

CHAPTER 1

August 1939: The Last Peacetime Summer

IN FRONT of the house, under the big chestnut tree, Mother sat on a wooden bench talking to Uncle. Uncle, tall and gaunt, was leaning on his stick, while Ania, my towhead three-year-old daughter, tugged at his hand and made sweet eyes at him. She was a grand one with men, regardless of their age, Ania was. When she saw us approaching she let go of Uncle's hand and ran with outstretched arms to hug me.

"Who won?" Mother asked. We were just returning from a volleyball game. It was one of those riotous family affairs, in which the grown-ups joined the children and only children took seriously. But Mother was always immensely interested in all our games.

"They!" I said dramatically, while trying to free myself from Ania's embrace. "Let's go in for tea. I'm ravenous."

"Fresh croissants for tea today," Basia, our hostess, announced proudly.

"Hurray!" Warm, crunchy croissants, with butter which will melt and golden honey on top of that, dripping.

Before we entered the house I caught a glimpse of George's blue shirt and Tereska's red dress, flashing among the trees at the other end of the big, sloping lawn. Evidently another of the daily bike races between my eight-year-old son and his little cousin was in progress.

There was a mad scramble for the guest lavatory with its scented soap and embroidered towels for which we had no respect. We were all too worn out from our game to climb two flights of stairs to our respective bedrooms. We then filed into the big, cool, oak-paneled dining

room. Basia had been right! The delightful scent of hot croissants, just from the oven, was hanging over the table.

Aunt Nina, mother of my five cousins, of whom Basia was the youngest, was already waiting for us. Aunt Nina has always been my idea of an empress—an empress, mind you, not a simple queen. She was tall, erect and stately. She always spoke with great precision in a slightly dogmatic tone. And wasn't she brilliant! When Aunt Nina was around there was no need for us to look up things in the *Petit Larousse Illustré*, our favorite reference book. She knew by heart all the kings, dates and battles in history; all the rivers and the mountains on the map; the names, dates and authors of all the masterpieces ever written, painted or composed. I shall never forget the time when the daughter of the Swedish Minister to Poland came to visit Wola.¹ The girl had lived in Poland for twelve years, spoke fluent Polish and had studied Polish history at the University of Warsaw. We felt rather badly when we discovered she knew more about it than we Poles did. But then Aunt Nina came out with her knowledge of Swedish history and, believe it or not, she knew more about it than did the Swedish girl!

It was one of Fate's little ironies that Aunt Nina, who was born to preside over an intellectual "salon," should have settled in the country, while Mother, who adored country life, married the editor of a newspaper and had lived in the city ever since.

We were fourteen at the tea table, all related to each other by blood or marriage. Only Aunt Nina, Uncle and Basia lived in Wola all year round. But to the rest of us

¹ Wola, the family estate, was located in southwest Poland near the town of Pillica.

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the place was a sort of family Mecca, and we always managed to spend at least a few weeks there during the summer months. To anyone who belonged to the family clan, nothing on earth could replace that leisurely atmosphere of abstract discussions (led by Aunt Nina), family gossip and childhood memories that was Wola's own.

Aunt Nina had been listening to the afternoon radio news and was giving us now a precise résumé of it. News was bad as usual. This was August 21, 1939, and political tension was growing with every hour. However, radio news, no matter how bad, was only radio news to us and did not spoil our appetite for fresh croissants.

Nevertheless, Aunt Nina's report started once more the old argument as to whether we were headed for war or not. We had debated that problem over the tea table, or dinner table, a hundred times at least and opinions were still divided. Basia and I insisted that war was imminent; my cousin Hanka, the proud mother of three boys and an idealist if ever there was one, was convinced this whole war scare was all stuff and nonsense.

"Don't be silly! Do you think Hitler wants a war any more than we do? He is merely bluffing."

"But we are going to call his bluff. Then what?"

"He will back out."

This would go on for hours and neither side would be convinced by the other.

While the argument was still in progress, mail was brought in. Besides the usual pile of newspapers and circulars, there was a letter for Hanka addressed in Adam's handwriting. Adam was Hanka's husband. He was a member of the board of directors of one of the largest manufacturing firms in Warsaw and only occasionally was he able to run down to Wola for weekends.

Hanka read her letter, then calmly announced, “Adam has been mobilized.”

“Adam? For Heaven’s sake, why should they mobilize Adam? I should think he would be far more useful in some war industry department.”

Adam had been a volunteer in the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919.² He had been awarded a cross for bravery. He was a non-com at the time and had never bothered to obtain a commission afterwards, as this would require a special course at the military school and spending six weeks every other year at maneuvers. He could not be spared that long from his office. Besides, he was already forty-one.

“I don’t know,” said Hanka. “He is stationed in Warsaw, anyway. He says everybody is being mobilized. At the Tennis Club members are disappearing every day. Some are handed mobilization orders while on the court.”

This quiet mobilization by individual orders had been going on ever since May. People were used to it by now. Half of the men I knew were already under arms, but Adam was the first member of our family to be drafted.

“I hope they will release him before it’s time to go to the Carpathian Mountains,” Hanka added as an afterthought.

² The Polish-Bolshevik war began in February 1919, immediately after the end of the First World War when Poland regained its independence after 123 years of partition among Austria, Prussia and Russia. The border between Poland and Russia had not been settled. Vladimir Lenin, leader of Bolshevik Russia, wanted to reincorporate Poland into Russia and spread the communist revolution to western Europe—for the Bolsheviks, the shortest route to Berlin and Paris lay through Warsaw. Over a two-year period, the newly independent Poland fought and defeated Bolshevik Russia. The turning point of the war came in August 1920 with the Battle of Warsaw, sometimes called “the Miracle on the Vistula,” when in an unexpected and stunning victory, Pilsudski routed the Russian forces—a defeat that Josef Stalin, at the time a political commissar of Bolshevik Russia and in command of the Southwestern Front, would never forget or forgive.

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Every September she and Adam would be off to shoot the big red deer in the Carpathian Mountains. For two glorious weeks they would forget children, business, politics and all. They would live in a small hut on the slope of a big mountain, lost in the woods, cut off from civilization. Climbing steep, slippery slopes they would trail the deer, guided by the magnificent roar of the courting buck. They would return to Warsaw full of wonderful hunter's tales, loaded with splendid trophies. The antlers of the Carpathian buck were known to be the best in Central Europe. Those two weeks in September were the climax of the year for Adam and Hanka. I looked at Hanka, but did not feel like resuming our old argument about war. Now that Adam was mobilized, what was the use of telling her that deer-shooting was over and man-shooting might start any day.

But Hanka's faith was unshaken. She would not let Adam's mobilization interfere with her vacation plans, so the next afternoon she, her three boys and I were off to visit Adam's sister and brother-in-law. It was a rather long trip and we would not be back for two days. The whole family gathered on the porch to bid us good-bye.

Thad and Andrew, the two older boys, were a pretty sight, both dressed alike in white shirts and fawn-colored breeches, on their splendid chestnut mounts. They sat well in their saddles, too. Hanka, a fine horsewoman herself, had seen to that. Andrew's fair hair gleamed in the sun.

Hanka's face was beaming with motherly pride as she gave them the last instructions:

"Remember to turn to your left as soon as you have passed the church at Zaba—and be careful of the bridge

at Czarna; there is a hole in it. Andrew, don't hold her so tightly, you know she has a sensitive mouth."

The boys were to cut straight across the fields, while we were to follow the road. The fields from which the crops had already been gathered gave excellent opportunity for short gallops. Hanka had been on horseback all over the countryside and knew every path, every stone and tree, for miles around. This time, however, she had lent her mare to Andrew, who had no horse of his own yet, and was riding with little Paul and me in the horse carriage.

The boys were off, followed by the old groom, Francis.

We climbed into the *britchka*, an open, rather high vehicle with two comfortable seats, under which our suitcases were placed. Paul, who was to ride with the driver in the front seat, tried to sit with his back to the horses, facing his mother and me, but Hanka would have none of it.

"Don't you know, little fool, that the hind of a good horse is a far better sight than any human face?"

We all laughed. Hanka was a horsewoman all right.

"Have a good time!" Mother called from the porch, and we were off.

I love to ride in a horse carriage, it gives you such a wonderful sense of leisure. The world does not flash by as it does in an automobile. You have plenty of time to satisfy your idle curiosity, to observe scenes and scenery alike. You have time to find out whether the woman in the red kerchief, just stepping out of the cottage door, has come to fetch the wooden pail that stands near the doorway, or the big white featherbed airing on the fence. You can observe the brown earth sliding down the glittering knife of the plow. You can exchange a few

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friendly words with the little black dog that yaps at the horses and pretends he is going to scare you off. In fact, when you ride in a horse carriage you belong to the landscape—you are part of it. In an automobile you are always an outsider.

As we rode now, harvest time was over and the fields were, for the most part, deserted, save for large flocks of white and gray-saddled geese. Long fields, divided by narrow strips of grass on which cows and goats grazed, lay in the afternoon sun as if resting after the exhaustion of crop-bearing, and the pale melancholy of the late summer hung already in the air, even though the weather was glorious. Here and there, however, villagers were still reaping late spring oats and as we passed we would call to them the immemorial harvesters' greeting:

“God’s blessings!”

Straightening their bent backs, they would call back:

“May the Lord give it.”

The breeze brought to our nostrils whiffs of the sweet scent of yellow lupine, just in bloom.

We passed through villages built in a single file of houses, stretching for miles along the road. The walls of the cottages were exactly the color of the sky. Painted before every Whitsun with a mixture of whitewash and bluing, they would have, at first, the deep hue of June skies; then as the summer wore on and the sky grew paler, the walls would fade too. Little flower gardens in front of every house were overflowing with rosebushes, nasturtiums and sunflowers; tall honeysuckles reached the thatched, moss-covered roofs.

I had often wondered what it would be like to live one's whole life in one of those tiny cottages, so close to the soil. My own life had been so different. I was not even born in the country, and my real home was the

spacious, old-fashioned apartment in Warsaw where my parents had moved right after their marriage and in which Mother had lived ever since.

My father was chief editor of the conservative daily *Slowo*,³ and I was told that while he was alive, my parents' house was quite a center of Warsaw political, cultural and literary life, with Mother holding a "salon" on Monday and my father entertaining twelve of his political friends for lunch every Thursday.

I don't remember any of it however, for Father died when I was eighteen months old, and after his death the political lunches were discontinued. As for the Monday receptions, they slowly turned into gatherings of elderly, extremely respectable and well-bred ladies, with a sprinkle of Father's old friends and an occasional bishop or two. My brother and I loathed those Monday afternoons. I was invariably dressed for the occasion in a white woolen dress and Franek in a white woolen suit, with big lace collars, and we were severely reminded not to get dirty or ruffle our hair till we made our routine appearance in the drawing room. Thus dressed in state, we had to wait, sometimes two hours, till a polite guest would dutifully ask to "see the children." I used to stand on my head in the nursery for ten minutes after each such ordeal.

My next vivid recollections are those of the First World War. I was seven at the time and Franek eight. The outbreak of hostilities caught us at a summer resort in the Austrian part of Poland,⁴ and ours was the last train which

³ *The Word*.

⁴ In the late 18th century, the entire country of Poland was divided up by Austria, Prussia and Russia (the Partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795). What had been eastern Poland, including the Polish capital of Warsaw, was incorporated into Russia; southern Poland into Austria; and the north and west into Prussia. For 123 years, Poland literally disappeared from the map of Europe. The country was not reunited again as an independent nation until after the Armistice of November 1918 and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which officially ended the First World War.

crossed the Russo-Austrian frontier. It never got us to Warsaw, though. As soon as we were inside the Russian borders, all civilian passengers were told to leave the train, which was taken over by Russian troops, all of them drunk. It took us a week to reach Wola. We found it full of generals and high-ranking officers poring over big maps, drinking champagne at night. The Russian general staff had made its headquarters in the house. The place was simply buzzing with adjutants, liaison officers and whatnot, and among the general excitement we kids had the time of our lives.

There was the time, for instance, when the Cossack colonel, who was sweet on our French mademoiselle, let us have his field glasses and Basia, Franek and I stole to the roof of the house to observe the movement of troops. When my turn came, I had, at first, a hard time focusing the lenses, but at last I caught sight of three Cossacks riding along the distant road to Zarnowiec. They rode very fast and were about to disappear behind a cluster of trees, much to my regret, when suddenly three Magyars appeared in the focus of my lenses, right in front of the Cossacks.⁵ I knew they were Magyars, for I could plainly see their red breeches and dark blue coats. Then the whole scene vanished in a cloud of dust. A column of dust had been trailing behind each group of riders and now the two columns met—I could not see anything. Suddenly a riderless horse shot out of the dust, running in a mad gallop towards Zarnowiec.

⁵ In the First World War, the Allies (the British and Russian Empires, France, Italy and the United States) were pitted against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria). The Cossacks were Russian cavalry and the Magyars were the Hungarian forces. The Russians entered into a separate peace with the Central Powers in March 1918, after the Bolsheviks overthrew Tsar Nicholas II during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

I put down the field glasses, panting with excitement. At seven I had witnessed a real fight.

Then there was the day when Mother and Grandmother returned from a stroll in the park, crawling on all fours because machine gun bullets were whistling and cutting twigs all around them. We were not allowed to go out, so we spent our days at a top floor window watching golden stars, which were artillery shells, trace graceful arches over the horizon. A big battle was in progress and explosions shook the air. When we grew tired of watching, we tiptoed downstairs to peep through the drawing room door at the Russian generals bent over maps. Sometimes we were asked to come inside, and once Franek was even offered a drink of champagne.

Then one day the Russians had to retreat. The general warned the family that they would have to blow up the house because it stood on a high hill and could serve as an excellent vantage point for the advancing Austrians. We were therefore packed off in a hurry and sent to the home of another uncle further east. Only Basia's father remained behind to watch over the doomed house, which was never blown up after all.

Our trip east was most exciting. We met a large detachment of the retreating Russian army, plodding slowly along the sandy road in the intense August heat. Their columns stretched out for miles and slowed down our progress. We drove by the battlefields of yesterday, covered with trenches and barbed wire. The dead were already removed, but corpses of slain horses still lay by the roadside. Those dead horses produced a horrible impression on me. They were real, far more real than the fight in the colonel's field glasses. They showed their teeth in a mortal grin that seemed to mock me, the little girl with yellow pigtails who was driving by. . .

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THE MERMAID AND THE MESSERSCHMITT



Rulka and father; circa 1907.



Aunt Celinka, Aunt Nina and Rulka's mother.



Rulka, her mother and brother; circa 1923.

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We did not return to Warsaw till a year and a half later, when it was occupied by the Germans. At first our life was pretty much the same as it had been before the war. We were sent to the best private schools, attended dancing classes, and had a German governess whom we hated. Mother still had her “at home” days on Monday, only now everybody talked politics and quarreled bitterly as to whether Poland should throw in her lot with Germany or with Russia. The choice was hard—both were age-long enemies—and the opinions were divided. “Of course the best solution,” people used to say, “would be to have the last German soldier choke to death on the last Russian.” And that was what actually happened, but seemed hardly possible at the time.

Meanwhile the issue was a vital one, for it meant either cooperation or lack of cooperation with the German authorities that occupied the country. Sentiments were running high and close friends would stop talking to one another if they belonged to opposite camps. Mother was a strong pro-Ally, and very soon her Monday teas were decimated—none of her pro-Central-Powers friends would call on her. My personal contribution to the Allies’ cause was limited to sticking out my tongue at every German soldier and officer I met in the streets, a gesture doubly dangerous considering that I was always escorted by my German governess.

By 1916 we began to feel the real pinch of the war and conditions grew steadily worse. We were often hungry, and always cold. For three years I didn’t have a new dress—nothing but Mother’s old dresses made over for me. Considering that Mother had worn black ever since my father’s death, from the age of ten to thirteen I wore black too. And the wooden-soled shoes, though wonderful for toe

dancing, weren't so comfortable for walking. In the streets there were hunger riots.

The end of the First World War brought us the intoxication of independence—white bread made of American flour, greeted with loud cheers when, for the first time, it appeared on the dining room table, and American baked beans and rice served at school lunches.

It also brought a moratorium on mortgage debts. All the money left by my father was invested in mortgages.

Overnight we found ourselves penniless.

Mother had plenty of wealthy relatives to whom she could have turned for help, but she did nothing of the kind. She sublet four out of our six rooms, tightened the family budget as much as she could, and began to look for work teaching French. Even this was not easy to get at first. Mother used to lie in bed and wonder where the next meal was coming from. Yet the atmosphere of our home remained as cheerful as ever. At last she found a job as part-time French governess to a five-year-old boy of a nouveau riche family. It must have been pretty tough, but Mother never complained. Very soon she established a reputation as an excellent teacher and was flooded with pupils.

She wasn't doing it for the first time either. Thirty years before, when Mother was only sixteen, my grandfather, who belonged to the titled nobility, lost his estate. It seems rather amusing that it was Australian sheep which ruined my grandfather, but it is a fact. The vast estate which had been in the family for over three hundred years was principally used for raising sheep—the wool was exported to England and yielded good prices. Then one day in the 1880s, some troublesome inventor found a way to clean the fleece of innumerable Australian sheep of impurities which hitherto had made their wool useless, and in no time the English market

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was flooded with cheap, Australian wool. The Polish sheep raisers lost their market and my grandfather who, from what I could gather, was a gallant, dashing nobleman of the old school, with no more business sense than a newborn babe, found himself unable to cope with the situation. The big fortune went down with a crash. My grandfather could not stand it. Rather conveniently for himself he died of heart failure, leaving behind my grandmother, three daughters (the eldest of whom was barely eighteen), and innumerable debts.

The normal thing to do for the four bereaved women would have been to seek refuge in the house of some wealthy relative and from that time on lead the drab life of “poor relations.” Instead, my grandmother and the three girls went to Warsaw and took a cheap apartment in a tenement house. My grandmother did the housework and the three girls ran from morning till night on their worn-out shoes giving French lessons at cut-rate fees, for they had no school diploma of any kind. In that way they managed not only to support themselves, but began to pay off my grandfather’s debts. Word went around Warsaw Society (with a capital S) about the admirable pluck with which the beautiful Countess M. and her three handsome daughters were comporting themselves, and suddenly the four women found themselves the center of general attention and admiration. Shining horse carriages stood in line in front of the dilapidated tenement house and my grandmother, my mother and my aunts were flooded with invitations. According to Mother, for six years they never got enough sleep—they worked all day and danced most of the night. By and by the debts were paid off, Mother and Aunt Nina got married, and my other aunt Celinka became a nun.

Such was the family tradition I had been brought up in. To me it was also a challenge. I could not be outdone

by my elders: at fourteen I began to tutor; at fifteen I was fully supporting myself, earning one-third of the family budget; at sixteen I graduated from school with full honors and secret dreams of a diplomatic career. These, however, were dashed to the ground by a young diplomat I met shortly after graduation:

“If you want to get into diplomatic life you must marry a diplomat. That’s the only chance a woman has.”

I almost asked him to marry me in that case, but I didn’t quite have the nerve. He suggested that international commerce would be the next best thing and that it offered opportunities for women, and so next fall I entered the Warsaw School of Commerce. I was very much in love with the young diplomat that summer, I am afraid.

Silly as the reasons for my choice of a career were, I was never going to regret them, for during my third year at the School of Commerce, I was offered a scholarship to study in the United States. I was nineteen and going to America. America! The world belonged to me.

Those two years at Vassar (I had chosen Vassar because a Polish friend of mine went there and loved it) were wonderful.

True, at first I had a hard time because I didn’t know the language. It’s a terrific strain to listen for weeks, from morning till night, to a language which you cannot even break up into individual words. Each sentence sounds like one monstrously long word. In classes I would catch myself staring vacantly into space, the muscles of my face grown rigid with the effort of catching a familiar sound. It took me two months to understand what was said in class and a year before I could follow the general conversation at the dinner table.

During my senior year, I remember, I was taking Critical Writing. My professor, incidentally, was author

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Hervey Allen. One day he made us write a critical essay on one of Poe's poems. Dictionary in hand, I tackled the assignment. After two lines, I had enough. I had to look up every word and the poem was a long one. I wrote across the page, "Sorry, all the English I know is what I picked up on the Vassar campus. Poe doesn't seem to use any of it. I don't understand a word," and handed the paper to Allen. He read it and looked up smiling. "Do you know," he said, "this is a pretty good criticism of Poe."

While still struggling with the language, I began to absorb America through every pore of my being. American life, American mentality, American attitudes and ideas. It was fun—I loved it. My friends told me later that it was a source of constant amusement to them to watch me change within a few months from a little Quaker girl with long hair and too-long skirts, into a regular American flapper. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." I cut my hair and turned up the hem of my dresses. The only thing I was reticent about was makeup. Somehow, lipstick had always been associated in my mind with "bad women," and I could not bring myself to use it.

America is a wonderful country for making friends. It seems to be part of American hospitality always to give the stranger a chance. This chance, of course, is something in the nature of a test—if you fail, they drop you like a hot potato. What else can you expect? You had your opportunity, anyhow. But if you pass the test and are accepted as a friend, they will go to any length to make you happy.

During those two years at Vassar I failed many times, but on the whole I had invitations for every holiday, every available weekend. I went to football games, parties, theaters—I had the time of my life.

No wonder that when I stood on the deck of the east-bound *Aquitania* on an October night in 1928, I could not see the fairy-like sight that is New York seen from the sea at night, for the mist of tears which veiled my eyes. Would I ever see America again?

America, however, clung to me—or was it the other way around? At any rate, I soon found a job as copy-writer at the Warsaw branch of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency. It was lots of fun.

I also began to go into society. It was by no means my debut. I had gone to “grown-up” parties and dances before I went to Vassar, but at that time I was a washout.

Now, suddenly, I found myself fairly popular. If America had done one thing for me, it had improved my looks. I still was no raving beauty, but at least I was presentable; and my “exotic” (American) experience gave me an additional glamour in the eyes of young Poles, accustomed as they were to the prim and reserved society girls of those days.

“Of all your fiancés, Miss,” Mother’s cook told me one day, “I like the Swede best.”

But it was not the Swede that I married. It was my boss at the J. Walter Thompson Agency—Olgierd Langer.

Olgierd and I had known each other for years. He had studied at Harvard while I was at Vassar, but we were no more than friends. It was really J. Walter Thompson which was responsible for our romance. I don’t know why there should be anything romantic about the atmosphere of an advertising agency, but evidently there is. Perhaps the secret lies in the very advertising technique. For seven hours every day you have to whip up boundless enthusiasm for a brand of soap, car or breakfast cereal. It’s all too easy to transfer the same enthusiasm to the girl at the next desk. Be this as it may, Olgierd

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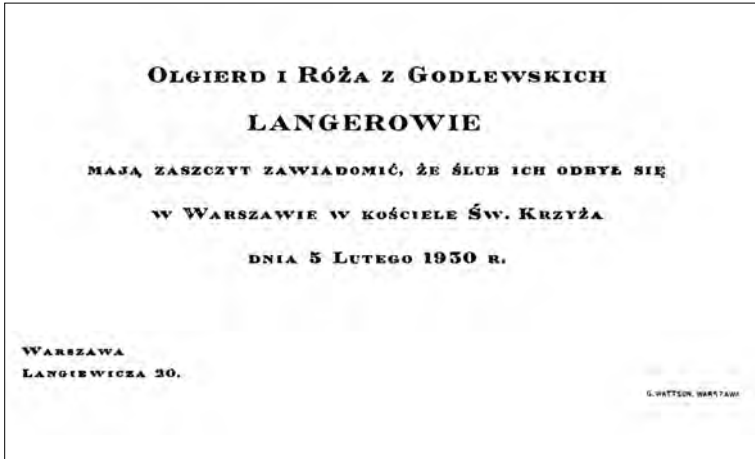
Olgierd Langer in Austrian army uniform, circa 1918.

OLGIERD LANGER (1896-1970) was born in Lwow, Poland, at that time a part of Austria. He graduated from the University of Lwow and the Harvard Business School (M.B.A., 1929) in the United States.

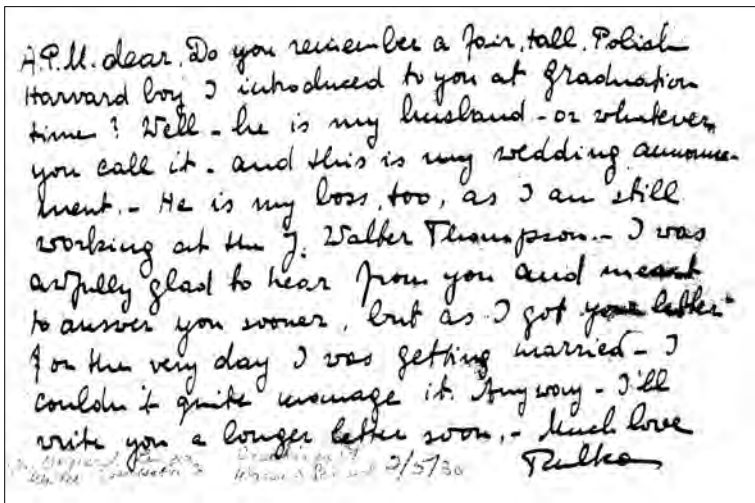
Mr. Langer is credited as the father of modern advertising in Poland—he taught the first university-level course in Poland on the science of advertising while Professor of Economics at the University of Lwow, and subsequently wrote the first Polish book on advertising theory while employed by the J. Walter Thompson Agency in Warsaw.

Over a long and varied career, Mr. Langer moved easily among academic, diplomatic and business circles. His service included posts as commercial attaché of the Polish Embassy in Washington, D.C., Trade Commissioner in Philadelphia for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Polish Consul in Detroit, delegate of the Polish Red Cross to the American Red Cross, and work with the J. Walter Thompson Agency in New York.

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The Langers' wedding announcement: "Olgierd and Roza (nee Godlewska) Langer have the honor of announcing that their wedding took place in Warsaw in the Church of the Holy Cross on the 5th of February 1930."



On the back, a note from Rulka to the friend to whom this announcement was sent.

and I were first secretly engaged, then openly married—in fact, we eloped. We both thought it lots of fun, but Mother’s friends shook their heads.

“You shouldn’t have let her go to America,” they said.

I was glad she did, though.

We were married in February 1930. For two years after that, I plunged into domesticity. Our first-born, George, was brought up strictly and scientifically according to American textbooks, thus bringing upon my head a host of criticism from the female members of both Olgierd’s and my family.

After two years, however, the “career woman” reasserted herself. The depression had spread from the United States all over Europe, and Poland was hard hit too. Olgierd was making half the salary he used to earn when we were first married and, accustomed as I was to complete financial independence, I couldn’t bring myself to ask him for money whenever any extras were needed. George, by that time, was already walking, putting his hands on anything he could get hold of, eating shoe polish on the sly and suchlike. American textbooks did not offer much help in the matter, so I entrusted George to the watchful eye of a nurse and got myself a job.

I was all wrapped up in my work with the Polish Radio when, quite unexpectedly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered Olgierd the post of Commercial Attaché at the Polish Embassy in Washington. Thus, unexpectedly, my old dream of a diplomatic career became a reality. However, like most dreams that come true, this one proved to be a disappointment. At close range the life of a diplomat’s wife bore little resemblance to the glorious adventure I had imagined it to be. After two weeks the glamour of big receptions and the excitement of meeting people one read

about in newspapers wore out, and the never-ending social duties became a regular chore.

“Do you know if I have any stiff shirts left, or are they all at the laundry? We are going to the Peruvians tomorrow night.”

“Oh, must we really? We were at the Egyptians only last night. I thought I could ask Mary and Red to come over to the house for a quiet chat.”

But I knew there was no use protesting. The Ambassador had assigned us and the First Secretary of our Embassy to go to the Peruvian ball the next night and that was that.

During those eight months in Washington I used up nine hundred calling cards, drank probably several cases of champagne, exchanged platitudes with thousands of people, discovered that the men whose names make news are usually the dullest ones in a drawing room, and I was thoroughly relieved when it was all over. Olgierd was offered a better paying job in Poland and resigned from the service.

On my return to Warsaw I took a year off and had another baby. A girl this time—Ania. Later I went back to work.

In the spring of 1938, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered Olgierd, once more, a post in the United States. This time it was that of Trade Commissioner in Philadelphia. Now, if there is one thing Olgierd can't resist, it's America. He says he has been that way ever since he was four and an uncle brought him a box of American candy from the World Exposition in Paris (1900). The tin box was beautiful: it had the American flag on top; George Washington, Uncle Sam, the Statue of Liberty and the Flatiron Building decorated the four sides; and the candy was delicious. Olgierd decided then and there that a

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Olgierd Langer, circa 1934.



Rulka Langer, circa 1939.

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George Langer, circa 1939.



Ania Langer, circa 1939.

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country which produces such marvels must be paradise on earth. It was not till twenty years later that, going through the attic, he stumbled upon the tin box again. He lifted it reverently. Suddenly an inscription in small type caught his eye—"Made in Austria" it said. By that time, however, Olgierd had visited the States and was more crazy about them than ever.

So when in 1938 another opportunity to go to America presented itself, he could not resist the temptation. Besides, the job itself was interesting and, this time, without diplomatic trimmings.

But the moment was awkward. Olgierd's family was just negotiating the sale of its land to the Polish government. It was a complicated transaction and to us it meant quite a bit of money. Someone should be on the spot to supervise the deal. At last it was decided that I should remain in charge, while Olgierd went to Philadelphia. As soon as the deal was put through I would join him in America, or else he would return to Poland.

After Olgierd left there did not seem to be any sense in keeping a six-room apartment for the children and myself. I put the furniture in storage and moved to Mother's. She was delighted to have both her children and her two grandchildren under the same roof with her.

With Hitler playing havoc all over Europe, Olgierd's and my plans did not work out the way we thought. We didn't expect a long separation—three, four months perhaps. However, the summer of 1939 came and still I was waiting. Waiting for the deal to go through, waiting for Olgierd to return . . . The Polish Government, faced with a threat of war, was in no hurry to invest money in real estate needed for peacetime ventures and the negotiations, despite all my efforts, dragged on interminably. And when in June Olgierd was due for a home leave, the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs cancelled all leaves due to the political tension.

“Wait another month,” Olgierd’s superior in the Ministry told me. “Perhaps by July the tension will relax, and your husband will be able to come.”

But the tension did not relax—it grew worse. War was on everybody’s lips. Suddenly I realized that if I wanted a vacation myself that year I had better take it right away. Therefore, at the beginning of August I asked for a leave at the Bank of Poland, where I was working at the time, packed two suitcases and went off to Wola. Mother and my two children had already been there since June.

I arrived at the tail end of the family reunion. Many members had already left. My brother Franek had gone to Zakopane;⁶ but the big house was still full and the park resounded with the shouts and laughter of children.

Yet there was a strange poignancy about that last vacation.

A few months before, Olgierd had sent me *Gone with the Wind*, and the book made a tremendous impression on me. Somehow I considered it prophetic. I remember that just as I had finished reading it, it was time to put winter things away. As a rule I would pick out all my two-year-old dresses and suits and give them to the maid. Lord knows she didn’t need them, she had more dresses than I ever had or hoped to have, but she always seemed to have plenty of needy relatives. This time, however, I suddenly remembered Scarlett O’Hara’s best dress made of her mother’s green plush curtains, and I decided not to follow the usual procedure.

“These may still be my best dresses in a year or two,” I thought, putting the old things carefully away.

⁶ Zakopane is a resort town in the Tatra Mountains, in southern Poland, well known for skiing in the winter and hiking in the summer.

CHAPTER 1

And many a time while watching a lively tennis game on the court shadowed by tall willow trees, or perhaps having coffee with the family on the big terrace, or riding, as I did now, in a horse carriage over the roads I had known since childhood, the thought would strike me suddenly, like a pang:

“Will all these be ‘gone with the wind’ next year...?”