

CHAPTER 1

Before the Havoc

THE TOWN of my childhood was Otwock, pronounced ‘Otvotsk,’ situated some thirty kilometres south of Warsaw. We lived in the middle house of three which stood together in a large, fenced, woodland plot where pine trees kept company with chestnuts and limes, where birch trees towered over acacias.

The villa was only ten or fifteen minutes’ walk from the railway station. You passed quiet, sleepy streets, cobbled or sandy, with paved footpaths planted with trees, and cars were seldom seen. Even much later, in the late 1930s, when I became an expert in such matters, the town—for all its 30,000 inhabitants—could boast of only three taxis and perhaps a dozen private motor cars.

Should you not feel like walking, you could hire a *dorożka*, a horse-drawn cab, one of the many which waited at the station, the drivers eager for your custom.

You gave the driver our address, Aleja Kościuszki no. 1, and the *dorożka* deposited you by the wooden gate of the villa. From the gate, a gravelled path with borders filled with flowers took you to the cream-painted clapboard bungalow divided into two flats. We lived in the back flat and the path passed between the bungalow on your left and the large multicoloured flower borders on your right. On a June morning the fragrance of the tree balm mingled with the scent of the flowerbeds and the sweet smell of the freshly scythed lawns.

During my childhood Otwock was a peculiar town, a health resort specialising in the treatment of diseases of the lungs, of which the main one was tuberculosis. In addition to its 30,000 permanent inhabitants and some 10,000 all-year-round patients, its population would be doubled in the summer by holidaymakers coming from the nearby capital city of Warsaw to take the famous Otwock air.

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Otwock air was very refreshing. It was said to have a very high ozone content. 'Here you can breathe,' were the first words exchanged by holidaymakers getting out of the train in the smoke-filled Otwock railway station. The Otwock soil was sandy, its landscape flat and its wooden houses, villas, boarding houses known as *pensions*, sanatoria and hospitals were scattered in pine woods. It was the Otwock pine which had been credited with producing ozone in preference to 'ordinary' oxygen given off by 'ordinary' trees. This fact was discovered by Dr J.M. Geisler* who had become 'the father of Otwock as the health resort.' Now, as every chemistry student knows, one molecule of ozone contains three atoms of oxygen, as against two such atoms per molecule of oxygen in ordinary air. This had to be good for patients with diseased lungs who didn't get sufficient oxygen. Simplistic reasoning? Perhaps, but nevertheless at least some of the Otwock patients got better.

Until the advent of anti-tuberculous drugs after the Second World War, TB was a veritable scourge, comparable to syphilis and leprosy in earlier years. It could affect almost every organ of the body, but in humans it had a special predilection for the lungs. The disease struck mainly young people, but no age group was exempt. It was a serious economic strain on the family and on the state. It had a high mortality rate, but usually the consumptive took a long time dying. For some reason a proportion of the patients survived, and apparently the chances of survival were better in such health resorts as Davos, in Switzerland, and Otwock, in Poland. Of the two, Otwock was much more affordable.

The mainstays of treatment of tuberculosis in Otwock were rest and diet. The Otwock cuisine had a character of its own, its main ingredient was fat: butter, cream, sour cream, eggs, fat poultry, rich soups, cream-laden cakes. Food was meant to be 'nutritious'; moderate obesity was 'good'; 'Sugar makes you stronger' was the slogan of the day, sanctioned by medical authorities; and 'The thin man dies before the fat man loses weight,' was the wisdom of the masses. Cholesterol levels must have been sky-high, but this was still an unrecognised problem. In tuberculosis, progress of the disease was marked by loss of weight, while improvement was heralded by weight gain. A fattening diet seemed, therefore, just the thing.

* *Zarys Dziejów Miasta Otwocka (An Outline of the History of Otwock)*, Otwock, 1996, page 7.

My father was a physician who specialised in the treatment of tuberculosis in children and young adults. He was a warm, compassionate man, popular with patients of all ages. Over the years he had built up a large practice. He saw patients in his office in our house from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Monday to Saturday, and in the mornings only on Sunday. Between the end of the morning session and the family lunch, served at 3 p.m., he made his home visits.

My earliest memory of family life was the daily dinner. We would all sit round the table, Father, Mother, my older brother, Jurek, I and whoever else happened to be staying in our hospitable home. After dessert, Father would half-stand. 'Who is going to tuck me in today?' he would ask. Without waiting for the volunteer, he would count us out pointing to each diner in turn: eeny, meeny, miny, mo (the Polish ditty was *entliczek, pętliczek, czerwony stoliczek*, equally mysterious as its English equivalent). Somehow the 'mo' always came when his finger pointed at me. I would have been very disappointed if it hadn't, but this never happened. Affecting surprise, but up in a flash, I would follow Father to my parents' bedroom. There he would lie down on the sofa and it was my job to cover him with a woollen rug and kiss him on the cheek. An hour later, Olesia, our maid, would call me to the kitchen and hand me a cup of strong black coffee to take to Father. He used to say: 'Unless I have my coffee, the first patient wastes his money.' In those days the majority of medical practices were private. In pre-war Poland, the poorer people had access to the centrally funded Kasa Chorych (a network of dispensaries for the poor), and to institutions supported by various Polish and Jewish charities to which doctors gave their time without payment. My father was one of the Kasa Chorych organisers after the First World War.

'Anyway,' he would say to me when I was a little older, 'forty per cent of my patients can't spare the money for doctors' fees. Often enough, God knows, I have to give them several zlotys for the prescription. Remember, Stefanku, provided that sixty per cent of your patients pay your bills, you make a comfortable living.' I loved my father. I always wanted to follow in his footsteps. In fact, it had never occurred to me to be anything but a doctor.

When I was about five or six, we moved to the ground-floor flat of another house on the same private estate. The flat was much bigger and I had a room of my own, next to my brother's. I don't remember much about the flat, except that in the winter my brother and I played football

in the long corridor and that once a week, usually on Friday, a big fish—either a pike or a carp—swam in the bath, awaiting execution. Later in the day Olesia would chop its head off and the headless body would jump about on the kitchen table. I used to watch the execution with fascination. Once, my brother, who usually avoided the kitchen, saw the headless body dance on the floor and vowed never, ever to eat fish again.

In the spring of 1936, before my eleventh birthday, we moved a couple of hundred yards up the street to our newly built house at Aleja Kościuszki no. 6a, at the corner of Szopena Street. My father had bought the plot of land a year or two earlier after a fire had destroyed the wooden villa; the blackened timbers still showed through the undergrowth. The plot was half a *morga* (about four-fifths of an acre) in size and, when finished, our house was the most modern and the most spacious private villa in Otwock. It had eleven rooms on two levels, including my father's surgery, the waiting room, and Mother's bacteriological laboratory. At the back of the house there was a conservatory, its walls consisting of large glass panels which were removed for the summer, and its flat roof served as the first-floor terrace.

The plot had a little history associated with it. In the earlier part of the century the original house was a *pension* and one of the holidaymakers spending the summer of 1915 there was Józef Piłsudski. Piłsudski later became the liberator of Poland and its prime minister, then its benevolent dictator, idol and national hero. When he had bought the plot, Father offered a corner of it to the town council for a Piłsudski monument. The monument had been ceremoniously unveiled on 11 November 1938, Independence Day. It was a rough granite obelisk, over two metres high, with a bas-relief of Marshal Piłsudski's head and a carved inscription. From then on all national celebrations were supposed to take place in front of our house, but we were away when the first parade took place on 3 May 1939, and then the war started and there were no more celebrations.

There was another monument in Otwock and that was the monument of Kościuszko, an eighteenth-century Polish national hero and a general of the American Revolutionary Army. It comprised a cream-coloured pedestal with a bust of the great man. The two monuments had a chequered history. During the Second World War, when Poland was under German occupation, the Kościuszko statue was blown up by the Germans in retaliation for the destruction by the Resistance of some

Nazi emblems in front of the local German police authority. The Piłsudski monument survived the war, but when I visited Otwock in the early 1960s—by which time Poland was a Soviet satellite—it lay on its side, overgrown and neglected. On my subsequent visits to Otwock in the 1970s and 1980s, it was nowhere to be seen; mysteriously, the obelisk had disappeared. In the early 1990s, when Poland once more regained its independence, the monument reappeared in its rightful place.

My mother had a degree in biology, or natural sciences as it used to be called, and she specialised in medical bacteriology and clinical pathology. For many years she worked in the State Institute of Hygiene in Warsaw, but in the new house she ran her own clinico-bacteriological laboratory. The room was full of wonders: there were instruments made of brass and stainless steel, glassware in all shapes and sizes and bottles labelled ‘poison.’ By the age of eleven, I was—at least in my own eyes—an expert operator of the microscope, the polarimeter, the centrifuge and the steriliser. I spent hours enthralled by the microscope, examining drops of water, my own blood and my mother’s preparations of various cocci and bacilli, stained different colours. In contrast, Father’s X-ray equipment, which was the first in private hands in Otwock and had moved with us from the old house, remained forever taboo.

The land around the villa had rapidly become a much-cherished garden, lovingly tended by my parents and by Antoni, our gardener-cum-coachman. Antoni, his wife, who helped with the housework, and their small daughter lived in the lodge that Father had built at the back of the garden. Next to the lodge was the stable which housed our pale chestnut horse, whose job it was to take Father on his rounds all over the town and sometimes to outlying estates, villas and *pensions* in our *bryczka* (an open carriage). On Sundays and during school holidays I would accompany Father, and sometimes Antoni would give me the reins. Occasionally, we would leave Antoni behind and I would take my father on his rounds.

There was one part of Otwock which was very different from the rest. This was *miasteczko*, or little town, the poor Jewish quarter on the west side of the railway line, separated from it by a large, open, market area. Narrow streets, which were sandy, or at best cobbled, led to the noisy and smelly area, with its semi-derelict houses which were terribly overcrowded, crooked walls and very little vegetation, only an occasional stunted tree. Here people talked in Yiddish, which I did not understand,

or in heavily accented Polish. They were very friendly to us and held Father in high esteem. Most of his patients who could not and did not pay their bills lived here. Under the German occupation the area became the Otwock Jewish ghetto and almost all its inhabitants were murdered by the Nazis.

I always had a book to read while waiting for my father outside the patient's house, but when it was Antoni driving, and should he be in the mood, instead of reading I would listen entranced to Antoni's often funny and sometimes scary stories. They were crowded with saints, devils, ghosts, all kinds of supernatural creatures, and full of very vividly described facts of life.

At the time schools didn't provide sex education. Also, generally speaking, my parents' generation were either unwilling or could not bring themselves to talk to their children about matters of sex. The subject was taboo. Not among adults, of course, but *pas devant les enfants*. Consequently, I had to supplement my sex education, as provided by Antoni, by my own efforts.

I soon discovered that in the evenings when my parents and Jurek were out and Olesia was totally wrapped up in a trashy novel in her kitchen alcove, I could sneak into my father's office and have the run of his library. Left on my own, I would be engrossed in *Vita Sexualis*, or some such book. The title was often in Latin but the text was in Polish and the language of the drawings was, of course, universal. The text was neither as explicit nor as colourful as Antoni's 'lessons' but, in a way, it was easier to understand; it made more sense to me.

In late 1936 the situation became a little easier when Olesia acquired a boyfriend, a local policeman, who absorbed her attention even more completely than her trashy novels had previously done.

Also by then, Jurek, my brother, had been sent to university abroad and this left me with the run of the house.

Jurek, diminutive for Jerzy, the Polish equivalent of George, was six years older than me and, apart from having the same parents, we did not have much in common. When I was little Jurek was very protective of me, but later I often felt his heavy hand when nobody was looking. I was certainly not an angel, so perhaps I deserved it.

It would probably be true to say that while I was Father's favourite, Jurek was Mother's. This fairly usual problem was magnified by our complicated family circumstances.

My father was born in 1890 in Płock, while my mother was born in 1889 in Mława. At that time Poland did not exist as an independent country and the part of Poland where they had lived was reigned over by the Tsar of Russia. Father had obtained his medical degree in Moscow in 1914, at the start of the First World War, and was almost immediately drafted into the Russian Army. Holding the rank of *shtabs-kapitan* (junior captain), he served as the medical officer for an artillery division. Mother studied natural sciences at the University of Warsaw which, because of the war, had been evacuated to Kharkov, in the Ukraine. My parents met at university and were married in 1915. In 1917, at the time of the Russian Revolution, they escaped back to Poland.

The country soon regained its independence and my father joined the Polish Army. It was the time of the Polish–Bolshevik war and my father stayed in the army until 1922.

Jurek was born on 2 June 1919, and consequently, for the first three years of his life, he had known Father only as somebody who periodically invaded his home and displaced him for a day or two as the centre of Mother’s attention. Not surprisingly, Father’s relationship with Jurek had never been good.

After my father’s demobilisation, my parents settled in Łódź, a big industrial town west of Warsaw. There my father contracted—probably from a patient—tuberculosis of the larynx. There was no real prospect of a cure. On the advice of his superiors Father went to Berlin, where some bold surgeons had tried to eradicate the disease by excision or cauterisation of the diseased tissue, but the price of this experimental treatment was the loss of voice. There, while already strapped in the chair, he changed his mind and decided on a more conservative treatment.

So my parents moved to Otwock, where my father became a patient. To give his larynx a complete rest he did not speak for two years. He spent his days in a deckchair, wrapped in a rug. He was forever writing notes to Mother and he read voraciously; hence our enormous library, most of which gathered dust in the loft. In 1924, after two years of this treatment, he went to Berlin once more. The check-up revealed no trace of the disease, and until the Second World War Father had no serious health problems.

Due to the need to keep Jurek away from Father because of the fear of contagion, my brother had only minimal ‘paternal care.’ Also, soon after Father’s recovery, the situation was further complicated by my

arrival in 1925, and the inevitable shift of our parents' attention. It was all very unsatisfactory from poor Jurek's point of view.

Jurek obtained his *matura*, or high-school certificate, in 1935 at the young age of sixteen, instead of the more usual eighteen. There was no doubt that the next step would be university—in our social circle a university degree was *de rigueur*. Father wanted Jurek to study medicine, but this very fact was enough to put Jurek off. He enrolled at Warsaw University, in the Department of Mathematics. One day, in the winter, he returned home much earlier than usual and had a heated discussion with Father behind locked doors.

Later the same day Father called me to his study. 'Jurek is adamant that he is not going back to Warsaw University. Members of the right-wing students' association blocked the university's entrance to those of Semitic appearance. They did not stop him, but some of his friends were told to go to the left side of the lecture theatre. "Left side for the leftists, communists and Jews," they shouted. Jurek's friends refused to give in and to avoid a fight they left the lecture hall. He left in sympathy.'

Father stopped, sighed deeply, got up and turned to the window with his back to me. 'You know,' he continued, 'what is happening in Germany. I have noticed that you have become an avid newspaper reader. Good. Good. It's getting very depressing, isn't it? Not what we fought for in the war. No, not at all. It looks as if our nationalists want to follow in the footsteps of Hitler and his Brown Shirts. I am going to send Jurek abroad, maybe to England or France. I don't know where and how yet. He wants to study industrial chemistry, he also mentioned shipbuilding in Italy, but he must make up his own mind. Aunt Lola has been living in Paris for some ten years now. She has been writing about the situation to Mother and she has offered to have Jurek to stay. I don't know. I would have to find a way of sending money abroad to him and there are restrictions in place.' He stopped and returned to his chair. His usually kind face was now stern, his brows knitted tightly together in concentration, his lips—drawn to two thin lines—had almost disappeared. Then he relaxed, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

'As soon as Jurek has gone,' he said, 'we will have to start thinking about you, Stefanku. It may be wise for you too to go to a boarding school abroad as soon as you get your *gimnazjum* [secondary school] certificate. Now, let me see... that will be in 1940, won't it? You will be only fifteen. Mother won't like it. We shall see. I hope peace will last that long.'

A pity that they don't teach you English at the *gimnazjum*. You must work hard on your French, but you do that anyway, don't you?' It wasn't that I was working particularly hard, I just did well at school without too much effort.

In September 1936, soon after Jurek's departure abroad, I entered the first form of the Otwock *gimnazjum*. Father's calculation was right: four years at the *gimnazjum* would take me to 1940. Then two years at the *lyceum* (college) and in September 1942, at the age of seventeen, I should get my *matura* and be ready to enrol at a university—faculty of medicine, of course.

The next three years were as idyllic as one could wish. Or perhaps they became so in retrospect. We continued to live well. As far as I knew my parents had no financial worries; ours was a prosperous middle-class life. Except for their short trips abroad once a year, my parents were always there for me. Olesia, our maid of many years' standing, was there and Antoni and his wife were there.

For me, the highlight of those years was a cruise in May 1939. It was my first ever trip abroad. After much deliberation my parents narrowed the choice to one of the two Polish sister ships, luxury liners. *Pilsudski* was going in May to the 'southern sun,' while *Batory* was scheduled to go in August to New York for the World Exhibition. As August was my father's busiest month in his practice, we went in May to the southern sun. My teachers saw no reason why I should not be given an opportunity to broaden my mind by travel and agreed to give me a month's leave from school. The fact that ours was a private school and that my father was our school doctor probably helped. It was all very exciting.

We left from Gdynia and went through the Kiel Canal into the North Sea, then through the English Channel and the Straits of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean. We visited Lisbon, Naples, Palermo, Tripoli and Ceuta. We returned to Gdynia towards the end of May. The trip was the greatest adventure of my childhood. It made me a seasoned traveller, at least in Otwock. Nobody I knew, even among the adults, had had a similar experience.



One interesting point: should my parents have opted for the New York cruise, our lives would have taken a very different path. The liner *Batory* was still in New York when the war started. The passengers spent

the war in the USA and most of them settled there permanently after the war.



I am not sure where to place the end of my childhood. On 18 June 1939 I felt very grown up; it was my fourteenth birthday and instead of arranging yet another children's party, my parents took me to the theatre. I was no stranger to the theatre, because although there was no permanent theatre in Otwock, the centre of Warsaw with its many excellent theatres—Wielki, Polski, Mały, Letni and Kameralny among them—was only half an hour away, and was easily reached by frequent and comfortable electric trains. About once a month I went to a matinée either with my mother, or with one of my many aunts, or with the school. Warsaw theatres had about half-a-dozen special performances for schools during the academic year. We saw all kinds of classical and modern plays by Polish and foreign playwrights.

On this particular day we were not going to any old theatre; we were going to the AliBaba, a review theatre, a kind of sophisticated music hall. Also, it was to be the evening performance. I became very impatient when, in my judgement, it was time to start on our way. Antoni was not yet ready to take us to the station. What was happening? At my most debonair, I had been ready and waiting for over an hour. I wore my white woollen trousers, a white shirt, a blue silk tie and my new navy-blue school blazer. I felt really grown up. But we were running late, very late. I could not stand the suspense any longer so I ran to the lodge and found Antoni in the stable grooming the horse. A cigarette hung unlit from his lip—Kasztan (the chestnut) did not like smoke.

'We are going to miss the train! We are late! We will be late for the theatre!'

'I ain't going nowhere,' Antoni shrugged his shoulders. 'I haven't been told nothing.' His shoulders popped up and down again.

I ran back to the house. I was making for the stairs and my parents' bedroom when an unexpected sight caught my eye. Olesia was holding the wide, heavy oak front door open and there, outside the gate, was a car. I knew that car; I had travelled in it before. It was the dark-green Buick limousine belonging to my parents' friends, the Skotnickis. Mr Skotnicki was at the wheel and his wife was in the passenger seat. To me a car, any car, had been an object of long-suppressed envy. Father could

afford a car, but he did not want to own one. ‘Jurek will break his neck on his first trip back,’ he would say. And perhaps a motor-car was not a practical means of travel on the cobbled or sandy streets of Otwock.

I looked up. My parents—Father in his dinner jacket, Mother in a black evening dress—were coming down the stairs. An hour later, with the Skotnickis, we were in the theatre.

The foyer and the street outside the theatre were packed with adults. I looked around and thought how different it was from the matinée. In those days people would dress up for the evening performance. Most men sported either dinner jackets or dark lounge suits, many ladies wore long dresses. A boy standing near me was also wearing a school blazer, but the red school badge on his left sleeve and the thin red trimmings on his blazer cuffs indicated a *lyceum* (equivalent of the last two years of secondary school) pupil. He was thus at least two or three years older than me. He was also much taller than me and he was arm in arm with a slim brunette. Perhaps in two or three years that might be me.

The bell sounded and we went to our seats in the stalls. The AliBaba had only a small auditorium, but it was the most renowned of the Warsaw review theatres. The current review was called *Orzeł czy Rzeszka*. It was a mixture of satirical poems, political sketches, jokes by the famous *compère*, Krukowski, bits of music, risqué playlets and cabaret. I still remember the look of surprise on my mother’s face when I had no problem in understanding the most risqué jokes, innuendoes and situations. Even the title of the review was a double entendre: the Polish meant ‘Head or Tails,’ but the addition of one letter changed the meaning to ‘Polish Eagle or The Reich.’

After the theatre we went to the Bristol Hotel restaurant for my first late-night meal out. A liveried doorman opened the door of the Buick. I remember that the night was warm, the sky studded with stars.

The light-blue dining room was crowded. People, many in dinner jackets, sat at tables that were covered with white starched tablecloths and they were waited upon by other men in dinner jackets, distinguishable from the diners only by the fact that they moved about very quickly. Two waiters guided us to a table and held the chairs out first for the ladies, then for the men and lastly for me. One of them took our orders, another brought the list of vodkas and wines.

I felt like an adult and was being treated as such. Having been a regular reader of daily newspapers, I was up to taking part in serious

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conversation. Or maybe I was allowed to have my say out of kindness to the birthday boy—but I was given only one vodka.

This was a time of rapidly increasing tension in Europe. Neither my parents nor their friends doubted that the war was just around the corner. ‘But we have a non-aggression treaty with Germany,’ I objected. ‘Don’t we?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Skotnicki, ‘but treaties have never yet stopped them from attacking their neighbours at the time of their choosing.’

Father was more optimistic. ‘With France and now also England on our side,’ he said, referring to the recent English guarantee of Polish frontiers, ‘we ought to be all right, even if they do attack.’

‘What about the Russians?’ said Mother.

‘We also have a non-aggression treaty with them,’ I said. ‘We were discussing it at school last week during the Latin lesson. *Pacta servanda sunt*, and all that . . . *Coniugatio periphrastica passiva*,’ I added for no obvious reason. Conscious of showing off, I blushed and laughed at the same time. It must be the vodka, I thought.

‘It is no laughing matter,’ Mr Skotnicki sternly told me off. ‘Sooner or later Hitler and Stalin will work hand in hand,’ he prophesied.

Now everybody laughed. ‘Incompatible ideologies. Impossible!’ said Father.

Others agreed: ‘Preposterous . . . Out of the question.’

‘I hope that you are right, but I wouldn’t bet on it,’ said Mr Skotnicki.

I was puzzled by what Mr Skotnicki was saying and by the vehemence with which he said it. He was well connected in Warsaw, he had friends in government circles, perhaps he knew something the others didn’t. But it was all so different from what the papers were saying: OUR CAVALRY SHALL REACH BERLIN . . . WE SHALL WATER OUR HORSES IN THE RIVER SPREE. I was mystified.