

A Boy's Story *A Man's Memory*

Surviving the Holocaust

1933-1945

The gripping, true account
of one family's struggle to survive
the brutal intolerance of Nazi Germany

A True story by
Oskar Knoblauch

A Boy's Story—A Man's Memory
Surviving the Holocaust 1933-1945
Third Edition

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case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews.

In memory of my beloved wife Lila, my dear daughter Tracy,
my mother Ruzia and my father Leopold, my sister Ilse and her husband
Elek, my brother Siegmund, and also Aunt Itka, Uncle Szymon, and their
daughter, my dear cousin Rose.

Praise for A Boy's Story—A Man's Memory

“Knoblauch’s horrific struggle to survive the Nazi war against the Jews is frightening and inconceivable. His unique story through hell on earth will make you question and reflect not only on your personal tolerance and acceptance but also on the action and voice needed to never let this happen again.”

Jyll Harthun

Business Career Center Consultant, Arizona State University

“Oskar’s compelling story of survival, respect, and freedom is one that teaches young and old that the freedoms we have are to be treasured and respected. Oskar’s life story is one that reminds all of us that our life here on Earth is very precious. The invaluable message that my students and myself have all taken away from his horrific experience as documented in his book is that courage, tolerance, respect, and love will make us better human beings, and will teach us the life lesson that we should never take anything or anyone for granted.”

Debbie Cluff

Language Arts Teacher at Hillcrest Middle School

“*A Boy’s Story—A Man’s Memory* gives a different perspective on the horrors of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. I find his story of survival, resilience, and resourcefulness amazing!”

Michael D. Weltsch

PhD Adult Education

“I just finished your book. It was amazingly inspiring.”

Salli McCartin

Social Studies Teacher, Montessori School

“Some things in life defy words! I never cease to be amazed at the courage involved on the part of survivors and those who helped them. I think with your story, the thing that struck me is how, at any moment, your future could

have changed so drastically. Your life was so literally in the hands of others and your careful actions and decisions were so important. How perilous life was! Thank you for sharing those moments on paper.”

Amy Drake

Social Studies Teacher, Santan Junior High

“I had the privilege of speaking with Mr. Knoblauch prior to ever reading his book. In arranging to have Oskar speak to my 8th grade students, he explained to me how it has become a particular goal of his to “share his experience with our youth in order to preserve our future.” Profound words, indeed. The moment his book, *A Boy’s Story—A Man’s Memory* landed in my hands, I was compelled to savor each word. Even more profound words, however, are found in Oskar’s story of hope and humanity in the face of the absolute evil and cruelty exhibited and so viciously enacted in the Holocaust. Oskar’s message woven throughout his book—one of beauty in the face of terror; hope in the face of loss; humanity in the face of depravity—is one that every single reader of any age can learn from and cherish. Oskar—thank you for sharing your story with me, and also with my students. Yours is a story none of us will ever forget.”

Lindsay Taylor

8th Grade English Teacher, Summit Academy

“Your new book is a lasting tribute to history. Thank you for sharing your story and your heart with us.”

Mary Harthun

Staff Development Specialist and Educator

“In reading your story, it seemed you were blessed during those horrible times. The most beautiful thing is you did not allow bitterness to destroy you. You are an inspiration to my family and me and I am sure many

others. Life has not been easy for you but it is evident you value every day as we all should.”

Elaine Henry
Business Project Specialist, SRP

“You have told a story that all of us should be aware of and always remember.”

Bob Julien
Certified Public Accountant

“Thank you for writing your book, for sharing your story, and for allowing my daughters to one day know of the courage, strength, character, and hope that you, your family, and millions of others possessed almost 70 years ago and continue to possess even now.”

Marisa B. Cox
Business Professional, Mother, and Community Volunteer

“The Holocaust casts a long, dark shadow that must never be forgotten— it is wrought with stories of people, such as yourself, whose courage and will to survive give us all encouragement and perspective in our lives.”

Richard L. Chelпка
District Orchestra Specialist, Mesa Public Schools

“We applaud you for sharing your story with the world and appreciate your experiences. Hopefully your experiences will help others learn the meaning of tolerance and acceptance.”

Allan & Leonetta Cumpton
Parents and Humanitarians

“We all finished your WONDERFUL book. You did super!”

Carol Walker
Educational Enrichment Award recipient for Excellence in Education

Preface

Today, many people in the world insist that the Holocaust did not happen. Nazi Germany itself documented with precision the horror of the Holocaust. The Nazi regime was very proud of their accomplishment of killing Jews—killing that continued until the very last day of the war. Explicit accounts of genocide were made public during the Nuremberg trials that began on November 20, 1945. The Nazis have left enough visual evidence and documentation behind to make sure that the world will remember their barbaric murders! The sins committed by the “little corporal” and his Nazi followers as well as the rest of all those self-imposed ignorant and insensitive people will haunt humanity to the end of time.

There are those who minimize the Holocaust and challenge the number and the manner in which the Jews were killed. I ask those Holocaust deniers to explain to me where the six million Jews are. What happened to them? Did they just disappear into thin air? No, you deniers, those six million were turned into skeletons and ashes and were buried in almost every European country! Hitler and his regime set out to conquer the world and establish a thousand-year Reich that would be totally free of the Jews. Well, they didn’t conquer the world or win the war, but they did manage to eliminate millions of Jews from the human race.

In our daily lives, we sometimes take numbers for granted. One or two million are large numbers by any standard. As of 2010, the population of Arizona is a little over 6 million souls. That is a very large mass of people, to be sure. Now imagine what would happen if all of those people were done away with. From another perspective, the Arizona State University football stadium seats a sellout crowd of 72,000 people on a game night. Fill that stadium 83 times and you have about six million people. That is the number of people murdered by the Nazis between 1939 and 1945. The next time you find yourself in a traffic jam, let your mind wander for a minute and picture Arizona without a living soul. . . .

Hitler targeted the Jews for a specific reason that was not just racial. The elimination of Jews had a unique status in Hitler's master plan. While he certainly killed millions of others (gypsies, communists, homosexuals, etc.) he made exceptions for all these groups. The only group for which no exceptions were made was the Jews—they all had to die.

Hitler believed that before the Jewish ethical vision came along, the world operated according to the laws of nature and evolution—the survival of the fittest. The strong survived and the weak perished. When a lion hunts the herd, the young, the sick, and the weak are always the first victims. Nature is brutal but nature is balanced. There is no mercy. The great ancient empires such as the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans conquered and destroyed other people in this manner. They respected no borders and showed no mercy. To Hitler this was natural and correct. But as Hitler saw it, in Germany, suddenly the strong had become emasculated, and that was not normal or natural. He blamed the Jews! His plan was to take over the world, set up a pagan master race, and return the world to what he viewed was its ideal natural state: a world “unpolluted” by Jewish ideas and Jewish off-shoots such as Christianity. This is made clear in a song sung by young people in Germany:

We are the joyous Hitler youth,
we do not need any Christian virtue.
Our leader is our savior.
The Pope and Rabbi shall be gone. We want to be pagans once again.*

To implement his plan, he had to get rid of the Jews. He once said, “The Ten Commandments have lost their validity. . . . Conscience is a Jewish invention. It is a blemish-like circumcision. . . . The struggle for world domination is fought entirely between us, between the Germans and the Jews.”‡

* Graeber, Isacque. *Jews in a Gentile World*. New York: Macmillan, 1942.

‡ Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks*, p. 220.

In a later speech he flattered himself by saying, “There will never be a man in the future who has more authority than me. My being is therefore a huge value factor. No one knows how much longer I will live. Therefore, it is better to have the conflict now.” Six years later, Hitler killed himself. It amazes me to this day how a civilized nation such as Germany followed and believed in a man who had irrational ideas—a man who preached paganism and the extinction of a human race.

While writing this book, I have expressed the feelings I had during those times of upheaval. To a degree, they do not reflect my thinking of today. Hopefully my sometimes-harsh descriptions will not be offensive to my readers—offense was not intended, nor do I mean to hurt feelings or put down any religion.

The ethnic killing of Jews between 1939 and 1945 is a dark page in modern man's history. It will serve as a reminder of how civilized humans were able to kill millions of people in order to promote their self-proclaimed superiority. As history records, World War II was a senseless bloody war in which tens of millions of innocent people lost their lives.

Hitler had a deep-seated hatred of the Jews. He and his Nazi Party followers, known for their passionate hatred of Jews and their demands for additional territories in Europe, were the architects of World War II. On September 1, 1939, these architects set the German war machine into action against Poland and then against other European countries. Within two weeks, the German army conquered Poland and established total occupation of the land.

Eastern Europe had the greatest concentration of Jews. With that in mind, Hitler's wild obsession with Jews became his first agenda. He proclaimed that Jews in Europe had to be isolated, eliminated, and exterminated. Hitler's ultimate goal was to bring the whole world under German domination and then, of course, exterminate every Jew in the world! In the

first two years of occupation alone, the special German police and SS detachments had executed and killed over two million Jewish men, women, and children. To speed up Hitler's "Final Solution" (or extermination of the Jews), faster and more efficient ways to kill were developed with each passing month.

I was one of the millions caught up in the Nazi killing web during World War II in Poland.

Chapter 1

I heard the urgent sound of the doorbell ringing. The five short strokes meant that it was no other person than my neighbor, Renate Dorfmann. Opening the door I curiously asked, "Why are you wearing your apron?"

Pushing her long blond braids back over her shoulders with her hands, she announced, "Your mother is going to show me and your sister how to make sugar cookies. And guess what, you can't have any!" Having said that, Renate brushed me aside and walked with her nose high in the air into the kitchen.

It was 1930 in Leipzig, Germany. A metropolitan city, Leipzig is located some 75 miles southwest of Berlin. Leipzig is also the capital of Saxony, and is noted for its many world fairs held in the month of September. The city has also been the headquarters of the German book publishing industry since 1825. In the 19th century, Leipzig became one of the musical centers of Europe, with well-established theaters and a conservatory of music. In 1930, Leipzig had a lot to offer its citizens, with botanical gardens, zoos and parks, an astronomical observatory, and museums. The city streets were all well paved. Even though quite a number of them had cobblestones, they were fun and healthy to walk barefoot on. City transportation was excellent with hundreds of streetcars quietly speeding about.

In addition to my parents and older sister Ilse, I lived with one brother, Siegmund (Sidney), who was three years older than me, and my Uncle Adolph. We were the proverbial middle class family. We lived in a middle class neighborhood that was predominately Protestant, with the exception of a few Catholic families, the Grossmans, and, of course, us.

Family life, what we did and how we did it, was the centerpiece of our being. Our lifestyle was very simple and modest. Today's modern marvels and technologies that we take for granted and couldn't do without were at the time distant dreams, or in their infancy. As children, our evening entertainment consisted mainly of playing assorted board games: checkers, chess,

dominos, chutes and ladders, and backgammon, just to mention a few. We read books—a lot of books. We listened to the sounds of classical records coming from a wind-up gramophone. Sometimes, we listened to our rented radio that operated by inserting a coin into a black box. The radio had a limited choice of stations with programs mostly suited for adults. The marvel called television that by now has saturated every household and comes in all shapes and sizes was not available in Germany. No matter how we entertained ourselves, bedtime was strictly set for 7:30 p.m. My childhood up to five years of age was a uniformity of playing, getting into mischief, eating, and going to sleep (not exactly in that order).

After World War I, my parents and Uncle Adolph settled in Leipzig. My father's profession was unique. He restored fur using IGA dyes and other chemicals to make it look like new. Uncle Adolph was a chemist by profession, and both combined their skills in achieving a finished product. There was a demand for such a job since fur loses its sheen and fades with time. It was a modest income, required hard work, and was a long-range health risk due to the inhalation of strong chemicals.

The apartment buildings on our street were all attached to one another, which made it look like a solid wall, except, of course, for the doors and windows. On warm days, usually after supper, people, including my mother Ruzia, would put a small pillow on the windowsill and look out. The grownups gossiped and got all the news by talking to their neighbors on either side. The apartment building we lived in consisted of the main bottom floor plus three additional floors. Each floor had two apartments. We shared the top floor with a young family of four, the Dorfmanns. Our neighbors and our family got along just fine.

Karl Dorfmann, a carpenter by profession, was a jolly, pot-bellied fellow who frequently enjoyed going with my dad and Uncle Adolph to the neighborhood tavern, or *bierstube*, to have a few beers and talk about World

War I, the Great War—the war that was supposed to have ended all wars. Those beer drinkers had been comrades in arms. During that war, my dad served in the Austrian Army. While fighting in this ferocious campaign, my dad distinguished himself, earning the rank of Lieutenant. He was also decorated with five medals of valor, which he wore with pride on national holidays. Uncle Adolph fought with the Polish Legion for Polish independence. After years of hard fighting, the Legion was successful and re-established Poland's independence. He, too, was a highly decorated soldier, and came home with the rank of Major.

Karl Dorfmann's daughter Renate was my sister's age. They both attended the same public school on *Herde-Strasse* and enjoyed each other's company in the classroom as well as at home. Ilse and Renate both took piano lessons, and since we had a baby grand in our living room, Renate was always welcome to practice at our home. The girls studied and did most of their homework assignments together. In their free time, they gossiped and talked confidentially about boys. Walter and Helmut always came up in their secret conversations. The two boys were classmates of Ilse and Renate, and they all walked the short distance together to school every day.

I heard them in the kitchen as they began to work on the cookies. Between Mrs. Dorfmann and my mother, Ilse and Renate were introduced to cooking and baking, but that was not all. They also were shown how to properly set a dinner table and how to serve food. On other occasions, Mrs. Dorfmann had Ilse over at her apartment to teach the girls the art of preparing simply cooked meals. One such meal, very popular at the time, was called *eintopfgericht*; in English, a one-pot meal. Meat, potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips, and beans of all sorts were prepared and cooked in one pot.

Gunter, their son, was one year older than me. Gunter and I were good friends and got along very well. On rainy days, we entertained ourselves in

either his or my apartment. Checkers and dominos were always good, and so were card games such as War, or fascinating card tricks that Siegmund taught us. We colored pictures, worked on art projects, and we made paper airplanes to fly on calm days. On sunny days, Gunter and I would join the rest of the neighborhood kids on the street in games and fun. On windy days, it was kite-flying time.

Siegmund taught Gunter and me how to make kites. We both became quite proficient in building them. We each made three or four at a time so that we would have spare kites in case they got crushed or tangled up in a tree. We usually waited for a strong, windy day to set the kites free to soar as high as the string would allow. A kite was a wondrous toy. Holding it in my hand, it was just a few bamboo strips, some parchment paper, strips of newspaper for the tail, and string—lots of string. Once the kite was airborne it became a living toy, performing loops and dives only to rapidly climb up again, while all the time moving its tail majestically from side to side. Sometimes, the glue that held the parchment paper to the bamboo frame would separate, causing the kite to come crashing down. We'd just reach for another kite and launch it for a new adventurous flight.

Just a short block down the street, on the corner of *Biedermanstrasse* and *Auerbachstrasse*, was Grossman's Bakery. Besides the many types of bread, Kaiser rolls, and pretzels Herr Grossman and his wife Miriam baked, their specialty was baking the most scrumptious fruit sheet cakes. Delicious cherry, apricot, plum, blueberry, and apple cakes, individually trimmed and sliced, were proudly displayed behind the large windows of the shop. We kids, not being able to resist just looking at the wonder of the day, would press our foreheads, noses, and drooling mouths against the windowpanes. Mrs. Grossman did not like us soiling the display windows and told us time and again to please stay away, but we were drawn back to the windows by the irresistible force of the fruit slices.

Finally, one day, Herr Grossman came out of the shop wielding a gigantic rolling pin. We all were caught by surprise and were scared at the same time. Herr Grossman was not a big man, but to us he looked like a giant, wearing his tall baker's hat, white jacket, and white pants. He wore a long apron that had a few fruit stains on it. As he lowered his rolling pin, he said, "Frau Grossman has asked you many times not to put your faces against the window, because each time you leave, the window is soiled from your faces, and then Frau Grossman has to come out and clean the glass panes." He continued, "If you kids will stay away from the window, I will have a surprise for you all. My wife Miriam and I bake the fruit sheet cakes every Friday. So every Friday in the early afternoon I want you to sit quietly on the curb of the sidewalk and wait for me to come out."

The following Friday afternoon, right after homework was done, Gunter came rapping at our door shouting, "Hurry up, Oskar! We'll be late! I think I can smell the aroma of freshly baked cake!" We bolted down the three flights, jumping two steps at a time over the wooden stairs and making a terrible noise.

"I will report you to your parents, you little scoundrels!" the superintendent shouted. Gunter and I did not care. We were on a mission and we couldn't be late.

The curb in front of the bakery was already occupied by at least a dozen kids. Peter, the oldest at seven years, said, "I bet we are going to get a whole sheet of plum cake!"

"I think it's going to be apple," said Olga.

"I think it will be a big surprise!" exclaimed Gunter.

Soon the sweet irresistible aroma of freshly baked cake reached our nostrils. The waiting became intense. Finally, Herr Grossman came out carrying a large baking pan. He placed the pan on a small table that Frau Grossman carried out from the bakery. "You kids were very good and

patient. Frau Grossman and I would like you to share equally without fighting for the trimmings of the sheet cake that are in this pan.” This certainly was a great surprise! The cut edges were still warm and crisp, with chunks of fruit still on them.

“I’ll have plum trimming,” said Peter.

“I’ll have cherry,” Gunter said.

“I’ll have a little of everything!” said Hans. Most of the other kids had nothing to say. They were too busy enjoying their good fortune. So we gathered every Friday afternoon in front of Grossman’s Bakery and sat quietly on the edge of the sidewalk, waiting for the delightful fumes of freshly baked cake to fill the air around us. This was the cue that the waiting was over, and the treats would be there shortly for us to enjoy.

Saturdays and Sundays were always special days. Every other Saturday afternoon, while our parents would go out to visit friends, we kids were allowed to go to the movies. On such days, Ilse, being the oldest, was in charge, and she made sure we knew it.

One day, I remember her saying in a very dramatic voice, “As you two well know, I’m in charge! Siegmund, you hold Oskar’s hand while we walk to the movies.”

“Dad gave me some extra change to spend on some goodies,” said Siegmund. “How about we get something in the candy store?”

“No, Siegmund, we shouldn’t have candy. Why don’t we get puffed rice instead?” Ilse always won! Puffed rice was good, and we got a lot for just a few pfennigs (cents). At the time, we had not heard of popcorn. Movies were all in black and white, and the plots were often about cowboys and Indians. The one we saw featured the cowboy hero, Tom Mix.

When we got home, Mom and Dad, as always, had a surprise waiting for us. On the kitchen table, Mom had three place settings prepared for us. Each setting had a glass of milk and two cookies, and on this day there was

also a small piece of chocolate. A vase with fresh flowers sat in the middle of the table. Also, each setting had a folded piece of paper, each with one of our names on it. Inside the folded paper, Mom and Dad always wrote some encouraging words, thoughts of wisdom, or original poems. That evening, they had written a poem, that all three of us long remembered, called “Gift.” Translated from German, it goes something like this:

Your Life is a Gift that is one of a kind.

Love, respect, and hope,

Always keep those three in mind!

We repeated this verse constantly throughout the war, especially the one word “hope.” Thanks, Mom and Dad!

Saturday was also special because it was chicken soup day. I don’t mean the kind of chicken soup that we get now out of cans and packages. Our mom created this chicken soup from scratch with love and care. It took her almost all day to prepare it. It was the very best. I have not tasted anything like it since the Saturday suppers we had in Leipzig! We seem to associate chicken soup with Jewish mothers. As they say, eat chicken soup for whatever ails you. This is a wise observation, but there is more to it. Mom would say, “Eating chicken soup calms and raises your awareness. It improves your thinking, and therefore makes you a better person.” How much of this is true is any reader’s choice, but for us it was the gospel. After all, how could we not believe this beautiful, calm person—our mother! Whenever and whatever this wonderful person said to us in her soothing voice was precious to our ears. We truly were fortunate to have had this woman for our mother! Our father, too, was fortunate to have been married to this woman, even though it was for a relatively short period.

Sundays often found our family bicycling through the countryside. In the city, most main streets had special lanes for bicycle riders. It was mandatory by law for bike riders to use those lanes. One Sunday afternoon,

as we were approaching one of the main streets, I neglected to make a sharp right turn into the bike lane, ending up on the main thoroughfare. Before I had a chance to correct my infraction, a policeman on a bike ordered our family to a stop and wrote out a violation ticket and gave it to my father.

My father was six foot two. His slightly receding hairline didn't take anything away from his good looks. Because of his military background, he was a no-nonsense type of a man. He was a strong believer in law and order. That afternoon, as I remember, he was not happy about the incident. Later on at home he lectured me. In an elevated voice and with a firm tone, he said, "Laws have to be respected at all times and should never be broken!" He assured me that as much as he hated to do it, he was going to have me make up for the fine he had to pay. "This," he said, "will perhaps teach you a lesson not to let it happen again."

In my defense, I told him that it was a mistake and that I didn't do it on purpose. Moms and Dads always seem to have the right answers. "If you wouldn't have pedaled so fast, you wouldn't have missed your turn." For one week I had to eat my slightly reduced meals in the kitchen corner by myself.

Our Sunday walks through the nearby park were unforgettable. People actually called the park a forest because it was so huge. The Dorfmanns joined us many times on our Sunday walks through this serene park. We would come across hundreds of families, just strolling along in their best Sunday clothing. After the snow melted away, tens of thousands of lavender and white hyacinths started to bloom, followed by yellow daffodils and tulips of every color. Later, toward the end of spring, patches of the ever-so-delicate purple violets, admired for their shape and color, grew all over, making a splendid ground cover. And, of course, the forget-me-nots, known for their light blue color, grew all along the banks of the river that meandered through this enormous forest. My mother would tell us how the romantic name of this flower was derived from the last words of a legendary German knight

who drowned while attempting to retrieve the flower for his lady. In summer the forest was overwhelmed with purple and white lilac bushes and an array of wildflowers of every color. It was a splendid display of nature, to be sure!

One time, I really got carried away while riding my bike in this serene setting. Not having a watch, I completely lost track of the time of day. As I rode up to the house, I could see my mom looking out the window. The stern expression on her face indicated that I was in trouble! To be in trouble in our home was a serious event. Uncle Adolph's military background had made him a very strict individual, especially with me! We kids called him "The Enforcer." If any of us did anything wrong, like not finishing our chores or talking back in an inappropriate way to one another, Mom would sometimes report the infractions to Uncle. He then would dispense the appropriate punishment to fit the "crime." Judgment day was usually on Sunday mornings.

Reporting to his room that morning, I had to stand at attention for several minutes, until he acknowledged my presence. Then, finally, I had to listen to the infraction I was charged with. "You stayed out late, and by doing so worried your mother half to death! What have you to say for yourself?"

"It is difficult to tell time without a watch, Uncle. I finished all my chores, and Mom gave me permission to go bike riding. I feel terribly bad if I caused Mom to worry."

"That is no excuse! Step in front of me!" To dispense punishment, he proceeded by pulling up the hair on my sideburns until I ran out of toes (so to speak). It hurt like the devil! But that was not all. Next, while kneeling on a handful of dried peas with my exposed knees, I had to read a chapter from a book out loud. I did the reading as fast as I could in order to get out of this situation. It was extremely uncomfortable. When it was over, I had to pick some imbedded peas from my kneecaps. After a couple of such treatments, I was reluctant to do anything wrong again for a long time.

As you read this, you may ask, was it a cruel and unusual punishment? As a child I thought it was. Now I strongly believe it taught me to respect life, people, and everything that is righteous! I also believe that those treatments were valuable lessons conditioning me to concentrate and overcome pain, and it also instilled discipline that I believe was somewhat instrumental in helping me survive the war.

When I was five, my parents enrolled my brother and me in an athletic sports club located nearly a mile and a half away from our apartment. Gunter also attended the same club. For almost three glorious and enjoyable years we attended twice a week. The three of us would run the distance to the club—we called it our “warm up,” which preconditioned us to take part in all the activities. There was the high jump, the long jump, climbing, relay races, soccer, but most of the concentration was on calisthenics, a series of exercises related to gymnastics, such as pull-ups and push-ups, which were designed to strengthen the body and increase flexibility. I remember each year we had a big exhibition called “Fest.” Several hundred members would perform gymnastics all together. Gunter and I were the youngest members in the club and, because of that, the coaches put us in the very front so that the audience could see us perform. The coaches were so proud of me; they even told my parents that I showed great promise in athletics.

Our childhood did not differ from the rest of the children in our neighborhood or anywhere else; we were totally integrated. We had disagreements and fights, like any healthy children do, and we made up, but above all, we were friends. We all had needs and wants, just as children universally do. We went to school, ate, played together, and marched alongside parades if there was one going through our street. We laughed when we were happy, and cried when we were hurt. Our neighborhood had no shortage of boys or girls my age. We would play together after school either on the street or in our backyards. On other occasions, we would play in my home, or my

friends would invite me to their homes. We shared our toys and sometimes our food, and had a good time playing together. Everything looked promising for a healthy and bright childhood.

This, of course, was at the time when the general public in Germany did not widely acknowledge Nazism. However, as time passed, Hitler's socialist party was slowly creeping through the land, infecting the German population like cancer. Just as a soap bubble, floating silently and mysteriously in its colorful glory, must come down and burst, our bubble started to descend rapidly.

In the spring of 1932, my sister, brother, and I sensed that something was happening in Germany. In the evenings, just before bedtime, Ilse and Seigmund began listening to conversations between our parents and Uncle Adolph. However, since they were not in the same room with the elders, only bits and pieces of the conversations were audible. The information we kids shared from those conversations was that if the Nazis ruled the country, they promised a better life for all German citizens, and that there would be drastic changes for those who were not considered citizens.

With each new day, the Nazi party membership grew to new levels. To celebrate and show their strength, Hitler's militia, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), marched through the streets of Leipzig in their brown shirts. At first, Gunther and I thought it was fun to see the parades. The two of us marched right along with them; after all, how can any kid resist a parade and not join in?

Many people at first jeered and threw things at the marchers, yet others cheered and applauded the brown shirts. Within a few months, the Nazis had very large numbers marching to the sound of their bands and waving a colorful assortment of flags. An enthusiastic crowd of people always greeted them. By that time, those who jeered at the passing columns, and there were quite a few of them, were severely beaten and silenced by members of the SA and other Nazi sympathizers.

One evening, after one of these bloody parades, our parents and uncle talked to us and tried to explain, in the best way they could, what Nazism was all about. They explained to us that the Nazi party was strictly for German citizens and not for us because we were Polish citizens. My Dad told me that evening that if I heard the marchers coming, I should leave Gunther and come straight home. It must have been very difficult for our parents to hide the real truth about the Nazis' intent for the Jews. Perhaps they felt that in time we would learn it. It didn't take long for the whole truth to come crashing down on us.

Siegmund, Gunter, and I still attended the club regularly. One day, we made it to the gate in a record-breaking sprint. We always had been greeted by a smiling Horst Werner, who was one of the coaches and also took roll call at the gate. As we arrived, he stood in front of the gate, blocking the entrance. He was dressed in his SA uniform, signifying his place in Hitler's National Socialist Party. The uniform was light brown in color with a black belt and boots; on his left forearm he wore a red armband adorned with a black swastika in a white circle. Werner gestured to Gunter to enter, and while stretching his hand toward us he said in a loud, hateful voice, "You Jews are not allowed here anymore! This club is only for pure Germans! Get lost and don't show your Jew faces here again!"

Siegmund got his nerve up and said, "But coach, my brother and I are German! We were born right here in Leipzig! We have German names, and our father served in the German Army in World War I . . ."

"That does not matter!" Werner interrupted. "You are Jews and are the enemy of our great country! Go home!" Having said that, he slammed the gate shut. It was a painful and devastating jolt! It was unbelievable! This was the same man, our coach, who up until last week was as friendly as could be, was always glad to see us, and who always had a kind word for us. Now he had turned into a beast, full of hate and rage! Siegmund and I left in silence. I think it took us an hour to get home. Our mother somehow was not surprised at the club's new ordinance. She had the feeling that sooner or later it would come to that and there was nothing anyone could do to change it.

The situation became worse day by day. In school at that time I was in third grade. My desk was in the front row. Those seats were designated for the better students, making the seats in the back of the classroom for the worst students. One morning my teacher was already in class, and yes, he was dressed in his SA uniform. As I approached him, (I remember it vividly to this day), he advised me very proudly that from now on I would be sitting

in the last row. He went on to say that I would be excluded from all sporting and other school activities. By the way, I was the only Jewish kid in the class of 30 students! As I looked around the classroom I noticed that most of my friends wore Hitler Youth uniforms and it seemed that no one wanted to make eye contact with me. During recess I found myself ignored by all the students. Nobody paid any attention to me. In class, the teacher never acknowledged or called on me even if I had my hand up for the answer to his question. I was isolated as if I had the plague. Ilse and Siegmund, who attended the same school, experienced the same if not worse treatment. Their classmates were older and therefore more aggressive than the kids in my class. It finally got so discouraging at school that we stopped attending our classes. It is ironic to me that the school authorities did not miss us or inquire as to why we were not attending school. They just didn't give a damn!

All after school play activities with my friends ceased. On many occasions the same boys and girls who just a few weeks ago were my best friends called me dirty names. I recall that the first initial pain that was inflicted upon us was the behavior of the Dorfmanns. The sudden rejection and hate was hard to accept. Within days, Renate became a member of the female branch of the Nazi party's youth group, the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* or BDM, and wore a uniform. Gunter also joined the Hitler Youth and, like all the rest of the boys, he wore a well groomed uniform and polished boots.

My mother's evenings of leaning out of her window and gossiping with neighbors suddenly ended. When the Nazis gained power, huge swastika flags leaned instead from every window. The streets were lined with them—thousands of them. There was a sea of red and black swastikas. It was incredible.

In 1933, right after Hitler gained power, a bizarre situation brought my sister Ilse face-to-face with him. While Ilse was recuperating from a foot operation, Hitler, surrounded by an entourage of other Nazi party members, visited the hospital ward. As Ilse told us, he went from bed to bed extending

his hand as he read each girl's posted identification information. He would shake hands and smile as he moved from patient to patient. He came toward Ilse with his hand extended. As his eyes read her identification card, he stopped suddenly. His face reddened, his eyes became enlarged, he became furious, and he demanded she be removed at once from the ward and hospital! He screamed at the doctors and staff for allowing a "Jew" to contaminate the "purity" of Germany's future womanhood! Ilse was instantly wheeled out to the street and left alone in front of the hospital, where she sat waiting for my parents to pick her up. Her foot therapy, scheduled to help her through her post-surgery and recovery period, had been terminated.

This man suddenly had enough power to throw young people out of hospitals onto the street! Hitler served in a Bavarian regiment during World War I and fought the same common enemies that my father and my uncle did. That was a time when men fought and died side by side, not caring what religion anyone was. All that mattered was how good a soldier a man was. During that war, my father and my uncle were ready to give their lives for the survival of Germany and Austria.

For years we had been accepted and honored in our community. We children had many friends and played daily with our peers. My mother was well liked and respected and my father and uncle were honored as war heroes. One day we were their friends, and the next day we were dirty Jews with no rights or dignity. It is hard to understand how people can change in such a short time. It was a most painful and despairing time. This was the character of our neighbors—our best friends. Once these people didn't care to whom you prayed, and suddenly they turned their backs and rejected you. This shows how easy it was for the Nazis to manipulate the gullible German population. My parents knew that there was no future for us to stay any longer in Germany, and we would have to leave our home.

Meanwhile, life went on, but it was not the same. I missed going to school and I missed my friends. After finishing my daily chores at home, I would ride my bicycle to the nearby forest that was directly adjacent to the sports club to which we used to belong. Paved bike paths were built throughout the woods for safety and comfort. The vast variety of mature trees provided a sanctuary for birds and for countless squirrels. Intermittent meadows grew an array of colorful wildflowers in spring and summer, and the sound of the rushing water in the winding river, curving gracefully like a snake through the woods, made it an ideal retreat and a peaceful place to be.

Riding my bike was the best way I found to pass the time as legal problems delayed my parents' plan to immigrate with our family to Poland. Jewish communities in Germany dated back a thousand years. Long before Hitler, German Jews had integrated fully into German life and culture. Many were proud Germans who were stunned to be singled out as an evil influence, but they trusted that the excess fanaticism of Nazism would in time decline in its intensity. Others, my family included, felt a desperate urgency to leave Germany.

My parents and uncle were Polish citizens. Because our parents were Polish, we kids, according to German law, were also Polish even though Siegmund and I were born in Germany. As Polish citizens we had some political rights, but as Jews we had none. However, being Polish gave us enough protection that we were allowed to take all our personal belongings, including our furniture, with us to Poland. Those Jews who were citizens of other countries, like us, had to wait quite a while for their native countries to allow them to return. German Jews, on the other hand, had a very difficult time being accepted by other countries, and in most cases they were denied asylum anywhere.

At last, after opening the early morning mail, our dad proudly announced that the final papers had just arrived and we needed to finish

packing right away. Our parents told us that all the furniture, household items, bedding, and most of our clothing would be shipped separately by railroad freight (though it arrived at our final destination a month after we did). Most of our things were already prepacked, so when the two men from the moving company arrived at our apartment, all they had to do was to inspect everything and see that it was done to their specifications. Everything was packed except five suitcases, which we carried with us.

It was mid-morning when Dad said, "Kids—close your suitcases, go to the bathroom, and say good-bye to your Uncle Adolph. We have to go to the railroad station." Uncle Adolph, as arranged earlier, would stay in the apartment until morning when the movers would pick our stuff up. He planned to stay with some German-Jewish friends.

By now, of course, all the tenants in the apartment building knew that we were leaving, but no one as I can remember came out to say anything, either to wish us luck or bid us good riddance. I trailed behind my dad as we descended the stairs. He stopped and knocked at the door of the superintendent. Frau Bergheimer appeared at the door. She was an elderly widow who lived with her oldest son. She was a rather tall woman with snow-white hair, and her weathered face covered with deep wrinkles still showed kindness. My dad handed her some papers and money. She took my dad's hand and shook it for a while and said something to him in a whispered tone. She then wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, managed a tiny smile, and waved to me. At that moment, I felt ashamed and sorry for the times I came down the stairs making all that noise and making her upset. I waved back to her with a smile and continued down the stairs very, very quietly, walking out of the building, my childhood home, for the last time.

We boarded the International Express Train. Those trains have dining cars and our whole family took advantage of it! The train was very comfortable and the people traveling were kind and happy and jolly. We stopped at

the German-Poland border. First, we were ordered by the German Border Police to prove our identity. After that, the Polish immigration officials checked our papers, and again we were on our way to Kraków.

At a little after six in the evening, early in the summer of 1936, our train arrived in Kraków. My mother's sister, Aunt Itka, was there to greet us. She lived with her husband Szymon and daughter Rose in Modlnica, a small village near Kraków. After storing our suitcases on Uncle Szymon's wagon, we all climbed aboard. With a light tug at the reins the horse was on its way to the three-bedroom apartment in *Ulica Kopernicka* (Kopernicka Street), not far from the center of the city, that Aunt Itka had rented for us.

My parents left a lot of German-Jewish friends behind that they stayed in constant touch with until shortly before the war broke out in September of 1939. Still, our departure from Leipzig was a happy one. We looked forward to going back to normal lives and to being treated like human beings again. A new chapter in our lives began.

Life in Poland differed from that in Germany in many ways. From the physical point of view, Poland's interior was not as developed as most European countries. For instance, not all the streets in the cities were paved, and neither were the few highways that led out of Kraków. Rail and bus services were inferior compared with the ones in Germany. Poland, though, had just regained its independence in 1918, and it was still a recovering country.

The Polish are a mixture of many cultures. The Polish people were originally one of several Slavic tribes that settled between the Oder and Vistula rivers before the 700s. Ever since then, the Polish territories were attacked and invaded at one time or another from all sides, but they managed to survive. By the mid-1500s, Poland greatly extended its territory, but the country was lost in 1795 when Russia, Prussia, and Austria partitioned it off, wiping it off the map. Poland only regained independence after World War I. The Polish people had Austrian, German, Russian, and Slavic ancestry

mixed with deep Polish roots, varying in different parts of the country. Before the war, anti-Semitism was widespread throughout Poland and was predominantly embraced by the church and slightly tolerated by the government. The Polish peoples' behavior and thinking followed that of their ancestors and influenced their attitude toward Jews before and during the war.

A big, new adventure was about to start for me. It was a new country, a new language, new friends, and a new school. Best of all, most of our relatives lived in Poland. My mother was glad to be back in Kraków and to be reunited with her sister Itka. My father's parents, two of my uncles with their families, and my dad's cousins lived in Katowice, located only 60 miles or so west of Kraków, so we could visit each other frequently.

My brother refused to go to school. He didn't want to leave Leipzig. He hated Poland, its people, the language, the dirty streets, and basically the whole idea. To keep my brother occupied, a distant family member named Hutterer gave Siegmund a job in his music store. Ilse, however, liked Kraków. She made friends easily. She also worked at Hutterer's store as a secretary. Within a short time, Ilse joined the Zionist Youth Organization. At the time, they were very much involved in recruiting young people to work on and develop collective farms (*kibbutzim*) in Palestine.

Within a week of arriving in Kraków, I was enrolled in school. Starting in a new school was hard, but it was even more difficult because I could not speak Polish and didn't understand the teacher or the students. At home, my parents spoke to me in Polish only, which helped tremendously. Eventually I got a tutor, and with her help I was able to completely master the language.

The school, named after the Polish poet Sniadeskiego, was a mature four-story red brick building occupying half a city block. One side of the building was for girls and the other was for boys. We didn't have a coed system in Kraków at the time. In addition to meeting Monday through Friday, we attended class on Saturday from eight in the morning until noon.

We had no classes on national or religious holidays, and summer recess was only six weeks long!

There were only two Jewish boys besides me in my class of 29 students. They had a problem with the rest of the students who didn't approve of some of their religious practices. The Jewish religion says that God created earth in six days, and, of course, he rested on the seventh day. And so the seventh day became the Sabbath, the day of rest. On that day, no manual work of any kind should be performed, no matter how small. It is forbidden to write on the Sabbath, play sports, ride on or operate any vehicle, cook, strike a match, or even flip a light switch on. And the list goes on. To follow those religious rites would have been ideal thousands of years ago, when there wasn't much going on anyway. So you didn't ride your donkey or your camel (if you were richer) to the nearest market, and you didn't have to strike two rocks to ignite a candle. True to their religious beliefs, the two boys would not participate in any school activities, nor would they pick up a pen to write with, or a pencil to draw with. My thinking on this matter was very simple. I was of the assumption that it wouldn't be sacrilegious to do all those things, especially while going to school. I was of the belief that people should observe the Sabbath or a Sunday in our modern time in a democratic way. It can be a solemn day or a workday but it also should be a day of fun and play, so that people can enjoy what was created for them!

When asked why I differed from the other two boys, I replied that we are all individuals and look at things from a different perspective. While my own religious view is very liberal, I do tolerate the teachings and rituals of all other faiths. We live in a world society where people are continuously being harassed and singled out for different reasons, or for no reason at all, and it is therefore wise to follow an old saying: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do!"

For me, school was fun and easy, especially after being able to speak

Polish in its purest form. I made a lot of friends, but my very best friend was a fellow by the name of Zbigniew Mankewicz. He came from a strict Roman Catholic family. The difference in our religions didn't seem to have been an issue at all. After we moved to our new apartment, which was not far from where Zbigniew lived, we would meet every morning at a designated street corner and walk the four-mile distance to school and back together. Our parents gave us money to ride the streetcar to school, but we saved the money so that we could go to see a movie once a week. Every day on our way back home, our journey took us through the old city center.

This section of the city contained a vast number of historical buildings. Walking along the narrow cobblestone streets, we would stop and window-shop at stores that displayed mostly art objects from the past and present. Making our way through the *Rynek Główny*, the main plaza in the center of old Kraków, we had to pass by the church of St. Mary, a Gothic edifice dating back to 1223 and containing a number of elaborate 16th and 17th century tombs. In the mornings, on the way to school, he always stopped at the church for Morning Prayer. I waited outside for him, but on cold and rainy days I went inside with him and even said a prayer, in my own way.

On the other side of the plaza, facing St. Mary's church, Kraków's fanciest hotels were located. I remember them well: The Plaza, Metropole, Internationale, and Polonaise. On nice days, the hotels served breakfasts and brunches to their clients at their outdoor restaurants, all along their long and wide sidewalks. Some customers at those hotels parked their cars along the sidewalk curb. Those cars were beautiful, all foreign, with names such as Citroen, Bugatti, Rolls Royce, and Skoda. Zbigniew and I made it a must to stop for a few minutes in the morning and on our way home to observe those beautiful people sitting in these ever-so-elegant surroundings. Freshly cut flowers were everywhere. They had them displayed in big urns and in small vases on every table. Many, many times later, I often wondered what

happened to Zbigniew's famous words that stayed in my mind for so long. "Look, Oskar, you are looking at our future!" He would say, "That will be us sitting here a few years from now!"

"So, tell me, Zbigniew, who will we be to be able to sit here in this splendor?" I would ask.

"Well," he replied, "I will be an Air Force officer, or a big businessman, and I will have a beautiful blond woman sitting next to me, like that one over there."

"Since you are making all the plans, tell me, what about me?"

"You talk a lot, but you speak well, Oskar, so you probably will be a lawyer, and you will have an auburn beauty sitting next to you, like that gorgeous looking woman over there. And who knows? I might be your client! And, by the way, I can see you driving a Bugatti Royale, the one parked at the curb with those long flowing front fenders! And I will have a Skoda convertible!" What dreams we had, dreams that could well have been reality if it had not been for World War II.

Leaving the old town, we passed through the remnants of the impressive big walls that formerly surrounded old Kraków. The wall encircled the whole city in early medieval times, built around 1200 to protect the city and its people from the invading Tatars. Immediately past the outside walls, the Promenade, an enormous green belt that encircled the whole outer city, had been built. Huge old oak and maple trees, green grass, flowerbeds, wide walkways, and benches to sit and rest on were abundant. Once in a while we would treat ourselves to Eskimos; they consisted of vanilla ice cream covered in chocolate on a stick and were sold by vendors throughout the promenade. Crossing a main street, *Ulica Basztowa*, we turned left to *Ulica Paderewskiego*. That street housed many different stores that displayed their wares in large store windows. One store in particular attracted our attention; it was a bookstore. For us it was different and unusual. The store had two

huge windows that each displayed one open book (starting with pages one and two), resting on a pedestal close to the windowpane. A label placed in front of the book indicated the title and the author. The store clerk would turn the page at closing time Monday through Saturday so that the people could read it the next day. This would continue until the last page of the book. The book topics ranged greatly from adventure to science, history, or romance. Zbigniew and I would toss a coin to choose a book. Like many other window shoppers, we would stop to read every day on our way home. Sometimes, depending on the book, it would take us several months to finish. Each day after reading the two pages, Zbigniew and I would exchange the story lines of our selected books. Doing so, we actually read two books at the same time.

We then passed the Kraków Daily News building and watched through extra-large plate windows as the huge rolls of paper sped through the printing machines and emerged at the end of the line as folded newspapers. Our final stop was the soda bottling company on *Ulica Długa*. There we would enjoy a huge glass of cold lemon sparkling soda for just a few *groszy*, or pennies, then we were again on our way home.

On many occasions, I was invited to Zbigniew's home for snacks, and sometimes asked to join his family for dinner. Every Christmas I was asked to help decorate their tree, which I enjoyed doing. Zbigniew would spend a lot of time at our place, too. He always was our guest for our Passover dinner. When I broke my leg and couldn't go to school for three months, Zbigniew brought my homework to me every day. Thanks to Zbigniew, I passed to the next grade because I was able to complete all my school assignments. We were very good friends!

Zbigniew had a high level of interest in aviation. He was an expert maker of paper airplanes that flew extremely well. His interest in airplanes must have come from his oldest brother Stefan, who was an active pilot in

the Polish Air Force.

Mid-year in 1938, our school offered afternoon activities at the Air Defense League (the *Liga Obrony Przeciw Powietrznej* or L.O.P.P.) for students who had an interest in building model airplanes. This course was designed to teach students how to build and fly those intricate model crafts. Zbigniew and I promptly signed up and soon found ourselves in a new four-story L.O.P.P. building located at *Ulica Pomorska 2* (Pomorska Street). It was a sprawling building, located on the corner, and it had a huge cinema on the ground floor. It was located a comfortable 30 minute walk away from my house.

Each participating student was assigned to a large worktable equipped with a variety of tools and blueprints depicting each part we would have to build. Our hawk-eyed instructor scrutinized all our work and taught us, "Mistakes are not an option!" Each of us constructed ribs for the fuselage, wings, a tail, and support for the landing wheels out of fine strips of bamboo. Following the blueprint's instructions, those parts had to be bent by applying heat and then glued together. To finish the model, we used heavy-gage cellophane.

After four weeks of work, we were all ready for our first flight. As I recall, out of 15 models, only four flew successfully. Zbigniew's model was one of them. My plane went up, but after some 20 seconds or so it decided to come crashing down. We who didn't do it right had to go back and fix our shortcomings (the sturdy bamboo had prevented them from breaking). During those days at Pomorska Street in 1938, I had no idea that the place would soon represent something vile and sinister.

When I was growing up, we didn't have most of the modern conveniences that we take for granted today. For instance, we didn't have a simple washing machine. I really don't remember people having such a wondrous device. Perhaps the very rich were able to own them—we surely didn't have

one—so laundry day was an important event my mother didn't look forward to. Every single item from towels to bedsheets had to be washed by hand. But first it all had to be scrubbed with a big chunk of yellow soap, then it would soak in a large cauldron of hot water, and finally one item at a time had to be scrubbed on a washboard to get it clean. Then came the wringing and rinsing and more wringing and rinsing (all by hand)! It seemed an endless and difficult chore, and by the time my mother got through with washing all our personal clothing, bedsheets, and pillowcases, her knuckles on both hands were raw and bleeding from all that scrubbing.

My Aunt Itka knew Marina, a farm lady, who helped my aunt with her laundry in Modlnica. Marina was eventually hired to help Mom with that dreadful chore. Marina and her family lived in Modlnica, where they toiled on their small farm. It was just a few acres—enough to sustain their needs and have some produce and dairy left over to sell at the marketplace in the city.

Marina was an impressive, tall young woman. Her husband Jasiiek was equally tall and he was well built with broad shoulders and muscled arms, no doubt from working hard in the fields. Even though he appeared somewhat older than Marina, they seemed to make a perfect couple. They had no children. Marina, when coming to the city, wore the customary garb most farmwomen were clad in. Over her head she wore a large colorful scarf tightened into a knot under her chin, exposing some of her blond hair. She would wear white blouses with colorful embroidery with ankle-length skirts that exposed her black boots. The most prominent part of her appearance was her kind and healthy face. I will always remember Marina as a soft-spoken angel that my family had the privilege of knowing.

Later, we moved closer to the outskirts of the city. A large field sat along the side of our new apartment building. Half of the field was cultivated with a variety of flowers and some vegetables. As I found out, our neighbor Mrs. Kaminski, a widow who lived across the hall with her teenage daughter, had

looked after the garden. Mrs. Kaminski was not happy to see us move in because we were Jewish (What else is new?). She never acknowledged our greetings nor did she ever speak to us. One day, I decided to make my own garden. Equipped with a spade, I began to turn the fertile soil in the open field adjacent to our neighbor's garden. Like a witch on a broomstick, Mrs. Kaminski came running out of the building, shaking her fist and yelling at me, "You can't have a garden next to mine! I was here first!"

Somewhat surprised, I politely turned the other cheek and walked away. When I told my mother about the incident, I remarked, "I forced Mrs. Kaminski to talk to me!"

A chain-link fence surrounded the house we lived in. On the other side was bare land that was owned by our landlord, who gave me permission to use this empty lot to make a garden. And so once again, armed with my spade, I began the hard labor of turning the soil. Every day after school I was out in the garden digging, all the while being watched by Mrs. Kaminski, who was spying from behind her window curtain. I had no prior experience in planting or gardening. However, with the help and suggestions of Marina, the garden project started to shape up. With her expert advice as to when and how to plant, when to fertilize, and when to water, the harvest turned out to be rich and bountiful!

When the plants began to mature and everything looked just right, the unthinkable happened! One afternoon as I was weeding, Mrs. Kaminski came down to the garden for a visit. She looked around and congratulated me on a job well done. Her compliments were flattering. One of her comments was, "I didn't think you had it in you, to make this garden grow!"

"And why is that?" I asked. "Is it because I am too young, or is it because I am a Jew?" Mrs. Kaminski did not reply. Nevertheless, from that day on she became a very good friend. When Stella, our Spitz, had a litter she even took a puppy from us. I never could explain this woman's thinking

or figure out if there was a moral to this story.

Uncle Szymon and his brother Zyga were the sole proprietors of a beer bottling company. Their plant was in the village of Modlnica. The whole area around Modlnica was dotted with dozens of farming villages, and, of course, every village had a general store. Once a week, one of the brothers would hitch the horse to the wagon and head out to the city to pick up the beer from one of the breweries. The beer came in huge wooden kegs, which they transported back to the plant. Once there, the kegs were hooked up to the filling machines and then they manually corked, labeled, packed 12 bottles to a wooden crate, and they finally delivered them to all the villages. I spent a lot of time during my vacations helping out in the bottling plant, and I went on many deliveries with my uncle. I still can remember the strong aroma of beer that filled the air in the bottling room. I had a wonderful time!

The house my cousin Rose and her family lived in was a big two story building. This big house was the only brick structure in the vicinity. It was considered a mansion, even though there was no electricity available. People who lived in the villages were poor farmers who owned small five to ten acre farming plots. Their homes were made of wood and mud; the roof was straw and the floor was natural clay. The villages had no electricity and plumbing was nonexistent. Drinking water had to be hauled from deep underground wells, but it was cold and better than city water. Livestock usually consisted of pigs, a few cows, a dozen or more chickens, and a horse or two and a wagon to go with them. Some had a few goats and most had dogs and cats. They worked very hard to make a meager living. They grew enough crops to sustain themselves and they took what was left over from the harvest to Kraków's open market to sell. To make the cycle complete, with the money earned from their sales they purchased clothing, pots and pans, shoes, trinkets and yes, beer.

All around the countryside, fields were planted with crops that

displayed multiple shades of color, giving the impression of an enchanting quilt stretching out as far as the eye could see. Some contained green colored oats that grew two to four feet high. Others were wheat fields with plants five to six feet tall that ranged from light brown to golden. There was lush red and white clover, and many other dark green leafy crops that filled out the rest of the panoramic view. Thousands of deep blue cornflowers, red poppies, and a colorful variety of wildflowers grew intertwined like an artist's design throughout the fields.

Sometimes I would stand on top of the rolling hill overlooking this breathtaking landscape and, with the wind blowing softly, I would pretend to be a maestro conducting a waltz to one of the melodies of Johann Strauss, or perhaps a frolicsome dance by Antonin Dvorak. The colorful crops and flowers would sway in gentle unison to the rhythm of the music. After a while the wind would change in intensity and direction, creating the illusion of ballerinas entering the stage for their dance. They would perform jumps and splits, ending with graceful pirouettes. Sometimes a sudden calm and silence would prevail for a short moment, only to be gently broken by the sound of a trickling brook meandering through the fields nearby. This was the cue for the chorale to join in. The frogs were first with their croaking voices, followed by cooing doves and chirping crickets. Sometimes bumblebees would come to join in for the orchestra's rousing finale! It truly was a beautiful place to be, to relax, and to dream. Life could not have been any better. Everything looked so very promising for the future.

On the horizon, however, dark clouds began to form. A storm was brewing. The flicker of lightning and the rolling sound of thunder echoed in the distance, announcing the tumultuous violence of the tempest that would bring upheaval and anxiety to this serene and peaceful life.

Chapter 4

Summer vacation of 1938 was over. In three months I'd turn 13, and on that day, according to Jewish tradition, I would enter the elite club of "manhood." Preparations for my Bar Mitzvah had to be made. We had to decide where it was going to be held, who was going to be invited, and we had to make sure that I was ready for my Torah reading. The latter was our most immediate concern. Every Friday evening and Saturday morning, I went with my dad and brother to attend services in a semi-Orthodox Temple. The print in the Torah is written in the language of the ancient Israelites, which was spoken by the Jews long before the time of Christ. Rabbis and Cantors are well versed in Hebrew language and learning. A Cantor is considered a Rabbi's helper. He performs prayer songs and readings from the Torah during services.

One such Cantor, a man with a bushy gray beard, long side curls, a huge black silk hat, and a long black satin coat that was tied with a sash around his waist became my Hebrew tutor for the next three months. He lived across town in one of the oldest sections of Kraków, called "Kazimierz" after the Polish King who established this ghetto back in the 1600s. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews remained in the old ghetto, where they had developed a close religious community.

The age of this old part of the city was visible everywhere. It was a drab looking place. Everything was gray, and the walls of many of the worn-out buildings leaned to one side. Even the cobblestone streets were worn out from age. The scarcity of greenery or any bright color gave an outsider the impression of destitution, and yet everything was extremely clean. The very religious local gentry, young and old, wore black outer attire with white shirts. All males from a very young age had side locks and wore head coverings at all times.

I traveled there every Saturday morning to see my tutor. Since it was all the way across town, I rode my bike to the outskirts of Kazimierz, locked