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## CHAPTER 1

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# Before the War

First they killed my brother Moshe. . . .

Then they killed my father. . . .

Then they killed my brother Bunio. . . .

Then they killed my brother Zachary. . . .

Then they killed my last brother, Herzl.

Only my mother and I were left. I vowed that I would never let them kill her, that I would protect my mother from the Nazis and their collaborators for as long as I lived.

Love and hate were what motivated my young mind and heart. Love for my dear, gentle mother—and hate for the cruel murderers.

And this is my story.

In 1938, there were eighteen thousand Jewish people in our Polish city of Buczacz, nearly one-third of the total population. Some of the more orthodox Jews wore the classic black frock coats and fur hats, while others dressed just like the rest of the residents and were largely well-integrated into the community.

We had many things to be proud of: the Hebrew schools, the Talmud Torah house, and our joy and pride, the Great

Synagogue. It was a very impressive large structure with tall stained-glass windows. It had a small synagogue attached to one side, giving the impression of a father and son standing there proudly. The small synagogue was used for daily prayers, and the large synagogue for the Sabbath and the rest of the holidays.

I was quite familiar with the synagogue, since my older brother Bunio sang in the choir. We had a handsome young rabbi with a beautiful wife, and both were accomplished violinists. The rabbi chose his choir from among the students with good voices who attended Mr. Kofler's Hebrew school. My brother Bunio, who was an alto, was selected, and so was his friend David, who was a soprano. They were both soloists during the High Holiday prayers. I often listened to their rehearsals, sitting in the semi-darkness of the balcony, where the ladies prayed. My brother's voice would reach into the depth of my soul and carry me off into the beauty of its words and melody.

It was in this synagogue that Bunio had his Bar Mitzvah. Bunio's beautiful voice was a sensation. Of course Mama and I had to watch from upstairs, but we could see and hear everything. My youngest brother, Herzl, saved us some of the candies that were thrown at the Bar Mitzvah boy. We had a kiddush at the synagogue, a reception at home, and my mother prepared the midday meal for the students of the Beth Hamidrash—the house of Jewish studies. It was a beautiful day.

Part of being Jewish in Poland was learning to live with anti-Semitism. As a young child I had not encountered Jew-haters, partly because I was born in the remote mountains and also because my parents and older brothers were so protective. I didn't classify my friends as Jewish or Gentile, although I knew there was a difference between Judaism and Christianity. Life was pretty good, and we were happy—until the first shocking act of anti-Semitism hit our family.

It happened to my oldest brother, Zachary, in May of

1938. He was a student at the conservatory of music in Lvov and was on his way to school, violin case in hand, when a gang of five Polish boys began following him. They were Polish university students. "How about a little music, Jew-boy?" one of them asked. The others laughed. Zachary kept on walking, his eyes looking straight ahead, his fist clenching tighter around the handle of the case.

"What's the matter, *Zhid* [Jew]," another boy said. "Are you deaf or something?"

"How can he play the violin if he is deaf?" said another.

"Come on, *Zhid*, let's hear you play."

At that point my brother stopped. Turning around, he appraised the situation. Two of the boys were as tall as he; the others were shorter but stockier. They were all students in school uniforms. "Please, let me go in peace," Zachary said to them.

The boys surrounded him. "Not until you play us a song." One of the boys pushed him back roughly; another reached out and snatched away the violin case. My brother lunged toward him, but two others caught him and threw him against a wall, holding his arms firmly. A boy opened the case, took out the violin and bow, and began to make sawing noises on the instrument while the others laughed. "Well, it's no wonder you wouldn't play for us," he said. "This thing isn't worth anything." With that he bent over and smashed the violin against the pavement. With a cry Zachary broke free and threw himself forward, nearly reaching the boy. He was stopped by a swift kick in the stomach, which doubled him over with pain and took away his breath. That was when the boys fell upon him, kicking and punching. They held him by the hair and slammed his head against the pavement. They kicked him in the ribs, took turns holding his arms so the others could beat him, and finally left him there in the street, his broken violin a few feet away. He was helped by a Jewish music student who brought him back to his room.

Zachary came home to Buczacz by train with his wounds still fresh. I will never forget how my father paced back and

forth as my mother examined Zachary and bandaged him. We were all there in the kitchen, all except for Bunio, who had choir practice and would be home later. I thought of him there at the synagogue, singing his heart out, not knowing his older brother had been beaten and humiliated.

The first time I really became aware of Germany and what was going on in Europe was when I went to get my father at Horovitz's candy store, where he was engaged in a game of billiards in the back room. I was waiting for him while sitting in a chair and eating an ice cream cone. Nearby, two men were smoking and talking. I did not pay much attention at first, but the word "war" caught my attention. I knew from history books about wars, and I had seen Papa's medal for bravery, which he had earned as an Austrian officer in the First World War. I also knew that wars could be terrible. One of the men insisted that Germany was going to move east no matter what, and there was going to be a war. Austria had already been invaded and Poland was going to be next, he continued. But the other man was more optimistic, saying that England was not going to let this happen. They kept mentioning other countries I had studied in my geography class, and suddenly the maps I had drawn seemed more real and threatening. I was loyal to my country and did not want anything to happen to it.

On the way home I mentioned this conversation to my father and his face became very sad. I knew his parents were in Austria and so were many of his friends. I realized suddenly that there was a lot going on that we children did not know and that I, at the age of eight, was too young to understand. Yet, from that day on I kept asking questions, and the answers I got frightened me.

But life had to go on, including school and Hebrew classes, and homework and friends, so I let things go; but the seed of worry was planted in my mind, and it grew. During the summer of 1938, which I spent at my uncle's home in Stanislavov where he practiced medicine, I tried to find out what was going on from my friend Milek, but he

could not explain things to me. He did not know too much himself. My uncle was very busy that summer caring for his sick patients, and, as usual, he was very loving and wanted me to have a good time. He probably knew in his heart that the war would soon begin.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# Life Under the Russians

Poland will never forget the year 1939. Hitler had annexed Austria in 1938 and part of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939, without encountering resistance. Then, on September 1, Germany attacked Poland. The Poles fought bravely but were no match for the Germans, and within a couple of weeks the Polish army was defeated. Germany signed a peace treaty with Russia, and Hitler and Stalin divided Poland between them. East Poland, where we lived, was invaded by the Russians on September 17, 1939.

Before the Russians actually entered our city, cars carrying Polish army officers and their families traveled through our city for days on their way to the Romanian border. They were fleeing from the Germans, whose air force was bombing cities and civilians. Sometimes they would stop their cars for a rest, and I would have a chance to watch them. They looked very tired and sad, but the Polish pride and carriage was still there; even defeat could not take that away.

And then one day the traffic stopped, and an unusual hush fell over the city. There was an expectancy in the air and a general nervousness generated by the adults. We children

were acutely aware that something very important was going to happen. We knew from the radio that Poland was losing the war with Germany, and the word "Russia" was heard often in our parents' conversations.

Strangers dressed in unfamiliar styles of clothing appeared on the streets. They were refugees from Germany, the majority of them Jewish. My parents were busy trying to find homes for them. My older brothers stayed home most of the time, and they explained the political situation to me. I heard about the Russian revolution and what Red Russia stood for. Before I had a chance to digest this information, the Russians entered Buczacz. A small group of people from our city came down the main street carrying red flags. Behind them was a cannon pulled by two horses followed by several soldiers.

I had expected a tremendous invasion. Surely, I thought, such a small army could not hurt us badly. But the following day the army trucks came, and within a few days the streets were filled with soldiers. They were everywhere, and to my surprise they were friendly.

The stores reopened and the soldiers flooded them. They bought everything in sight and paid with rubles (Russian currency). The soldiers were most interested in leather goods. My friend's father had a shoestore on the Hala Targova, and within two days his store was completely empty. What puzzled me most was how the soldiers bought the boots without trying them on. One day my friend and I watched in amazement as they left the shops carrying piles of big boxes that almost completely covered their faces. When they saw us, they put down their purchases and gave us each a small red enamel star, the same as the larger stars they wore pinned to their hats. They smiled and seemed quite likable. From their behavior it was clear that they intended to stay for a long time, if not forever, and they were working very hard to win the people's approval—especially that of the children.

School reopened for a new academic year. Russian teachers came to teach, and the major languages became

Russian and Ukrainian. German was also taught, perhaps in honor of the Russian-German treaty. Our Polish teachers now had to learn Russian and Ukrainian in order to teach.

I will never forget our first day at school. I had my first shock when I entered our classroom and saw that the Madonna and Child were removed from their customary spot, replaced with pictures of two men. One, we were told, was Lenin and the other Stalin. They looked down on us very sternly, which I didn't like at all. I was deeply offended and hurt by this turn of events. Even though I was Jewish, I had a deep respect for the religion of my friends and felt their pain and disappointment. Luckily though, the churches and the synagogues remained open. Had they been closed, the people would have been enraged, and I don't know what would have happened.

So far we had not suffered from religious deprivation. However, we soon suffered from being classified as capitalists. A businessman was considered an enemy of the Soviet Union and was very soon relieved of his business and merchandise. Those who did not have businesses but were known as businessmen were asked to donate merchandise—clothing mainly—because the Russians assumed that their merchandise was kept at home. My father's fabric business in Bielsko, now under German occupation, was lost. He was asked to donate his samples, which he did.

Most of us, with the exception of a few, returned to our classrooms. Among the missing was a very fine boy and good student, Jezek Janowski, whose father had been head of the Polish police. What upset us the most was the absence of a lovely girl and my good friend, Wisia Urbanska. Both her parents were teachers. Her mother taught in our school, and her father was a high school math teacher.

One day I came home from school very upset. I couldn't eat my dinner, and instead of doing my homework I just sat staring at the pages. My mother noticed my mood and, gently taking my hands, pulled me to my feet and asked me to follow her. We sat down on the grass in the backyard and



Mama, looking straight into my eyes, asked, "Alicia, dear, what is bothering you?"

I lowered my eyes, not wanting my mother to see the tears that were gathering there.

"I am frightened, Mama. My school friends are disappearing. Jezek Janowski has been missing for several days, and now Wisia and her mother have not come to school. There is a rumor going around that they have been taken away. Are they going to take us away too? Please tell me, Mama."

"Alicia, please look at me. I will try to explain the situation to you," my mother said softly.

"The rumors you have heard are true. The Russians are deporting former Polish government officials, Jewish refugees from Germany, and both Jewish and Gentile businessmen.

"Yes, we could be deported too," Mama added almost in a whisper. "But your uncle in Stanislavov, whose medical specialty is important to the Russians, is taking care of our safety, and the rest is up to God."

"But where are they being deported to, and when will they return to their homes?" I asked.

"We have heard that they are being taken to Siberia, and I don't know if they will ever return. We have to hope that they will."

Even though my schoolmates and I worried over who would be missing next, we soon found ourselves very busy with little time to think. We had challenges before us. We had to learn new languages—Russian, Ukrainian, Latin, and German—in order to read the hundreds of handwritten pages the teachers gave us instead of books.

In addition to school we continued with our Hebrew lessons. We had to hide our teacher, Dr. Ferenhoff. Although he was given the title of rabbi and was considered a man of religion by the Russian authorities, he was not permitted to keep his school open to teach. Therefore, the Jewish parents ran an underground school, moving Dr.

Ferenhoff from home to home. Even though we had to crowd around one table, hitting one another's elbows as we wrote, we enjoyed our studies and tried hard to please our teacher. We knew instinctively that he would be in danger if he were found to be teaching us.

My fears lessened somewhat when Zachary was given a permit to return to the conservatory in Lvov. Then to my great surprise my father was assigned to manage a chinaware store. I was very happy to see my father working, and I hoped this meant that we would not be sent to Siberia.

Bunio, Moshe, and Herzl attended the boys' school on Kolejova Street. As we began to understand the Russian language, the teachers and the government officials started a serious campaign to indoctrinate us into the Soviet system. The Russian-language teacher was always quoting things that Stalin had said. He, the teacher said, was the father of all children, and he commanded us to learn, and learn, and learn. I did not believe such stories. I had a father at home; besides, I did not like this man hanging in the place of the Madonna.

Actually life under Russian rule was not unpleasant. As the end of the school year approached, I was expecting all A's on my report card, which pleased me greatly. I brought my drawings to the art exhibit in the high school and won several prizes for my watercolors of mountain people and their surroundings. My notebook of flowers and leaves was also exhibited and was greatly admired by my classmates.

I was looking forward to the summer vacation with great anticipation. Zachary would be home and I would be able to follow him around again. I would go swimming in the river Stripa and explore the Fador, the meadowland that adjoined our city. Part of the time I promised to spend with a new classmate, Tunia, who had moved to Buczacz from nearby Tlusty. I had promised to help her with her Russian studies. When summer finally came, it met all my expectations and the time passed quickly.

The Russians were very interested in promoting their educational system and, at the beginning of the second

school year, they began to encourage local students to attend school in the Soviet Union. This could be done now because all of us had become sufficiently fluent in the Russian language.

My second oldest brother, Moshe, had always been a good student and, lured by the opportunity for a better education, asked my parents if he might be allowed to study in Leningrad. Since Moshe had already studied away from home before the war had started, he knew how to take care of himself. Because of this and his persistence, he was granted permission.

So Moshe went off to Leningrad. Months went by. We sent him mail constantly, and my mother was forever going down to the post with packages of home-baked goodies. Moshe wrote back frequently at first; then his letters began arriving monthly, almost as though on a regular schedule. Something was strange about those later letters. While they were written in his hand, they didn't sound like my brother. They were cold, almost robotlike, and every letter praised the Soviet school system.

My parents became increasingly alarmed with each new letter. What was happening to their son? They wrote, asking questions that were never answered. There was no mention of his ever getting the cookies Mother had sent. Suddenly it was as though she had a stranger for a son.

Finally they began suggesting he come home, but he scorned the idea and insisted on staying in Leningrad. My father would have loved to go to Russia and personally bring Moshe home, but because our own situation was tenuous at best and traveling restrictions were rigid, it was impossible.

And then it happened! Moshe came home. I remember the night well. It was early morning, about two or three A.M. I did not hear the pounding on the front door, although others did. I awoke to footsteps running past my room and down the stairs. Then I heard my mother cry out. For a moment I remained under my covers, but then curiosity and concern for my mother drove me out. As I reached the top

of the stairs, I saw all of my family gathered around my father, who held Moshe in a tight embrace.

My brother looked ghastly. Always a slender boy, he was now gaunt and pale. Dark circles ringed his eyes, giving his face a ghoulish, almost skeletal appearance. He was sobbing, as was my mother. But it was the look on my father's face that struck me the most. He looked as though he were in terrible pain but dared not let it show. Although he did not weep, his eyes were red as he cradled his son's head against his chest and stroked Moshe's rumpled hair. Because my father had been unable to act, his son had had to suffer in this way. Poor Father, he loved us so much.

What Moshe told us about his experience in Russia explained all too well the bizarre contents of his letters. He had written them, it was true, but he and all the other students had been told what to say. Letters to and from home were screened carefully. Students were punished for any disparaging remarks made and were instructed to ignore inquiries about their living conditions.

He had been at school outside of Leningrad, where he and the other students were always hungry. Because of war preparations, there wasn't enough food; but the Russians didn't want the outside world to know. None of the students had had proper winter clothing, and packages from home were confiscated. The students were told that the packages would be distributed among the more needy Russians. All of Moshe's clothes were in tatters. In addition to their studies, which were grueling, all students had to work in nearby farms for the benefit of the state.

Finally my brother could bear it no longer. He had reached a point, he said, where if he didn't leave, he felt he would die. And so he schemed for weeks, waiting for the proper moment. When it came, out he went. For days he traveled, sometimes hitching a ride but mostly walking through woods and fields by night. He barely slept, so frightened was he of detection. And he had been able to bring only a little food along. The boy was near collapse; it was a miracle that he had been able to make it home.

Just before we went to sleep, Father told us to keep Moshe's return a secret until he could settle into life with us again. During those days Moshe slept a lot and ate ravenously. His color began to improve, and the circles under his eyes were starting to fade; but he was different from the boy who had left. He was jumpy and nervous. He didn't want to talk much, not even to Bunio, with whom he was very close.

Moshe had been home for about three weeks, when the Russian secret police came. I remember that they came late at night. The sound of their banging on the front door rang through the quiet house and awakened everyone. My mother told us children, Moshe as well, to stay upstairs; my father went down to talk to the police. They told him there was no real problem; they only wanted to talk to Moshe and hear his complaints about the school. They had received a notice from Leningrad that Moshe was missing. If students are unhappy in Russian schools, they said, they wanted to know why.

I couldn't judge how much time my father spent with the men, but after a while he came upstairs, had my brother get dressed, and the two of them went away with the police. I heard my father tell my mother, "We will be there only a few hours," as they left for the police station. She sent us all back to bed but waited up for Father's return.

I saw my father in the morning, and from his face and the look in his eyes I immediately knew that Moshe had not returned with him. I had to go to school even though I would rather have stayed home. I remembered what Father had said when Moshe got home—to keep everything normal. So reluctantly I left for school. When I got home I found out that Moshe had been taken to the Chortkov prison and that Father had followed him to Chortkov to wait until he was released.

Father was gone for four days, and when he came back Moshe was not with him. At the prison he had been told that Moshe was being kept until it could be decided how his case should be handled, whether or not he would be returned to

the school in Leningrad, whether he would be allowed to remain in Buczacz, and what disciplinary action, if any, would be taken.

"Why are they holding him?" I asked Bunio.

"It's because they don't want him talking," he said. "They don't want word to get around about how bad it is in Russia."

A month went by, then two, then three. My father was allowed to go to the prison about once a month to see my brother. After these visits he would report that Moshe looked well, that his spirits were high, and that he would be coming home soon, hopefully very soon. But after we children had gone to bed, he would tell my mother the truth about their son; that they were trying to make an example of him on orders from Leningrad, and that the local authorities couldn't change the orders.

Then one early morning a policeman came to our home. It was bad news, he said. Moshe had died suddenly. It looked as though food poisoning was the cause. Our family was in shock. We had been hoping for his release from prison every day, and now he was dead.

Father left immediately for Chortkov. We stayed home from school waiting for his return with my brother's body, but he came home alone. They wouldn't let him bring his son home. Moshe was buried in the prison cemetery. Father brought back the only possession my brother was allowed to have in prison—a chess set he had made from bread. As my father fingered the little nubs of dried bread that had served as my brother's pawns and rooks, his eyes grew teary. "The commandant told me how very sorry he was," he said, his voice filled with pain. "He said that had our son lived, he could have become a champion chess player."

A kind of darkness descended upon our home. It felt as though the sun had stopped shining and the world stood frozen. We followed the traditional seven days of mourning, the shiva. We sat on low stools. Papa and my brothers had their garments torn at the lapels. People came to visit and sit with us.

Zachary came home, but even his presence could not stop me from crying for my brother. I felt very guilty. Perhaps I should have loved him more. But I did truly love him. I remembered how he had once told me that he wanted to become a tree doctor.

“You mean a doctor like Uncle Kurtz?” I had asked.

Moshe burst out laughing. “Not like Uncle Kurtz; a tree doctor, a little like Grandpa Kurtz.”

“Grandpa is going to be surrounded by doctors, since I, too, want to be a doctor,” I said. Moshe patted my hand gently and smiled.

Now he was dead. I would never see him again. An emotion I couldn't even understand gripped me, and I couldn't stop crying.

My brother's death brought changes in my parents. Mama was very pale and was constantly wiping her eyes. She moved in kind of a trance and didn't answer us when we were talking to her. My heart ached for her, and I was very worried that she might get ill.

Papa looked thinner. He was not attentive to us the way he used to be, and the light in his beautiful blue eyes, the joyous sparkle that went with his laughter, disappeared. Moshe's death meant more than the loss of a son—it also made my parents realize that their lives were not their own to control, that they no longer had the power to protect their children. We had found out, as had many others, what life under Russian occupation could really mean.