



Henryk

CHAPTER 1

Our Orchards (*Henryk*)

Eastern Poland, 1939–1940

SOME DATES change the world irrevocably. What is done cannot be undone. No matter how well- or ill-conceived. One plane or two or ten piercing invisible lines, seeking enemy flesh.

A page of history that can never be torn out permanently. Things tend to catch up. Even when they are buried or ripped out. And it's impossible for people to go on the same, though many pretend while sweeping the ashes under the expensive silk carpet. It depends where the lines are drawn. Maps and agreements that may or may not be honored, upheld. Memory, selective. Paper and flesh can be burned.

The history books my sister, Helcia, loved—would become unreal, unwritten. The Helcia that was light, flipped her honey hair and skipped with her books about lost cities, golden ash. Before the stone pages made her heavy. The then-unwritten pages that would unfold us. One group of people fighting another; the variables, teams and players switching, faking the others out.

The fading hours of twilight fell quickly that late summer of 1939. I was eleven and a half years old, and like the other boys of my *osada* (village), had that feeling of youthful invincibility burgeoning in every vein. There was an ominous sense that the village talk of another large-scale war could come to fruition, but we shook that thought off gallantly. We were too busy playing our own war games, striving to be like our fathers, who were all decorated war heroes before we were born.

The wind unsettled the pine trees and disheveled the girls' long hair. Asia, Kasia, Magdalena, Małgosia, Dorota, Helcia and her friends. My peers and I didn't know exactly when it happened, our new interest in how the light transformed the shades of their hair from molasses to amber to honey—and in the new, subtle curves of their bodies. We could hear them laughing in the distance, there in the intricate spaces of a neighbor's farm. Their hushed giggles intrigued us, but we remained awkward around them, afraid of appearing foolish, so we poised ourselves, hoping to get a distant glimpse, a keyhole into their world.

“Come in, synu (my son). Supper on the table,” my father summoned from afar. He was more than likely still feeding our farm animals. I could barely hear the newborn sheep bleating to be fed; they were born a few days ago and still wet from birth. Our watchdog Hałas, named for his noisiness, barked also, fulfilling his job to keep foxes and other predators away from our horses, sheep, pigs and chickens. I had finished cleaning the barn about a half hour prior. Father and I tried to alternate between cleaning and feeding; his call to me signaled he was almost finished feeding all our livestock.

I knew that Mama, Helcia and Józef would be waiting in the kitchen to begin dinner. But like the other boys my age,

I pretended not to hear the voice of my father—and stayed out as long as possible, finding a rugged way through the dark of the orchards. We played dead to be hidden, to squeeze more hours of nightfall, intrigued as we were by the mystery of dark. And the darkness of our own games.

There was an urgency in being boys, sharing the space outdoors without elders, practicing to be men in front of witnesses, to convince ourselves in the process. We challenged our peers while smoking cigarettes like our fathers, climbing the gnarled trees, stepladders to the heavens. We longed for the girls to be proud of us as our mothers revered our fathers, hoping they looked curiously at us through their own windowpanes.

Aside from our awkwardness with the adolescent girls of our village, we were cocky, not believing the rumors of the impending assault on our country and our homes, the land our fathers were given in gratitude for their bravery in the Polish–Bolshevik War of 1919–1920, the war fought to retain Poland as an independent country after more than a hundred-year hiatus. From 1795 to 1918 Poland was essentially erased from maps, history books and globes, partitioned by Prussia on the west, Russia on the east, and Austria on the south. As a reward for reinstating Poland’s eastern borders after the Polish–Bolshevik War, my father and forty other veterans of the Polish Army were each awarded a plot of thirty-plus acres to farm, land in southeastern Poland that previously had been part of Russia. The land wasn’t considered very valuable, as it was grooved by ditches and foxholes remaining after the front lines had crisscrossed several times in the last phases of the war.

The newly formed Polish government had said *thank you for a job well done; try your hand at the sandy earth and see if you can thrive, if you are as skilled a farmer as a soldier.*

After enduring the trenches, our young fathers scoffed, tapping the burnt tobacco from their pipes, saying *thank you for the place for our sons to grow as tall as the pines, as fertile as the land we will cultivate with hard toil for our bravery's reward. The place where we will work, put away our rifles and war medals in chests of drawers, and live out the rest of our days with our wives and children, cultivating potatoes, barley, rye, oats, wheat. There is nothing else we need.*

They were young when the government gave them the land to farm in 1922—my father just twenty-two, the same age as my mother; both born at the turnstile of the twentieth century. Father had known my mother in Blizne from grammar school. He thought it would be prudent to marry while starting the farm, and therefore returned to his place of birth to ask Zofia to marry him. Orphaned since seventeen, she was living in her brother's house. My father's mother had died unexpectedly of pneumonia when she was almost fifty. Mama and Tata quickly became each other's family. After the hardship of the first several years, in which other settlers helped them build their house and farm buildings and vice versa, the following years proved abundant. They were tired but content on their own land in Piłsudczyzna, as the farm village was called. Little by little, the crops improved.

And then there would be the extension of their family—Helcia, the eldest child in 1925, myself three years later, and (after losing an infant son) Józef in 1935. We grew up with tools in our hands, scythes and trowels. Helcia's tools were mainly for cooking and sewing. I worked outside with my father even in the winter, for the farm entailed enormous labor.

We all rose early to tend to the animals and crops. My

family employed a few workers for the fields during harvest time and a full-time man who helped with a wide range of chores on the farm and in the stables. We called him *Wujek* (Uncle) though he was not; he always had something for one of us in his pocket—a piece of candy, a carved bluebird for Józef. Even though we were not “blood,” we considered him family. Calling a man “uncle” made him so; it had something to do with the level of respect given, the naming as *family*, *rodzina*, a word I would think about obsessively over the next decade.

Our settlement did not have its own school. Helcia and I walked two miles each way to a nearby town until our village constructed its own school in 1936. We walked even during the frequent snowstorms that punctuated winter. Often we walked in snow up to our waists and when we arrived at school, stood in front of the fire until we were warm and dry enough to focus on our studies.

Prior to September 1, 1939, our lives were filled with school and the mundane tasks of our land, crops and livestock. September 1, 1939: the first pivotal date in my life’s chronology. The day the Germans attacked Poland, and began what was recorded unanimously in history books all over the world as the first day of World War II. The war we had not let ourselves contemplate seriously, announced itself in the form of German tanks at the western boundaries of our homeland, etching the day into history books with indelible red ink.

At four o’clock in the morning, before daylight, German planes bombed Polish border towns, some reaching as far as Warsaw. *Blitzkrieg*, “lightning war,” as it would later be

termed. The small Polish Air Force presented no match for the enormous firepower of over fifteen hundred German aircraft. We expected England and France to honor the treaty they had signed, in what we believed to be good faith, to join our forces in retaliation against Hitler and his plan to annihilate all Poles and again efface Poland from the world stage. Fifty-three hours after the attack on Poland, the British government declared war on Germany. Six hours later, France followed suit. A formal declaration of war without any actual assistance with soldiers or armaments, however, did not help the Polish cause.

In addition to the war between the two armies, Hitler targeted the civilian population, including women and children. Low-flying German planes slaughtered young girls picking potatoes in the fields from close range. The rest of the world did not want to see the image of the young girls in the field, an image that would become an iconic photograph of children cold-bloodedly murdered during war. Our parents and neighbors held their breath, still believing that it was just a matter of time before other countries and their diplomats would step in to halt such barbaric killings.

We kept waiting, restlessly, in disbelief. We waited for England and France to do something, to send help, military assistance, arms. We waited as the German tanks rolled in and the bombs fell from the sky on Warsaw, the heart of our country whose arteries would be critically shorn. Not without a desperate fight. Not without enormous courage and bloodshed.

The war was close, in the capital, yet far away. My father, like the other Polish veterans in our area, learned about the war on the radio. At all hours of the night that September, the radio that Tata owned (one of the few in the entire village)

droned in the background amidst loud crackling static as neighbors filtered in and out to hear the latest update followed by quiet, nervous speculation that the children (hiding silently around door frames) were not to hear.

Seventeen days after the German invasion from the west, Russia invaded Poland from the east, as clandestinely planned. One week prior to the onset of the German invasion, Russia and Germany had signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, named for their respective foreign ministers. This non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR included a secret protocol that divided Poland between its two rapacious neighbors. The new border would eventually run along the Bug River: west of that line, the Germans would be in control and to the east, the Russians. Poland’s fate seemed geographically sealed once again by the implications of this document, covert Soviet–German collusion. The secret protocols to this non-aggression treaty would also impact Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania by similarly dividing those lands into German and Soviet spheres of influence.

We endeavored to continue with our daily routine as best we could, cognizant that German tanks ravaged Warsaw. It was nearly impossible to concentrate on school or anything else aside from the War for the next few months. Before this dual invasion from the west and then the east in September 1939, my homeland was something a boy my age didn’t think excessively about. What is a country to an almost twelve-year-old who had not yet worn a uniform?

Our schoolboy camaraderie conditioned us to be nonchalant about such things, to be tough. Yes, we knew from school and from our fathers that Poland did not exist as a country for over one hundred years, but we believed that to be the past, dormant—nothing to do with us now. Those books were dusty

and belonged to our grandfathers whom we did not have the luxury of knowing.

We took school for granted, as do all children who have not had education taken away. In the past we had consistently asked our teachers for more challenging questions instead of mechanical tests. True or false—too easy for addressing what we were learning to be complexities, shades of gray; the multiple choice test too convenient. We wanted no answers to choose from—longing to invent a new wheel and sign our names for posterity.

About a week after the Russians invaded eastern Poland, the Ukrainians formed a militia to replace the Polish police. Our *osada* was an oasis surrounded by Ukrainian villages. Historically, animosity and friction between Poles and Ukrainians had always existed. Most recently, the Ukrainians believed it was unfair that we were given free property instead of them.

While the Russians occupied our land, the Ukrainians were the “big shots” and repeatedly threatened to slit our throats and burn our buildings. My family was always ready to hide in the forest. Our wagon hitched to a pair of our horses was discreetly packed with supplies in case, at a moment’s notice, we had to flee. A few friendly Ukrainians, whom we knew prior to the German and Russian invasions, would warn us, “It would be safer not to stay at home tonight.” At least three times we left our house and hid overnight in the forest about three miles from our farm. Józef was scared until we told him we were playing a very important game that required absolute silence and “not tears from such a big boy,” Mama cajoled.

We continued to attend school—with different teachers and

classes, however. Russian became mandatory; religion banned. The Russians strongly encouraged us to join the Komsomol, a Communist youth league that glorified Communism and Stalin.

Christmas was bittersweet that year. We were grateful to be alive and together but afraid of the next progression in the historical chain of events. On Wigilia (Christmas Eve) when we broke *oplatek* (the Christmas wafer), we hardly spoke to each other, exchanging the wafer quietly while avoiding eye contact.

That winter comprised a silent winter of waiting; a winter of walking on eggshells, pretending everything would be okay. Normalcy would resume. The Communist regime would falter in Poland, we wanted to believe.

During the predawn hours of February 10, 1940, the second date inscribed permanently in my family's chronology, nine days before my twelfth birthday, our watchdog Hałas barked furiously until all of us awakened. Within minutes, heavy pounding reverberated at our door.

"What is it?" I asked my mother. I was half asleep and feared that something may have happened to one of our neighbors. Or that someone we knew. . . I shook the thought off as a sleep-induced worry, but my mother did not motion to reassure me or to answer. My father peered through the shutters of their bedroom window.

He informed us quietly that Russian soldiers surrounded the house.

Within minutes, the tall, brawny soldiers in olive uniforms occupied our home. Their rifles were the magnetic focal points for all of us. Józef looked quizzically at their guns, seeming to wonder where our rifles were for this new, foreign game. As the

oldest son, I amassed as much courage in my facial expression as I could to show that I was not afraid in front of my mother, wanting to help the situation somehow. I tried to be strong for Helcia (though she was three years older) and my brother Józef, who was not yet five years old and unable to comprehend the full impact of the sudden presence of these men behind their rifles with fixed bayonets.

Tata, my father. The Russian soldiers tied him with rope to a leg of the heavy kitchen table and left him facing a corner of the kitchen so that he could not see us. I'm sure he worried desperately about what they would do to us. The soldiers read the deportation order, making it clear that legally we were enemies of Russia and as such, would have to be relocated to prevent any sabotage of their supply lines. The soldiers ordered my mother, sister, brother and me to sit on the floor while they ransacked our house looking for arms, pulled drawers from dressers, and removed all the mattresses from our beds.

When they finished their thorough search of our home, they instructed us to begin packing. We had forty-five minutes to gather what we could carry. They spoke firmly and factually telling my mother specifically to pack sensibly, things to take with us, warm clothes, "useful" items. She complied as commanded without looking directly at their eyes, without challenging their succinct orders. I watched her hands shake ever so slightly as she removed the *pierzyna* (down quilt) from her and Tata's bed (the bed that we all sought when we were sick, scared, or had nightmares) to pack our belongings in it.

My mother bundled practical things as directed—dried meats, barley, flour, matches, heavy clothes. She nervously instructed Helcia and me to bring her our warmest things and asked Helcia to do the same for Józef. She discouraged Helcia

from including any books, but I saw my sister conceal her dictionary in a sweater. One of her teachers had given her this dictionary a few years prior as a reward for being the top student in her Polish history and literature classes. Her piercing look begged me not to mention the hidden book to our parents.

Within a half hour, the Russian soldiers lined us up outside the house. Tata was unbound and stood close to our mother. It was unusually cold that morning and still dark with a multitude of stars piercing night's dark indigo palette. I remember looking up and noticing how clear the night loomed. The crisp glints of light, ironic.

"What will happen to our animals?" Helcia asked me in a whisper. "Will they starve or be mercifully slaughtered?"

I looked away, unprepared to answer.

The Russian soldiers ordered us to stack our possessions on a sled waiting outside our house. The Ukrainian driver whipped the horses that trotted briskly toward the railroad station, approximately six miles away.

As our sled arrived at the train station, we could see the countless other deported families from our settlement and from surrounding villages designated to share our journey. We had not been aware that the forty other families of our village were similarly being "processed" at the same time and were headed with us toward the same unknown destination. Thousands of dislodged Polish civilians, more people in one place than I had ever witnessed, nervously waited at the train station.

It could have been so much worse, I learned from others in our village. My father was not tortured, my mother and siblings, for now, unscathed. In other homes soldiers killed

parents in front of their children; the children pushed along by the soldiers' rough shoves, without them.

Hour after hour, night after night, I thanked God for my parents and prayed for the young children without any. I kept wondering why we were being kept alive. Like the other men and boys in our settlement, my father and I, able-bodied free labor for the Russian workforce, were to prove valuable. Perhaps they spared the women and children so that the prospective workers would be able to concentrate and survive with some support and reason to live. I wasn't sure, but prayed we would all survive and that we would not be separated.

Our verdant orchards were receding quickly—the greenness foreshadowing the greenness of death. The color that settles in to replace the color of flesh. But we were cocky then, bragging with adolescent-inflated bravado of the place where we would become tall soldiers and strong farmers, herding sheep and cattle, where *all would not be lost*.

“Come in, synu,” my father called again more urgently.

“Yes, Tata, I will be in soon.” *I will find my way out of the shadows and darkness. I will join you, Mama, Helcia and Józef at the table. I will leave bravely and remember the orchards, our farm, my boyhood, our lost home, the obsolete borders of Poland. I will not forget what others said did not happen. I will urge Helcia to carve out the bloodspill with her pen.*

Train to Siberia

The horses dead and rotting in the barn
elude the threshold of imagining.

Awake, degraded, we are all strange[rs]
to sunlight, sustenance, and plans.

A cloud of bone, field of bone crosses
infinite array of grays shaping shadows.

The boy on a tall man's shoulders
probes splintered boards of our cattle car—

mangled limbs left by the train tracks
at the periphery of remembrance and sorrow.

Turn the pages of the Book, A–Z, string words
to wrap blankets *some of us, at least, will survive.*

Old Russian women sweep snow from the tracks.
Lost, they don't come back

though there is nowhere to go—
endless days of cold, hunger, and snow.