

Chapter One

It's a beautiful Sunday afternoon in September 1939, with golden light that makes everything glow. I don't have to wear a coat, and the air is so soft and clean and fresh that I breathe in deeply. Soon it will be cold—I know this. Polish winters can be fierce. That's when I have to get all bundled up and then still feel cold. I am almost five years old and small for my age. I'm with my mother, wearing one of the embroidered dresses she's made for me.

Nearby, there's a magnificent open marketplace, which is right across the street from where I live. It's got columns and graceful archways and long stairs that lead up to several stories with all kinds of shops. It's bright and airy and noisy, and it's where everybody comes to sell what they have to sell—meats, breads, cakes, fruits, flowers, anything you could possibly want. The flowers are amazing, changing through the year—daffodils, tulips, irises, roses, violets, forget-me-nots. Polish people love giving and getting flowers. My favorite flower is the silver thistle. It looks like a silver sunflower and it's surrounded by prickly green leaves. The marketplace, which spans about two city blocks, has a clock tower at one end that chimes on the hour.

The marketplace is the heartbeat of the town, where people gather and exchange news, gossip, information. The town is known for its brilliant Jewish rabbi and scholars, and people come from all over Poland, just to talk. To me, the marketplace is the busy center of the world and I get to live just opposite it.

I was born October 4, 1934, and I live in the Polish town of Czortków—pronounced “chort-kuv.” The “cz” in Polish sounds like “ch,” the “ó” sounds like “u,” and the “w” sounds like a “v.” Czortków is neither a great big city nor a tiny village, but something in between—a big town, an old town. The buildings on one side of the marketplace are tall, four and five stories high, which gives Czortków a “city” feel, but it's in a valley surrounded by farmland and on three sides by mountains. Some of the mountains have lush forests, which look bright green in summer and are covered with snow in winter. The Seret River bends its way through town—the river, along with the fresh mountain air, has made Czortków a place to which people come on vacation. They send home postcards showing how the spectacular mountains circle and protect the town.

The town has a population of about 40,000 people. Of these, almost half are Poles. They are Catholic. Almost a quarter are Ukrainians, who are Orthodox Christians, and there are about 10,000 Jews. I am Jewish. My last name, Rein, means “clean” in Yiddish and German—clean like the mountain air.

I live with my parents and grandparents—my mother's father and mother. This is not unusual, for the generations to live together, whether the families are Polish or Jewish or Ukrainian. I speak Polish with my parents and Yiddish with my grandparents.

My grandfather is a wonderful tinsmith, a very clever man. He makes the pots and pans that everyone in town uses. His shop is the ground floor of our home. He is handsome with a short, neatly clipped white beard and a long white mustache. He always dresses in black, a somber color, and wears a black hat.

I share a bedroom in the back with my parents. Their double bed is pressed against the wall, and there's a little bed for me. Across from my bed, there's a wardrobe to hold our clothes. The bedroom windows look out onto a low rooftop. To take baths, we pull a bathtub into the kitchen and fill it with water from the sink.

We certainly don't live in luxury, but life is not bad at all! We always have plenty to eat, including chicken and beef twice a day. My grandfather insists on it! Both my grandparents are religious, and my mother keeps a kosher kitchen. A meal can be chicken soup and beef brisket, which is soft and juicy, or cabbage leaves stuffed with meat, and beet soup with a potato in it, or dumplings called pierogis, made with meat or potatoes or both. The kitchen wall is only half wood with glass on top. So, when I'm helping my mother prepare a meal, I can see into my bedroom.

The big meal of the day is lunch, at noon. My father eats lunch with us and always takes a nap in the afternoon before going back to work. He makes mattresses and furniture, and covers chairs with beautiful fabrics. I'm told I look a lot like him. Both of us have thick hair, though he is dark-haired and I am blonde. He has a high forehead, small ears, and gentle eyes. He plays a lot of chess and reads constantly. When he is finished with a book, he closes it with a loud thump, triumphantly. Sometimes I can see dust particles in the light, after the thump.

A corridor separates our apartment from another family's apartment. At the end of the corridor, narrow steps go down into a small open-air courtyard. Because of these steps, the roof behind our bedroom curves down. We can hang bedding out of the bedroom window onto this roof to air out. Behind another low building, on the right, is a storage area that's roofed over. That storage area is boring. It's got old furniture and other leftover stuff. My mother won't let me play there, and anyway I don't want to, it's so dirty and dusty.

My mother has dark hair that curls around her ears, and bangs, and round cheeks, hooded eyes, and a mischievous smile. She is known, in the family and among her friends, as an exceptionally smart woman. She is industrious, hardworking, her hands always busy—sewing, knitting. She's a talented seamstress. She makes all my clothes, and I love getting new dresses. No one in town makes dresses like hers. When I put on these dresses, I feel like a princess with a fairy godmother!

My grandmother has a face as round as a pie tin. She has a broad, flat nose and a wide smile. She, too, wears mostly dark colors, and, because she is so religious, she wears a wig. I absolutely adore her.

I know nothing of the larger world, only my Chortków world, with its busy marketplace and my close, loving family—parents, grandparents, and assorted aunts and uncles and cousins who live nearby. I feel so safe that I don't even know that I feel safe. It's part of who I am, like my ability to breathe, something I don't have to pay attention to—it's just always there. Every once in a while, someone on the street calls out to someone else, "Dirty Jew." Never to a child, of course. I don't know why they do this and I don't pay much attention to it, anyway.

As my mother and I take a walk that lovely September afternoon, people start to gather in the street. They're not shopping or chatting. They're just standing around, staring. Soon there are hordes of them lining the street on both sides.

"The Russian soldiers are here," my mother tells me.

I see tanks, trucks, and soldiers. They look enormous. But I'm not scared. If anything, it's kind of interesting. I don't know why they are here, but here they are.

Then I hear gunshots.

In that moment, I have one thought: *Life is not going to be the same.*

My mother grabs me, and we run into the front of the nearest building. We can't tell where the shooting is coming from. The sounds echo in all directions. I try to make sense of the sounds, but I can't.

My mother says, "Don't be afraid."

But I'm terrified. I've never known a feeling like this. Before, I got scared if I woke up in the middle of the night after a bad dream. Now, my chest is tight and I can't take in any air. Suddenly, breathing is not automatic. This is our town, our home. It's the middle of the day. It doesn't seem real. It seems too real.

"It'll be all right," my mother tells me.

We stay in the entrance of that building until things quiet down. It's only about 15 or 20 minutes. This is when I realize that a small amount of time can be its own eternity—endless, and beginning-less, too, because suddenly everything that's come before this feels as though its only purpose was to lead me here.

We go home.

People say everyone's first memory is of something terrible. Usually, that means something that's terrible only for you—like falling out of your carriage. This episode, hiding from the shooting, becomes my first memory, something I will carry with me for the rest of my days. My

“memory button,” so to speak, got turned on that day, September 17, 1939. After this, I remember things vividly. There are gaps, to be sure, but from now on certain things stay in my head, forever.

The Russians take over the town.

Several days later, I’m standing in my grandfather’s shop, looking out the window at the marketplace, as I’ve always loved to do. There’s a man, running beneath the arches. Two Russian soldiers with rifles yell at him, “Stop! Stop!”

The man raises his arms. But he won’t—or can’t—stop running.

“Stop! Stop!” they call again.

He does not stop.

They shoot. I see him fall. I start to scream. My mother pulls me away from the window. The sound of my own screaming fills my ears.