"As superbly written as it is haunting in its truth, *Within These Walls of Sorrow* unveils the darkness of inhumanity and the soul-wrenching fate of millions in Poland during Hitler's reign of terror in WWII. Once again Amanda Barratt captures with riveting intensity the lives of her characters who fight to survive against insurmountable odds before the maw of the Nazi beast. Yet amid the despair and loss, she shines a fine, beautiful light on the hope, courage, and dignity of these people—enough to make one weep. *Within These Walls of Sorrow* should be required reading for this generation, and for any who continue to deny the Holocaust. Truly a tour de force."

—KATE BRESLIN, best-selling author of *For Such a Time*

"In *Within These Walls of Sorrow*, Amanda Barratt tenderly honors the experiences of Polish Jews during the German occupation by drawing readers into the inner lives of a few ordinary people who find themselves immersed in unimaginable horrors designed to strip a people of their identity and worth. Barratt weaves an unflinching tale that implores readers to stop and see, not a massive crowd of people, but individual hearts and souls. This book will linger in your heart and mind long after you've read the final page and will leave you with the question, *Would you choose self-preservation or stand in the face of evil for a slim chance at saving another, aware that everything you have to give can't possibly be enough?*"

—AMANDA COX, Christy Award–winning author of *The Edge of Belonging*

"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend, and Amanda Barratt's heartrending novel shows this truth in stark and powerful reality. Amid the Nazi terrors of war-torn Kraków, the love of family and the bonds of friendship withstand the ultimate test of faith and courage to emerge victorious. *Within These Walls of Sorrow* is an emotional journey that acknowledges both the horror of war and the resilience of the human spirit."

—STEPHANIE LANDSEM, author of *In a Far-Off Land*

"Barratt refuses to look away or ignore the heartbreak and depredations imposed upon the Jews of Poland during the Holocaust. With writing both sensitive and courageous, she brings to life the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental hardships that those forced into the ghettos endured. In the midst of the sorrow, though, are glimmers of goodness, light, and hope that will encourage the reader that God is still sovereign and that He can be found even in the worst circumstances. Through the power of story, Barratt shows that even the smallest kindness can change a life."

—ERICA VETSCH, author of the Thorndike & Swann Regency Mysteries

# Within These Walls *of* Sorrow

BY AMANDA BARRATT

*My Dearest Dietrich*

*The White Rose Resists*

*Within These Walls of Sorrow*

"Far as the Curse Is Found" in *Joy to the World*

# Within These Walls *of* Sorrow

*A Novel of World War II Poland*

Amanda Barratt

Kregel Publications

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*In memory of the millions who suffered and died in the Holocaust.*
*May their stories never be forgotten.*

*And to the pharmacists of the Apteka Pod Orłem:*
*Tadeusz Pankiewicz, Irena Droździkowska,*
*Helena Krywaniuk, and Aurelia Danek-Czortowa.*

*Soli Deo gloria.*

*Come, take this giant leap with me*
*into the other world . . . the other place*
*and trace the eclipse of humanity . . .*
*where children burned while mankind stood by,*
*and the universe has yet to learn why*
*. . . has yet to learn why.*

Sonia Schreiber Weitz,
survivor of the Kraków ghetto

*We were not heroes. It was just our bounden duty.*

Tadeusz Pankiewicz

# PRELUDE

*Zosia*
*Kraków, Poland*

THE SUN SHONE THE day I married Ryszard Lewandowski. Kraków, the city spun from a fairy tale, with its castle on Wawel Hill and medieval market square, with its gothic churches and meandering cobbled streets held a special kind of beauty as we stepped arm in arm from the doors of the Mariacki Church, its magnificent redbrick towers rising against a perfect blue sky.

My heart was full, beating with the promise of our future as Ryszard and I pledged ourselves to one another, as our family and friends encircled us at the festivities afterward and sang "*Sto Lat*," lustily chorusing their good wishes for us to live for "a hundred years, a hundred years!"

It was 1938, after all. The world still held a golden tint, war only a rumor nipping at the back of our minds. Germany's recent annexation of Austria . . . yes, it was troubling, but in a remote sort of way, rather like reading a stranger's obituary. Since the early '30s, we'd watched from afar as the man with the fiery oration and inkblot of a mustache rose to power on a tide of "Sieg heil!"

But war? Some considered it, but who really believed it would happen? Who could comprehend how war would sweep across Europe, how swiftly our lives would be caught up in its vortex?

I'd recently graduated with a master's degree from Jagiellonian University's Faculty of Pharmacy and now I was *Pani* Zosia Lewandowska, wife of a distinguished professor of law. As Ryszard and I ascended the stairs to his flat, I thought only of the life we were beginning together and the night before us, the first we would share as husband and wife.

"Do you think anyone minded we left the party early?" I asked, Ryszard's fingers woven through mine, my suitcase in his other hand.

"I did notice your father looking at me rather severely as we made our departure."

I didn't need to glance at him to picture the faintest of grins tugging at his

lips. My laugh spilled out. "That's *Tata* for you. But what else do you expect from a man who's just given away his only child?"

We reached the second-floor landing. Ryszard set down the suitcase and curled his hand around my waist, pulling me against him. "You've always been your own woman entirely." He gazed down at me in the half light. "No one but you, Zosia Lewandowska, could give yourself away."

"And now?" Our lips were but a breath apart.

"Now"—he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, fingers lingering against my skin—"we belong to each other." He pressed his lips against mine and my arms wound around his neck, our kiss deepening. He tasted faintly of wine and my senses swam with the warmth of his mouth on mine.

*We should go upstairs.* The thought came rather dizzily to my mind.

At a creak, we both started. Turned. The door to the left stood ajar—I was sure it had not been before—and a girl, bare feet peeking out beneath the hem of her robe, stood in the opening.

Her eyes went wide, the reddening in her cheeks visible even in the dim light. For several seconds, she stared at us, looking very much as though she wanted to sink into the floor.

My cheeks warmed as I wished I could disappear right along with her. What had Ryszard and I been thinking, kissing each other senseless on the second-floor landing?

"Good evening, Hania." Ryszard was first to speak, smoothing a hand over his disheveled hair.

"G-good evening, *Pan* Professor." Her voice barely rose above a whisper. Her thick brown hair hung around her shoulders, a match to her still-wide eyes.

"I don't believe you've met my wife, have you? Zosia, you remember Dr. Silberman? We met him last week when we brought over some of your things."

"I do, yes." I recalled the quiet middle-aged gentleman who helped carry my heavy crates of books up to Ryszard's flat.

"This is his eldest daughter, Hania. Hania, this is my wife, Magistra Zofia Lewandowska. We were married just this afternoon."

I stepped forward, smiling, hoping to ease her awkwardness. "I'm very glad to meet you." I still wore my understated wedding gown of pearl-hued silk, and doubtless my lipstick was hopelessly smudged, my swept-back curls disordered.

"I'm glad to meet you too." Her smile shyly unfolded. She swung a glance into the flat behind her. "I have to go. I'm not supposed to be up." She hesitated. "I hope you'll both be very happy." She flushed again.

We thanked her and Ryszard picked up my suitcase and took my hand. I couldn't help but smile at her, this young girl watching Ryszard and me as if we were film stars, as if there was something magical about us simply because we were newlyweds.

I did not imagine then how the years would stitch the fabric of our lives together, how the inexorable pull of war would bind us. Then, she was just a shy fifteen-year-old schoolgirl living in the flat below ours, and I was twenty-two, a bride blissfully in love.

Ryszard and I reached the third floor, and he unlocked the door of his flat. The moment the door shut, we fell into each other, and the rest of the world fell away.

The day I married Ryszard Lewandowski remains in my mind like the photograph snapped of us outside the church, sepia-tinted, me smiling up at him, his hand over mine, my arms full of lilies and carnations. The beginning of a beautiful dream.

But how quickly dreams dissolve into nightmares.

How quickly.

# CHAPTER ONE

*Hania*
*March 3, 1941*

THE *KRAKAUER ZEITUNG* RESTS on the table, the bold lettering of its masthead staring up at us above the fold. It's only a newspaper, black type and fresh newsprint, the sharp scent of ink clinging to its pages. But as my gaze fastens on it, lying atop the cream cloth, fear lodges in my stomach like a cold, hard stone. Darkness has long since fallen beyond the windows, the faces of my family cast in the dim glow of the light above the table.

"Read it out loud, Adam." Mama sits stiffly at one end of our dining table. Beside her, my younger sister Rena twists the ends of her plait around her finger, wide eyes fixed on Tata. My fifteen-year-old brother Szymon folds his arms, inky black strands of hair falling over his forehead.

The paper rustles as Tata picks it up and unfolds it. "Ordinance. Sanitary, economic, and security considerations make it imperative to house the Jewish population of Kraków in a special, enclosed section of the city, the Jewish residential district. The Jewish residential district will be located in the district of Podgórze, on the far side of the Wisła River. Without exception, it is forbidden for Jews to live outside the area of the Jewish residential district. The following streets constitute its boundaries . . ."

Beneath the table, I clench my hands together in my lap.

"All Jews in the city of Kraków residing outside the boundaries of the residential district are ordered to relocate by the twentieth of March 1941. The allocation of living quarters will be handled by the *Judenrat* housing office. Non-Jews residing in the area designated for the Jewish residential district are ordered to relocate to the district of Kazimierz no later than the twentieth of March 1941. The allocation of flats will be handled by the Municipal Housing Office. Failure to comply with this ordinance will result in severe punishment. Signed, Governor of the Kraków District, Dr. Wächter." Tata refolds the paper.

This morning, Mama and I stood in front of an advertising pillar, reading the freshly printed ordinance in silence. I've had a whole day to absorb this news.

But hearing the decree spoken aloud is like taking in the words for the first time. Tata has many voices. When he treats a nervous patient, his voice is calming; when teasing me and Rena, his voice rumbles with laughter; when reciting kiddush on Shabbat, it is resonant; when whispering in Mama's ear, making her smile, it is loving.

Now his voice is blank.

It is Tata's blank voice that seals the words and their reality inside of me.

"At least we know now where we'll be going." Purplish circles bruise the skin beneath Mama's eyes. Each passing month imprints a deeper weariness upon her features, her skin sallow, iron-gray tendrils straggling from her chignon. "The rumors have gone on long enough. Podgórze is only on the other side of the river. It could be worse."

"Will we be able to come and go freely, or will they trap us in this ghetto like rabbits in a cage?" Szymon's tone has a cynical edge.

*Ghetto*. The stone in my stomach grows heavier, colder. This will not be the first time Kraków's Jewish population has been driven into a separate district of the city. It's as if we've gone back to the 15th century and are once again being forced into isolation.

The Germans have already established ghettos in Warsaw and other smaller towns in occupied Poland.

Kraków, the city of my birth and the capital of the *Generalgouvernement*—the Polish territory under German rule but not annexed to the Reich—is next.

"Surely they won't keep us prisoner." Mama twists her clasped hands atop the tablecloth.

"I wouldn't be so sure." Szymon shoves hair off his forehead. "The Nazis would like nothing better than to lock us all up. Anyone who can't see it is either delusional or stupid."

"Don't speak to your mama like that."

I start at the harshness in Tata's tone. In all my growing up years, my mild-mannered tata rarely raised his voice to us, disciplining his children with firm but quiet words, the shame we felt at having displeased him worse than the pain of any punishment.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Szymon says quietly. "I meant no disrespect."

"It's all right, Son." Mama gives a weak smile.

"We're fortunate to have been issued *Kennkarten*," Tata says. "Those who weren't can hardly show their faces on the street on account of the roundups. The Germans are forcing all the Jews out of the city. The rest is simply a matter of location."

"Frank and his higher-ups are tired of having their delicate tastes offended,

ruling from a city polluted by Jewish filth and disease. They want their capital cleaned out, and this time they're not doing it by half measures." My brother's words hang in the air.

Neither of our parents disputes them.

"Do we have to go?" Rena's voice is quiet and uncertain. She's only twelve. How can she be expected to take in yet another way in which the foundations of our lives are slowly disintegrating?

How can any of us take it in?

"I'm afraid so, Renusia." Tata's words are gentle, but strain hovers beneath their surface. "It won't be for long. Until the war is over, perhaps."

"Where will we live?" Rena asks, as if resigned to the inevitability of the ghetto.

The months since the autumn of 1939 have taught us the best way to adapt is to accept, and the sooner one accepts, the sooner one can begin to adapt. So much we've accepted that should be unacceptable, so many times we've adapted to what should not be borne . . .

"It says the Judenrat will arrange housing. They'll find a flat for us, I'm sure." I make my voice confident, comforting.

"Better for us to go now than to leave the city only to be forced into the ghetto later. This way, at least, we won't be among strangers. And surely once we're in the ghetto, we'll have some peace." Tata is back to the tone he uses in his consulting room, the calm, unquestionable logic that has settled many a patient's fears.

What he doesn't say is the people being rounded up as illegal residents because they failed to qualify as essential laborers and obtain Kennkarten authorizing them to remain in the city are no longer able to choose where they relocate but are sent to the transit camp on Mogilska Street, and from there deported wherever the Germans see fit to send them. Tata's reasoning is by moving into the ghetto voluntarily, at least we're the ones choosing when and where we go. It's as close to autonomy as ground acorns are to real coffee, but what other options do we really have?

Mama draws a long breath. "It will be difficult, but we are used to that now. And if this is the worst we must bear, we will be all right."

The strained resignation in Mama's voice gives rise to a sudden, unaccountable urge to scream. I bite my bottom lip to stop myself.

*If this is the worst we must bear . . .*

Six days after the announcement crackled over the radio—*Early this morning, German troops invaded Polish territories without a declaration of hostilities*—our occupiers arrived in Kraków, columns of helmeted soldiers, the unified stamp of their boots harsh on the cobbled street. At first, we

reassured ourselves by telling each other it wouldn't last long. Somewhere along the way—when exactly did it happen?—as the net of occupation spread across Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, and Belgium, as loudspeakers and newspapers broadcast German victory after Germany victory, we stopped believing that delusion.

Now it's: *If this is the worst we must bear . . .*

Since the September dawn when Hitler's troops marched into Kraków, the Jewish population of the city has had to bear a great many worsts.

The first edict came only two days after the Germans arrived: Jewish businesses, market stalls, and shops had to be marked with the Star of David, making them targets for plunder. That December, the SS cordoned off Kazimierz—the center of Kraków's Jewish community—searching homes, confiscating valuables, and looting synagogues. They ripped rings from women's fingers and threw priceless Torah scrolls and prayer books into the streets, trampling them in the mud.

I'll never forget the night three uniformed Germans pounded on our door with their rifle butts, then burst into our flat, demanding to know where we'd hidden our valuables and cash, helping themselves to whatever they pleased. The fact that the place under the floorboards where we'd concealed Mama's diamond ring and what was left of our savings went undetected was a swallow of victory in a meal of humiliation.

One after the other, the decrees came in such rapid succession it soon became difficult to keep up with all the restrictions imposed upon our daily lives. The occupiers ordered the formation of a Jewish council—the main purpose of which was to communicate and enforce the edicts issued by the Generalgouvernement. The first order carried out by the Judenrat was to levy a tax on all Jewish Poles whose ancestry went back four generations. A census was conducted to ensure every last one paid.

In November 1939, the governor of the Kraków District published the order: all Jews over twelve years of age must wear an armband on their right upper sleeve—a blue Star of David on a white background, the exact dimensions for which were listed in the edict. Now whenever we set foot outside, we're easily identified; before it was not always so easy to tell who was Jewish and who wasn't.

Jewish physicians can no longer treat non-Jews, so Tata lost more than half his patients. We are forbidden to gather for prayers or hold services in the synagogues. We're issued special ration books with precanceled coupons, reducing our rations to barely above half those allotted to Gentile Poles. We can no longer use public transportation; walk in the Planty, the verdant park encircling Old Town, save for a small section where Jews are still allowed; or

enter the Rynek Główny, Kraków's main square, renamed Adolf Hitler Platz. We're forbidden cinemas, theatres, cafés, and restaurants, except the few marked *Nur für Juden*—for Jews only. We can't sit on park benches, so when our feet are aching from walking everywhere, because we're also not permitted to own automobiles or motorbikes, we're not even allowed a moment's rest on a public bench. We can no longer access our savings, as bank accounts held by Jews have been frozen. Jews cannot own businesses; the most profitable enterprises have been taken over by Germans, the rest by Poles.

Jewish men and women between the ages of fourteen and sixty are subject to compulsory labor, which means at any time one might be rounded up on the way to work or to the market and made to sweep the streets, shovel snow, or do whatever the Germans assign. Since the beginning of this year, everyone has to spend eight days a month shoveling snow; those who don't get the stamps on their identity cards certifying they fulfilled the requirement are in danger of being deported.

Near the end of 1939, the decree barring Jewish students from state schools and closing Jewish private schools was issued. Oh, how my throat swelled and my chest burned to hear Rena sobbing quietly into her pillow when she could no longer attend school. It didn't affect Szymon or me because by then, all secondary schools had been closed by order of the occupiers. In this it didn't matter whether one was Jewish or not.

We've grown used to ordinances and edicts. *You are forbidden to do this. You are ordered to do that.* With each one, we tell ourselves this can be endured. We find ways to adjust and maintain an appearance of normalcy and comfort ourselves with the brittle hope that perhaps this decree will be the last. So much has already been prohibited, so many forced out of the city.

What more can they want from us? What else can they take?

When we ask each other these questions, no one is looking for an answer.

But with characteristic German efficiency, they have one ready.

An answer.

A ghetto.

• • •

*Zosia*
*March 4, 1941*

The second winter of the war is as bitter as the first. Though it's the beginning of March, the damp chill in the air retains its ice-edged bite. Wind cuts through my coat as I hasten through Old Town. A tram clatters past, its

blue-and-white body outlined by the dirty gray sky, the faces of its passengers blurred behind the windows. The rising prices of food and coal means I must count every grosz, so instead of taking the tram, I walk to and from Magister Borkowski's pharmacy to my flat on Starowiślna Street, now Alte Weichselstrasse. Renaming its streets is one of the many ways the occupiers have attempted to Germanize the capital of the Generalgouvernement since their arrival.

Golden warmth emanates from the windows of a restaurant, the light glistening on the slush-coated cobblestones. *FOR GERMANS ONLY* is displayed prominently on the door. I pause, the glow shadowing the figures inside, men in uniform and women in sleek evening gowns, dining in the restaurant's dim intimacy.

I walk on, shivering, glad it isn't snowing, at least. Loudspeakers spit the latest edict into the frosty air. The occupiers installed them on major streets to transmit their propaganda, and their drone has simply become part of the landscape, as commonplace as swastika flags. The words, first spoken in German, then repeated in Polish, form a dull blur in my ears. It's about the creation of the Jewish residential district in Podgórze, announced only yesterday. The ordinance is on every advertising pillar.

Governor-General Frank, ruling over his administration from Wawel Castle, and his officials have been issuing edicts to drive the Jews out of Kraków since last spring, first by voluntary relocation, then forced eviction. It seems they're determined to rid the city, now inhabited by thousands of Germans, of its entire Jewish population. "Sanitary considerations," read the announcement in the *Krakauer Zeitung.*

A chill seeps into me, deeper than the cold. I quicken my steps, blending into the crowd of pedestrians hurrying along the sidewalk, men and women wrapped in winter woolens, carrying market baskets or briefcases, bent against the wind. Beaten down by it.

By all of it.

I reach my flat several minutes later, the front door closing behind me. I mount the stairs, feet aching after the long day at the pharmacy and the walk home. Footsteps tap behind me and I turn, pausing on the second-floor landing.

Hania hurries up the stairs, head bent.

She glances up and I draw a sharp breath.

Mud streaks her cheek and the front of her coat, the kerchief knotted under her chin slipping loose.

"Hania, what happened? Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head. "I'm fine."

"But just look at you—you're covered in mud." I can't help but notice how worn down she is, shoulders slumped, cheeks wind chapped.

"Some boys came by while we were shoveling snow and decided to have a bit of fun. They threw snowballs at us, only the snow was muddy, so . . ." She gestures to the dirty splotches on her coat. "But I'm all right, really."

"No one tried to stop them?" The anger flaring in my chest escalates my voice. I know the type, adolescents who think it great sport to torment the Jews, showing off to their friends as if inflicting pain on those deemed defenseless somehow makes them tough.

Hania shrugs.

In the year and a half Kraków has been under occupation, the sum of suffering and humiliation endured by the Jewish people makes youths hurling snowballs seem small in comparison. Though the act itself may be of little significance, it's a sign, a symptom, of something far greater and far more frightening. Hatred against Jews has always existed in Poland, its seeds implanted so deeply few question their existence, much less seek to uproot them. In Kraków, there has been, to a certain degree, a peaceful accord, or at least a tacit kind of tolerance, Jews and non-Jews sharing business relationships and occasionally personal friendships. But in the centuries of Jews and Gentiles dwelling side by side, prejudice and persecution have run like poison through the artery of society.

Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise the degree to which the Poles have joined in the oppression of their Jewish neighbors. The Germans have only stoked the fires of time-honored tradition.

Hania's stocking has a rip at the knee. I look closer. Dried blood encrusts a nasty abrasion. "What happened to your knee?"

"I got hit with a snowball that must have had a rock in it. I slipped and fell. It's only a scrape."

Those pigs. Those vile, filthy *pigs*. If I'd been a passerby, I would not have stood by, even if Hania had been a stranger.

But I have, and the remembrance floods me with shame. Once, in the early days of the occupation, I watched as a rabble of youth made sport of an elderly man, an Orthodox Jew, mocking him and pelting him with garbage as he swept the street alongside others pressed into forced labor. The old man kept pushing his broom, head lowered, shoulders stooped, as if unable to bear the weight of his shame. I've watched German soldiers beating Jews in the street and rounding them up for work details, shearing the beards and sidelocks of Jewish men. Against the occupiers we have little recourse. But as Polish youths tormented that elderly man, I could have done something. Or at least tried.

Even as I tell myself I would not stand by, one does not know until the moment comes. Courage is strong until it is tested.

I stare at the mud on Hania's cheek and the dried blood on her knee and feel a little sick. "Come upstairs and let me have a look at your knee. I've a little tea left. You look as if you could use something warm to drink."

"That's kind but I can't, I'm afraid. Mama went to see if she could buy some bread. She sent me on ahead to help Rena with supper." She pauses, smiles sadly. "I'd say maybe some other time, but we won't be here much longer."

"Yes." I want to tell her how sorry I am, how terribly sorry it has come to this, but I'm suddenly at a loss for words. For the right ones, at least.

"You've heard then? About the Jewish district in Podgórze?"

"I think everyone has by now."

"We have to be out by the twentieth. Tata is making plans. He'll have to give up his practice, since there won't be any Jewish people left in the city for him to treat. But there will be plenty of need for doctors where we're going, so I'm sure he'll be very busy."

"Is there anything I can do?"

She hesitates. "We'll have to leave a lot of our belongings behind. This morning, Tata was talking about who we might be able to give some things to for safekeeping. If it's too much, we understand . . ." She looks embarrassed, her voice uncertain.

"Of course. Whatever I can do. And please, if there's anything else your family needs, tell your parents they have only to ask."

"I'll speak to Tata tonight." She glances toward the door. "I should go. Rena will be needing my help."

"Be sure to put a bandage on that first. You don't want an infection. Though as a doctor's daughter, I suppose I don't need to tell you that."

She gives a faint laugh, a remnant of the days before war stole the brightness from her smile. "I will." She pauses, looking into my eyes. "Thank you, Zosia."

I nod, gazing steadily back at her. Since the day I came to live in this building as the wife of Ryszard Lewandowski, an uncommon bond has grown between us, two women separated by a flight of stairs in a middle-class block of flats on Starowiślna Street. Now a swastika flies above Wawel Castle, and what separates us has nothing to do with distance.

The door closes behind her and I turn. On the third floor, I reach into my handbag for my key and unlock the door. Inside, I take off my coat and unwind my scarf and hang them on the rack. I should prepare supper, but the day has left me worn, too tired to care whether I eat.

I cross the sitting room and enter the adjoining bedroom. I tug the chain

on the lamp and kick off my shoes, then stretch out on the bed. Light casts a glow through the shade, but it does little to dispel the dank chill. Coal is scarce, and what little there is comes dear, so I rarely light the stove. The gnaw of the wind never leaves my bones, even when indoors.

Silence gathers, collecting in the air like particles of dust. Most of the time, I manage to forget—or at least pretend I do—but each evening I dread returning to the flat, knowing the silence is waiting for me. War allots little space to dwell on personal griefs. One continues on, quietly endures as best one can. Loss has left its imprint on so many homes. At least I am alone, at least I have no children . . . though sometimes, I'm overwhelmed by an ache so fierce it takes my breath. For a child to care for and cherish. A small piece of Ryszard to hold onto.

I should be grateful not to have a child. Many women whose husbands are gone are left struggling to provide for their families.

Gone.

The word echoes, its syllables an empty shell. It explains nothing and it explains everything.

One morning, the most ordinary of mornings, Ryszard was sitting across from me at breakfast, gulping his coffee, wiping his mouth with a napkin, and rising from his chair. He kissed me goodbye, a hurried brush of his lips, the kind of kiss couples share out of habit when their minds are already with the day ahead.

Recollection has a strange way of centering on certain details while others remain in shadow. I don't remember the last words we spoke to one another. I've run through those moments so many times, trying to remember, but it's as if they're just beyond my reach, or my mind has simply lost them. But the click of the door as it shut behind him reverberates through me now as clearly as it did then.

It was the sixth of November 1939.

Because of the outbreak of war, Jagiellonian University had not commenced the academic year, but as time went on, plans had been made to reopen the university. Mere days before classes were scheduled to resume, SS-Sturmbannführer Müller, chief of the *Einsatzkommando* in Kraków, ordered the rector to convene a meeting of all professors for the purpose of giving an address on the Reich's views on higher education.

But it wasn't a meeting. Müller's speech lasted five minutes. The university had opened the academic year without permission from the German authorities, proof it was a breeding ground for anti-German attitudes. Everyone, Müller said, except for the two women professors, would be deported to a concentration camp. Those who resisted would be shot.

The next day, I joined the crowd of wives and relatives gathering outside the barracks where the professors were being held, clutching parcels of food and clothing. We waited in the cold for what seemed like hours until they permitted us a brief visit with our men.

Ten minutes. Sitting across from each other, unable to touch, a few whispered words when the guard wasn't looking. Ryszard's face was battered and swollen—a guard had hit him with a rifle butt when Ryszard protested the rough treatment of a colleague. He told me he had hopes they would soon be released, that someone would realize the senselessness of arresting nearly two hundred academics and intervene. I wonder now whether he truly believed it or if he said it only to comfort me.

Two days later, the men were loaded onto a train bound for Germany. After a brief imprisonment in Breslau, they were transported yet again.

This time to Sachsenhausen.

Each day, I told myself my husband would soon come home, rereading the few letters he managed to send, even after I'd memorized every word, kneeling in church until my knees could no longer bear the ache, begging God to keep him safe and restore him to me.

At the end of January, I opened the door to the postman holding a square box.

I signed for the package, carried it inside. Beneath the brown paper wrapping lay a letter.

*This is to inform you that on 13 January 1940, the prisoner Ryszard Lewandowski died at Sachsenhausen. Cause of death: pneumonia.*

The box contained Ryszard's ashes.

For long minutes, I stood in the sitting room, clutching the box, eyes dry.

Then I started to scream.

Over a hundred professors were released at the beginning of February and the release of others followed in the coming months. Those who survived returned to Kraków gaunt, almost unrecognizable. At least a dozen professors died at Sachsenhausen. Others never recovered from their ordeal, dying not long after they arrived home.

It wasn't until the professors returned to Kraków that I learned the truth. Before, I could not understand it. Ryszard had been one of the younger men, only forty years old, and had never been in ill health. One of those who'd been with Ryszard told me how after hours of standing at attention in subzero temperatures, an elderly colleague of theirs had fainted. Ryszard had lifted him up and supported him during the rest of roll call, but one of the SS noticed and beat Ryszard severely before ordering him to stand at attention on the *Appellplatz* for the rest of the day.

By nightfall, Ryszard had collapsed. He never regained consciousness.

I'd sat opposite this well-spoken gentleman, one of my husband's colleagues. The cup of tea in my hand grew cold as he spoke of the strength Ryszard had been to others, of how on Christmas Eve he'd led some of the men in singing "God Is Born" and spoken a few words of hope on a night spent far away from their dear ones.

The professor pressed a scrap of paper into my hand, its edges tattered, the page stained and worn, some words almost illegible. He'd found it among Ryszard's few belongings and kept it with him during his imprisonment. And now he gave it to me. These words, penned in a hand I knew so well.

*There is evil and there is good and there is the space between. We are given free will to choose where we stand. Evil thrives when good men choose the space between. We cannot*

The last sentence stood unfinished.

# CHAPTER TWO

*Zosia*
*March 18, 1941*

DR. SILBERMAN ANSWERS THE door in his shirtsleeves. In the years I've known the Silberman family, I don't recall ever seeing him without a coat and tie.

"Pani Lewandowska. Please, come in."

"Thank you." I follow him into the flat. Suitcases and a trunk are scattered throughout the sitting room, an assortment of items cluttering the chairs and side tables, the wallpaper darker in places where frames once hung. In the dining room, Pani Silberman and Rena are busy packing dishes into a crate, their movements rushed, almost frantic.

"Faiga, Pani Lewandowska is here." Dr. Silberman turns to me. "If you'll permit me a few moments, I'll gather up what we have."

"Of course."

He leaves the room and I turn to the women. "Good evening, Pani Silberman. Hello, Rena." It's strange, somehow, to be in their dining room, greeting them as I would on any other ordinary day, when nothing about the present situation is in the least ordinary.

"It's kind of you to come." Hair straggles from Pani Silberman's chignon. "I hope you'll pardon the disarray."

Only a housewife as fastidious as Pani Silberman would think to apologize for the state of her home at a time like this. She's always taken such pride in it though. The times I've visited, I've often seen her lovingly straightening a piece of bric-a-brac, smoothing the lace doilies on the side tables. One would be hard put to find so much as a speck of dust anywhere.

"Please, don't apologize." I hold out the cloth-wrapped loaf of bread. "I brought you this. I thought you might not have had time to think about supper today."

"Thank you, that's very kind." Pani Silberman continues to empty the china cabinet. "Rena, will you take that to the kitchen, please?"

Rena brushes sawdust from her hands. I smile as I hand her the bread. She gives me a little smile in return, but her eyes remain somber as she leaves the room. Pani Silberman kneels and places dishes in the crate. Spilled sawdust scatters the floor around her.

"Here." I cross the room and bend down beside her. "Let me help you."

She glances up, face taut. Fatigue has drawn circles beneath her eyes. "Thank you," she says quietly.

I reach for the plates and help her pack them in the sawdust. The crate is full by the time Dr. Silberman returns, Rena with him, each carrying an armload. They set the items on the table.

I rise and wipe my hands on my skirt. On the table is a silver coffee set, a tablecloth of finely worked lace, a volume with the word *Photographs* embossed in gold, and four framed photographs. One of a young Dr. and Pani Silberman on their wedding day, the second of a seated middle-aged couple with children of various ages gathered around them, taken probably several years before the Great War. In the third, Pani Silberman holds a round-cheeked baby, her smile radiant. Baby Hania looks up curiously at her tata rather than at the camera. Pride and love shine from Dr. Silberman's eyes, a memory preserved in muted black and white. The last is of the Silberman family, taken only a few years ago. They look as if they're on holiday, the peak of a mountain rising in the background as they stand, smiling, windblown, the carefree moment captured by the camera.

I look up from the photographs to find the Silbermans watching me, faces drawn tight. They are holding themselves together by threads.

"I'll keep them safe for you."

Dr. Silberman nods. "We know you will."

Pani Silberman regards me with the same steady assurance. "It's good of you to do this for us."

The weight of their trust settles on my shoulders. I heard the crashes and thuds the night SS men searched the Silbermans' flat, robbing them of their valuables, of possessions woven into the fabric of their family for generations. The items on the table are all the more precious because they've already lost so much. It humbles me to be entrusted with them.

"There's no need for thanks." I swallow. "I only wish it did not have to come to this."

"It won't be so bad." Dr. Silberman gives a slight, sympathetic smile, as if seeking to reassure me. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Though what reassurance could I offer that wouldn't taste false? "Podgórze is only on the other side of the river. We'll manage. Until the war is over, at least."

Shame fills me and then anger flares quick at its heels. That these good

people are on the eve of being forced from their home isn't the worst of it. Non-Jews have lost their homes as well, ordered to pack their belongings and vacate as the Germans requisitioned the best residences in the city. But though we are all at the mercy of the occupiers, the Silbermans are being uprooted because of the simple fact of their religion and birth. It's wrong. So terribly wrong.

And I can do nothing to stop it.

"Yes, of course you will." Do I say it to reassure them or convince myself? Maybe it's futile on both counts.

Dr. Silberman stacks the framed photographs and wraps them in the tablecloth. "I'll help you carry everything upstairs."

I should be going. Doubtless they still have much to do this evening. This is their last night in their home, and they must surely wish to be alone as a family. But I can't leave without saying goodbye to Hania.

I turn to Pani Silberman. "Is Hania here? I'd like to say goodbye to her if I could."

Pani Silberman nods, her faint smile tinged with sorrow. "She's in the kitchen."

"Thank you," I say quietly.

The Silbermans' kitchen is at the back of the flat, the door ajar. In the doorway, I pause. Hania stands at the kitchen dresser, an absent look in her eyes as she packs a hamper with cooking utensils.

"Hania?"

She turns, as if startled, perhaps pulled out of some memory. "Zosia, I didn't hear you come in."

"I just came to collect what you have for me. Your father is going to help me bring it upstairs. Is there anything you'd like me to keep for you?"

She hesitates. "No, but thank you. It eases my parents' minds to know our things will be safe with you."

The murmur of voices from the dining room filters into the kitchen. "I wanted to say goodbye."

She nods, presses her lips together.

"We may not be neighbors anymore, but we won't be far away. Perhaps you might visit. You're always welcome." Even as I say the words, I wonder how easy it will be for the inhabitants of the ghetto to move freely outside its boundaries.

"I'll come if I can." Hania's voice is hesitant, as if she wonders the same. She lifts her chin. "I'm sure we'll see each other soon." How young she looks, chin bravely lifted, even as she blinks as though forcing back tears, standing on the precipice of a future that promises no certain footing.

For an unguarded moment, her eyes hide nothing from me. In them is everything she does not say, a world of fear and uncertainty and loss.

The ache in my chest expands. I want to tell her everything will be all right, but I can't because I don't know if it will.

Instead I keep my smile strong. "Then there's no need to say goodbye."

"You're right." She smiles, a forced steadiness in it, only the slightest waver at its edges. "Why should we say goodbye?"

• • •

*Hania*

At last the long day draws to an end. Part of me is glad to put it behind me, yet another part wishes I could slow time, stretch out these final hours in the place I've called home as long as I can remember. Despite the hardships we've faced since the war began, despite everything that has been taken from us, we still had our flat. The familiarity we found within its walls gave us a measure of security, or at least the illusion of one as the storm raged outside.

Now its loss is added to the others.

We finish packing long after dark and sit down to supper, the last we will share around our table. Tata sold it to Pan Woźniak, our landlord, along with the furnishings in our sitting room. For them, Pan Woźniak paid a third of their value. We weren't in much of a position to haggle. In any case, we couldn't have moved them to the ghetto.

Though I'm hungry, I have to force myself to swallow the cold potato pancakes and chew the bread Zosia brought. We speak little, the scrape of our forks uncomfortably loud in the silence. No one feels like eating, except maybe Szymon, but we do anyway, forcing bite after bite until we finish the meal. Strain betrays itself in the faces of my family, as if we're but echoes of the selves that once filled this room with liveliness and laughter.

Mama offers to help with the dishes, but she looks so worn, I insist she leave it to Rena and me. In the silent kitchen, we repeat the routine begun long ago, continued evening after evening, year after year. I wash and Rena dries. I wipe the table and she sweeps the floor. There's no point in bothering with chores in a house that will no longer be ours after tomorrow, but we do not ask each other whether we should do them. We simply complete the tasks in silence, as if tonight is nothing more than the end of another day in an unbroken string of ordinary life.

Before leaving the kitchen, I pause to glance once more around the room, making sure everything is scrubbed and tidy.

I pass the sitting room on my way to bed. How strange and vacant it looks, suitcases, the trunk, and crates piled on the floor, the walls bare. Tata sits in his favorite armchair, muted lamplight casting his features in shadow. Through the days of preparation, he's remained strong for us, but now he slumps in the chair, eyes distant, almost dazed, the cracks in his control settling into his face. Though not an imposing man in height or build, my tata has always seemed so handsome and distinguished, a twinkle never far from his eyes. I ache to see how he has aged, how the light has left his gaze.

I pause beside his chair and bend to kiss his cheek. "Good night, Tata."

He reaches up and pulls me close for a moment, his cheek scratchy against mine. I breathe in the dusky scent of his pipe tobacco. He doesn't smoke as often as he once did, but he must have done so tonight, perhaps seeking some small comfort from the familiar habit. "Sweet sleep, my Hania."

I leave him there, sitting alone in the quiet room.

Rena is already in bed when I come into our room in my nightdress after brushing my teeth in the lavatory. I cross the room, the floorboards cold against my bare feet, and slip beneath the sheets, pulling the eiderdown to my chin.

"Good night, Rena," I call softly.

She doesn't echo my good night as she usually does. Maybe she's already asleep.

I close my eyes, listening to the murmur of my parents' voices down the hall and Szymon moving about in the room next to ours.

Sometime later, as I drift in the space between wakefulness and sleep, a voice whispers, "Can I come into bed with you?"

I open my eyes.

Rena stands beside my bed, a slight shadow in a pale nightgown.

I scoot over, making room for her. She crawls beneath the covers, resting her head next to mine on the pillow. It isn't until she's beside me that I realize she's shaking.

"Renusia, what is it?"

She doesn't answer, her body trembling.

I wrap my arms around her. "Shhh," I whisper. "It's going to be all right."

"I'm so afraid." Her voice is small. "I wish I wasn't afraid. I wish we didn't have to go."

It's the first time she's spoken about our move to the ghetto since the night we read the edict. Since then, she's been withdrawn, retreating into herself like a small animal into its burrow. It's worried me to see her so, but each time I've asked, she's always insisted she's fine.

My heart squeezes.

*Why is this happening to us?*

"I know. I'm afraid too." I haven't spoken the words aloud, and to voice them now feels like a confession. "But we'll be all right. You'll see."

"How long will we have to live there?"

"A few months, at least, maybe a year. Until the war is over." Will that day ever come? Germany and its allies have conquered and occupied most of Europe. Never would we have believed they could be capable of such victories until they achieved them. How are they ever to be overcome? The thought fills me with a panicked kind of despair, and I push it away before it tightens its grip.

"What will it be like?" Her breath warms my cheek. She's still shaking but less than before.

"Not as nice as this, probably. But we'll have our own things with us, and we'll make it as much like home as we can. It doesn't matter where we are so long as we're together. That's always the most important thing, no matter what happens. Now, try to sleep."

Rena's eyes drift closed as her warm body nestles against mine. Minutes pass as her breaths lengthen and she relaxes in sleep, and I wonder how much of what I told my sister will be true.