

Chapter 1 ❖ THERE IS A WATCH LYING ON THE GREEN CARPET OF THE LIVING room of my childhood. The hands seem to stand motionless at 9:10, freezing time when it happened. There would be a past only, the future uncertain, time had stopped for the present. Morning-9:10. That is all I am able to grasp. The hands of the watch are cruel. Slowly they blur into its face. I lift my eyes to the window. Everything looks unfamiliar, as in a dream. Several motorcycles roar down the street. The cyclists wear green-gray uniforms and I hear voices. First a few, and then many, shouting something that is impossible and unreal. "Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!" And the watch says 9:10. I did not know then that an invisible curtain had parted and that I walked on an unseen stage to play a part in a tragedy that was to last six years.

It was September 3, 1939, Sunday morning. We had spent a sleepless night in the damp, chilly basement of our house while the shells and bombs fell. At one point in the evening when Papa, Mama, my brother Arthur, then nineteen, were huddled in bewildered silence, my cat Schmutzi began to meow outside in the garden and Arthur stepped outside to let her in. He had come back with a bullet hole in his trousers. "A bullet?" "There is shooting from the roofs, the Germans are coming!" Then, in the early gray of the morning we heard the loud rumbling of enemy tanks. Our troops were retreating from the border to Krakow, where they would make their stand. Their faces were haggard, drawn, and unshaven, and in their eyes there was panic and defeat. They had seen the enemy, had tried and failed. It had all happened so fast.

Two days before, on Friday morning, the first of September, the drone of a great many German planes had brought most of the people of our little town into the streets. The radio was blasting the news that the Germans had crossed our frontier at Cieszyn and that we were at war! Hastily, roadblocks had been erected. Hysteria swept over the people and large numbers left town that day. I had never seen Bielitz, my home town, frightened. It had always been so safe and secure...Only now, when I saw people deserting it, did I realize how close, dangerously close we were to the Czechoslovakian frontier; only twenty-odd miles separated us from Cieszyn.

There had been talk of war for many weeks, of course, but since mid-August our family had been preoccupied with Papa's illness. Mama and I had been away in Krynica, a summer resort, from early June until the middle of August. Papa and Arthur had been unable to accompany us, and we returned when we received a telegram from Papa, suggesting we come home because of the gravity of the international situation.

It had been somewhat of a shock to see how ill Papa looked when he met us at the station. His right arm was bothering him and Mama, alarmed, had called the doctor. The doctor diagnosed the illness as a mild heart attack and Papa was put to bed immediately. The following day two specialists were summoned to Papa's bedside. That same day we received a cable from Mama's brother Leo, who was in Turkey. It read: "Poland's last hour has come. Dangerous for Jews to remain. Your visas waiting at Warsaw embassy. Urge you to come immediately." Mama stuck the cable in her apron pocket, saying, "Papa is ill, that is our prime concern." Papa was to be spared excitement and worry at all costs, and visitors were cautioned not to mention the possibility of war to him. Mama little realized the fate we all might have been spared had she not concealed the truth from Papa. Yet on Friday morning, September 1, when German planes roared through the sky, Papa, who had been ill for two weeks, came face to face with reality. It was a tense day. I spent most of it in my parents' bedroom and instinctively stayed close to Papa. As that first day drew to a close, nobody touched supper, no one seemed to want to go to sleep. Mama sat in a chair near Papa's bed, Arthur and I watched from the window.

Horses and wagons loaded with refugees continued to roll toward the East. Here and there a rocket, like blood spouting from the wounded earth, shot into the evening sky, bathing the valley in a grotesque red. I looked at my parents. Papa appeared strange, almost lifeless. The yellow flowers on Mama's black housecoat seemed to be burning. Outside, the mountaintops were ablaze for a moment, then they resounded with a thunderous blast that made the glass in the windows rattle like teeth in a skeleton's head. Everything was burning now.... Then, all of a sudden, Papa spoke to me. "Go, call the family and find out what they are doing."

I went downstairs. I sat down next to the phone with a long list of numbers. I started at the top and worked to the bottom, but there were no answers. The telephones kept ringing and ringing...“Nobody answered, isn’t that right?” Papa asked. I could not speak. I nodded. There was no longer any pretense.

Papa motioned me to sit down on his bed. He embraced me with his left arm. “Children,” he said, “the time has come when I have to say what I hoped I would never have to say. I remember as if it were yesterday the cries of the wounded and the pale faces of the dead from the last war. I didn’t think it possible that the world would come to this again. You believed I could always find a solution for everything. Yet I have failed you. I feel you children should go. Mama just told me that Mr. and Mrs. Ebersohn have asked to take you with them to look for refuge in the interior of Poland. I am sick when you most need my strength. I want you to go, children. I command you to go! His voice had assumed a tone of authority that I had never heard before. I saw Arthur look up startled at the mention of his girl friend’s parents. More than ever he looked like Mama, but somehow he reminded me of Papa as he stood there tall, erect, and determined. Almost without hesitation, he said, “No! We are going to stay together.” My parents’ eyes met. I had a feeling there was relief and pride in their faces. “I hoped you would say that,” Papa said brokenly, “not for my sake, but because I hate to cast out my children to complete uncertainty. I believe that God will keep us together and under the roof of our house.”

It was a wonderful, peaceful Saturday. But evening brought fury to the end of that last peaceful day. Sporadic shooting started from the rooftops, an attempt at delaying the enemy while our army retreated to Krakow. We looked for shelter in our cellar and sat there through the night. Toward morning the shooting stopped altogether and the vehicles of the Polish army ceased to roll. We came up from the cellar for a cup of tea in the living room...

It was 9:10 A.M. I looked out again. A swastika was flying from the house across the street. My God! They seemed prepared. All but us, they knew. A big truck filled with German soldiers was parked across the street. Our neighbors were serving them wine and cakes, and screaming as though drunk with joy, “Heil Hitler! Long live the Führer! We thank thee for our liberation!” I couldn’t understand it. I didn’t seem

to be able to grasp the reality of what had happened. What are those people doing? The same people I had known all my life. They have betrayed us. The breakfast tea turned cold on the table. Papa and Mama looked down at the floor. Their faces were blank. Papa seemed so old, so gray. He had changed so much. I smelled something burning. A hot coal from the big green tile oven had fallen through the grill onto the carpet. I remembered a similar accident a year or two before and Mama had been terribly upset. Afterward she had turned the carpet so that the burned spot was under the couch. This time I wanted to shout a warning, but my throat froze when I saw my parents staring at that coal. They saw the carpet burn slowly, but they didn't seem to care. Finally, Papa got up and with his shoe carelessly shoved the coal back to the grill.... Nobody spoke. I looked out the window and there was Trude, a girl I had known since childhood. She and her grandmother lived rent free in a two-room apartment in our basement in return for laundry service. Now I saw her carrying flowers from our garden, white roses of which we had been so proud because they bloomed out of season. She handed them to a soldier, breaking her tongue with the unfamiliar German, "Heil Hitler!" The soldier reached for the flowers, but somebody offered him some schnapps. He took the glass instead, the flowers tumbled to the dusty road, the boots of the soldiers trampled on them. I started sobbing, crying, releasing all my emotions and anxieties in that outburst. Arthur jumped over to me, put his hand over my mouth. "Are you crazy? Do you want to give us away?" But I did not hear him. The tears felt so good. He finally slapped me. "Think of Papa's life. If they hear you crying-" I couldn't stop. He pulled me down from the couch, dragged me over the carpet, and up the stairs with Mama holding my mouth. They put me to bed, where I cried into the pillow until, exhausted, I fell asleep. Early in the afternoon the drunken, jubilant mob was still celebrating its "liberation" and hoarsely shouting "Heil Hitler." Papa and Mama smiled. Their smiles seemed more painful to me than my screams and tears, and I learned at that moment that I must not always cry when I wanted. I realized that we were outsiders, strangers in our own home, at the mercy of those who until then had been our friends. Although I was only fifteen I had a strong feeling, more instinct than reason, that our lives were no longer our own, but lay in the hands of a deadly enemy. Mama tried to maintain the pattern of our life,

even on that fateful Sunday. She prepared dinner and we sat down as usual, but no one could eat and when the food was cleared away we sat in silence. Arthur got out books about the war of 1914 and looked up data about its development, but Papa said, "This is a different war. This one cannot possibly last four years. Four weeks, perhaps four months at most."

Early in the evening, when the shouting of the drunken mob had died away, there was a knock at the door and a whispered, "Mrs. Weissmann." It was our neighbor Mrs. Bergmann, the mother of my friend Escia. She looked pale and shaken as she relayed the news that during the afternoon several Jews had been rounded up in the streets, locked in the Temple, and the Temple set on fire. "Men had better stay out of sight," she whispered. Papa and Arthur exchanged glances. Mama's eyes widened and she pressed her lips together. But Mrs. Bergmann told us too that England and France had declared war on Germany that morning. She stayed only a few minutes. When she rose to leave, Mama saw her to the door and I followed them. Before they opened the door Mrs. Bergmann and Mama listened a while, then finally Mrs. Bergmann turned the knob and through a tiny opening glanced up and down the street before she slipped out.

We sat a while longer in silence, none of us wanting to go to bed. That was the first evening in my life that I saw Mama without needlework in her hands. She just sat and stared into the fire. After a while she got up, outwardly calm and regal, and said, "Go to bed, children. We all will need rest and strength." Her words climaxed the first day under German rule.... End of this excerpt. ❖

Paragraph breaks and ellipses to indicate omitted material, added by Jane Thielsen.
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