

Author's Preface

ALL THE characters in this story are real, and so are the episodes. I have changed the names of people and places but I have tried to make them as true to life as I could. Even conversations are reported almost verbatim.

I wrote this book because I was homesick.

I wrote it, also, to show my many American friends why I was not happy to leave Poland in February 1940, even though I was coming to the United States—the friendliest and most hospitable country in the world—a country I love so much. “Aren’t you lucky to be out of that hell!” people would exclaim when I first arrived. “I don’t know. . . ,” I would answer hesitatingly, and they looked at me with surprise.

The fact was I didn’t consider myself lucky. Perhaps it was hell. But if so, it was my own kind of hell, a hell I loved with all my heart. It was only for my children’s sake that I had left Warsaw.

Finally, I wrote this book to show my readers what it is like for an average human being to live through the Blitzkrieg. No war correspondent, however brilliant (and American correspondents are the most brilliant the world over), can ever do that. A war correspondent is always on the spot wherever the most dreadful things happen. A bombed hospital, an orphanage set in flames, he sees them all. He talks to hundreds of destitute people. In fact, he sees ten times more of the horrors of war than the average person in the same city does.

And yet, a war correspondent, when he runs to that gigantic fire, does not leave his own children behind in his

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hotel room. When caught in an air raid, he doesn't tremble for the life of his own old mother. His brother has not vanished somewhere on the crowded roads threatened by strafing fighter planes. It isn't his own house, the house in which he was born and has lived for years, that has been set on fire by an incendiary. And if he himself goes through the agony of mortal fear, none of his readers will ever know about it. This is no part of his reporting job.

To the average person, I think, war horrors come pretty much like the pangs of childbirth. At first, in spite of apprehensions, life still goes on, almost normal, with all of its little trivialities. Then comes the pang: wild, screaming, inhuman. You think you'll never stand it—yet you do. It passes—once more you are yourself. Trivialities reappear. Another insane, unbearable pang... And yet another breathing spell with its tiny but insistent daily cares, its humor and its griefs...

And in that horrible process in which so many die, new human beings are born. For no one who has been through war will ever be quite the same person again.

R.L.

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