

After the bombing, Wladek and I were terrified to drive on the open road, yet we wanted to reach the border as soon as possible. We reached Kowel and stayed with a friend until dark, resuming our journey at night, when we'd be safe from the bombing.

As the second night passed, I thought obsessively about my family. I hadn't heard whether the Nazis had occupied Włodzimierz-Wołyński, and I struggled to control my panic and focus my thoughts on what lay ahead. I imagined that the Soviets would welcome everyone who needed protection, especially Jews, but my hopes were clouded by the memory of my first trip to the Soviet Union. When I was eight years old, my mother took Julek and me to Odessa to visit her brother. At the train station in the border city of Schepetovka, I looked with admiration at the soldiers and officers of the Soviet border guard, awed by their green uniforms and distinctive insignias. We had three suitcases (mainly filled with presents for our relatives), two handbags, and two small pillows for my mother. The guards ordered us out of the train, and we stood in line for a customs search. I remember the pillows being ripped open, the white feathers flying all over the station, and the sound of our luggage being slashed. My mother was taken to another part of the station for questioning and a personal search; Julek and I sat on a bench waiting for her, afraid we'd never see her again. Paralyzed with fear, nauseated from thirst and hunger, I fell asleep and slipped from the bench onto the floor. Some people brought me water, and when my mother came back, we collected our tattered things and got back on the train. She was worn out and had been crying.

Now, riding to Rowno under the moon and stars, I pretended I wasn't leaving home but was merely taking a pleasure ride with

Wladek. A light, refreshing breeze passed through the willow trees along the road, and it was easy to imagine that we'd soon be home and life would be as peaceful as before the war had started. Absorbed in my thoughts, I was shocked when we were stopped by flashing lights. I hadn't seen anyone on the road. I had no idea where the people had come from. Two men shined flashlights in our eyes while others surrounded us and ordered us off the motorcycle. I was astonished to see Soviet military uniforms and hear the Russian language—we were still a long way from the border. I couldn't imagine what Soviet soldiers were doing on Polish territory and could only hope that the mighty Red Army had come to fight the Nazis and expel them from Poland. I wanted to express my joy at seeing them, but someone ordered us to put up our hands. We were led into a field covered with dozens of camouflage tents. Soldiers frisked us and took away our watches and money and my hunting knife. They didn't discover my hidden belt or pistol. Even though I had a rifle pointed at my back, I wasn't afraid of being shot. I believed that the Soviet Union was a paradise for the oppressed, ruled by workers and peasants, and that the Red Army was the enforcer of social justice. I couldn't imagine them as my enemies; even at gunpoint I felt safer with the Red Army soldiers than with many of my Polish compatriots. I tried to be friendly and spoke Russian to the guard, but he only mumbled at us to walk forward and stay away from the tents.

A young officer asked who we were, where we were going, and where we were from. He ordered a soldier to take us farther into the field, away from the tents, and to watch us until morning. I stumbled over cabbage heads, so thirsty and hungry that I was ready to eat the cabbage right from the field. I asked the soldier if I could have a drink, and he said he'd bring over some water. He ordered us to lie down on our stomachs with our hands clasped behind our heads until he came back. Within minutes my position became unbearable. Very cautiously, without creating any commotion, I unclasped my hands and straightened my arms at my sides. I waited nearly an hour for the soldier to return; then, very slowly, I crawled to a nearby head of cabbage and chewed

on some leaves to get the moisture. The next thing I knew, I was waking up with the sun shining brightly in my eyes. I looked around and saw Wladek sitting next to me.

“Wake up,” he said. “They’re gone.” The soldiers and tents had disappeared as though they’d never been there. The only evidence of their presence was the fact that my motorcycle was gone.

Sitting in the field with no food or transportation, I was thankful not to be alone. I trusted Wladek. He was calm, thorough, and calculating, whereas I was quick and impulsive. Wladek was already digging beets and potatoes from the field. I ate some cabbage and dirt-crusting potatoes and was ready to move on. “Wladek,” I said, “stop digging. We’re not harvesting the field. Let’s get out of here before we get caught by peasants.”

Wladek ignored me, continuing to dig and stuffing beets and potatoes into his pack. “Cool off. We need food for later—who knows when we’ll eat again.” When a dog in the nearby village began barking, we grabbed the beets and potatoes and ran into the woods. We decided to stay away from the main road and walk in the forest for protection from air raids. We found some railroad tracks and silently followed them, hoping they would lead us to Rowno. The hours of walking took me back to my childhood, when I walked along the tracks at home, pretending I was on a journey to some unknown destination. I imagined a big train traveling into the exciting world that I wanted badly to know. I envisioned the beautiful sleeping and dining cars occupied by distinguished, well-dressed, French-speaking passengers. Watching the passing trains at night used to put me into a dreamy, hypnotic state. I loved to stand close to the tracks and feel the trains rush in front of me. They seemed to come from nowhere and disappear into eternity. The world of the nighttime trains was both close and far away, and I wanted to jump on and be taken away into the unknown. I always felt that the next train could be mine, taking me into the exotic, unexplored world of my dreams.

We reached Rowno in the late afternoon, hungry and exhausted, and went into town to buy something to eat. The low wail of the air-raid siren filled the air, and everyone scattered into the build-

ings. Wladek and I ran into a nearby park and dove under a bench. Again, I felt as if I were being hit with each explosion and hoped to die instantly. But when the bombing stopped and the air cleared, I found myself alive and unharmed. Wladek and I went back to the station, followed the tracks into the forest, and found a place to sleep.

The next morning we resumed our journey on the railroad tracks. After several hours we saw a clearing in the distance and what we thought might be the main road. As we got closer, I smelled hot oatmeal. "How could anyone be cooking hot oatmeal in the middle of the forest?" I asked Wladek. He gave me a puzzled look. As we walked out of the woods, an astonishing scene came into view: hundreds of Soviet soldiers sitting along both sides of the road, eating. Two field kitchens had been set up behind several trucks. For the second day in a row, we had run into a Red Army unit on Polish territory. I could hardly believe it.

The smell of oatmeal made Wladek and me run across the road to the kitchen. In Russian, I asked the cook if we could have some. He asked for our bowls, and I told him we had no bowls or spoons. Wladek, standing shyly behind me, took off his hat and handed it to the cook. I took off my jacket and asked the soldier to pour the thick oatmeal into the lining while I held it like a bowl. He gave me a strange look and pointed out that the oatmeal would ruin my jacket. I told him I was so hungry I didn't care. Wladek and I stayed right there at the kettle, scooping out the oatmeal with our fingers and licking them off.

Feeling full, tired, and sleepy, we sat down under a tree to rest. Someone shouted, "Hey, you over there! The officer wants to see you." I had anticipated trouble ever since we'd entered the compound. The officer looked at us inquiringly and asked if we were the young men he had seen two nights before riding a motorcycle. "How did you get here without your motorcycle? You look exhausted. Did you cover all this distance on foot?"

"Yes," I answered. "Through the forest, along the railroad tracks."

"I'll give you back the motorcycle so you can get to Ostrog this afternoon."

I was surprised by his offer and astonished that he had remembered we were heading toward the Soviet border. We found the motorcycle on one of the trucks and sped as though we had wings to Ostrog. Encountering almost no traffic, we rode without stopping to Zdolbunow, a large junction with hundreds of passenger and freight cars on sprawling tracks. Many had been demolished, and the nearby station was blackened and pitted by German bombs.

An hour later we reached the outskirts of Ostrog. The area appeared tranquil and had not been bombed. Fall was just beginning; weeping willows lined the road, apples and plums were ripe on the trees, and flowers bloomed in the gardens. We followed crowds of refugees to a plaza in front of the Polish border crossing. Those who had traveled far on foot were tired, filthy, and sunburned. The border poles, painted in swirls of red and white, marked the Polish side of the border. The arm of the gate was lowered, and the border guards, wearing green uniforms and helmets, walked stiffly back and forth, their rifles held against their chest, looking serious and highly alert. The red and white Polish flag flapped on high masts next to the gate. Soft, freshly raked dirt lay in the no-man's land between the Polish and Soviet barbed-wire fences.

I was filled with awe to be standing at the border, to see the Soviet Union only fifty meters away. There, red flags with golden hammers and sickles were raised on light green and white border poles. The Soviet border guards walked leisurely back and forth. Hearing their loud laughter and occasional exclamations, I felt a kinship with them; I wanted to run through the gate and ask them to open the entrance to everyone, certain that once they knew that thousands of desperate Jewish refugees were waiting for salvation they would not make us wait a day longer.

Wladek and I waited impatiently for the historic moment. But after many hours, the gate remained closed, and we left to find the house of my former classmate, Mischa Sternberg, who lived downtown on a side street only three houses away from the main road. We parked the motorcycle behind his house, went to the front door, and knocked. Mischa answered and, al-

though a bit surprised by our unexpected arrival, gave us a firm handshake and said he would arrange sleeping quarters for us in the basement. That night I lay down in a soft warm bed, feeling exhausted but unable to fall asleep. Now that I felt safe, I couldn't stop thinking about my family. I was frightened for them and ashamed for having left them. For a long while I lay awake, imagining my return home and my reunion with Taubcia.

When I finally did fall asleep, I was tormented by bad dreams. Again I met the Soviet officer who had given back the motorcycle, but his face was made of steel and his eyes were black slits. He shouted at me because I hadn't told him the truth about my relatives living in the Soviet Union. He bound my hands and legs, tied me to a horse, and dragged me on a long rope to the border crossing. The crowd parted, the gates opened at his order, and the officer whipped the horses into a gallop. The throng of refugees ran behind. Their contorted faces magnified as they threw rocks and stones, and every projectile, as it bounced closer and closer, turned into a person's head, its open mouth shouting at me: "Jew! Jew!"

"Stop yelling." Wladek sat on my bed shaking my arm. "What's wrong with you?" I told him about the dream. Wladek went back to sleep, but I was too lonely and frightened to sleep. All my feelings for and memories of Taubcia welled up within me. She was my first love, and I felt there was no world without her. I remembered the first secret touches of our hands, which made me feel happier than I had ever felt. I could hold her small, delicate hand all evening, feeling how close she was to me, all our tender feelings concentrated in our palms and fingers. I was mesmerized by her, finding everything about her unusual, adorable, and wonderful. Every smile, every move, every second between us was meaningful. We could talk for hours; I could listen to her, laugh with her, dance with her, and spend more time with her than the day allowed. Being in the same school, we looked for each other every break, and every day I walked her home, carrying her books. I was blind and deaf to the outside world because she filled everything that was important and dear to me. It wasn't

enough that we spent all hours of the day together. During the four years of our relationship, I lay in bed at night dreaming about her and knew that she was doing the same.

At dawn a storm approached Ostrog. The thunder began far away and steadily came closer and closer, increasing in volume. Impatient to know what was going on, I awakened Wladek, and we both dressed, climbed out the window, and walked to the main street.

The thundering sound of heavy metal hitting the cobblestones was strange and new to me. The next thing I knew, a large tank with a big red star painted on the turret was coming in my direction. Soviet soldiers and officers stood on top waving at bystanders. The Red Army was crossing the border. Thousands of citizens and twice as many refugees shouted, danced, sang, and threw flowers to the soldiers on the tanks. It struck me that the Red Army soldiers we had met on our way to Ostrog were part of a reconnaissance unit exploring the country before the tanks and soldiers crossed into Polish territory.

The tanks proceeded through the gates like a chain of elephants, smashing the barbed wire fences to the ground and snapping the border posts in two. I ran alongside excitedly with many other young people, climbing on top of the tanks to talk to the soldiers, who greeted us with friendly handshakes. I was glad I could speak Russian so I could share my happiness with them. When I heard the army was proceeding west, I had no doubts that in a day or two it would reach Włodzimierz-Wołyński, and my family would be safe. All day the Soviet units, tanks, artillery, and infantry paraded through the city. My heart was already traveling with them to Włodzimierz-Wołyński.

The next day Wladek and I followed the army units westward, reaching Włodzimierz-Wołyński late that night. A patrol of Soviet soldiers was walking down Kowelska Street. I felt joyous, safe, and thankful. I turned down Farna Street, dropped Wladek off at his aunt's house, and pulled into our driveway. I mounted the stairs to our flat. Not wanting to ring the bell and scare anyone, I knocked feebly and waited, each second of silence seeming to invite peril. I knocked again, more loudly. When I heard the

door to the foyer open, my heart began to beat uncontrollably. My father stood in the open door dressed in his shirt and pants. He hugged and kissed me, and for the first time ever he cried in front of me. My mother, Rachel, and Taubcia came running to the door and into my arms. Even as filthy as I was, everybody wanted to hug and kiss me, and I was the happiest person in the world.

I vowed never again to leave Taubcia and my family.