

- Chapter 1 -

An Ordinary Family

From the window of our apartment, I look down on the bustling streets. The morning sun shines on my street, *Koszarowa Ulica*, a busy thoroughfare in *Radom's* Jewish quarter. Placing my hand on the window, I feel the warmth radiate through the glass. The bright August morning pours into my bedroom, casting away the shadows of a doubt-filled night. The ordinary ebb and flow of life seems to continue in a reassuring cycle of sunrises and sunsets.

Across the street, the shopkeepers are opening their stores. Michal the baker comes out and looks at the sky. A smile spreads across his plump face as he brushes some flour from his prominent nose. Mrs. Rabinowicz greets him, and with a last wistful glance at the sky, he follows her into his bakery.

The birds' songs crescendo in the tall chestnut trees lining the street, adding to the symphony of daily life. People hurry through the busy streets in pursuit of their daily callings. Bicyclists weave among the horse-drawn *dorozka's*¹, the principle form of transportation throughout Poland's cities. Life seemed normal enough on this warm summer day in 1939.

I rub my eyes in an effort to dispel the dream that still plagues me, trying to make sense of the visions of the night. It has been two years since my beloved *zaida*² passed away. Last night in my sleep, he came to me. Reaching across the barriers that separate the living from the dead, he touched me in an urgent gesture to communicate. Standing at the foot of my bed silently beckoning me to acknowledge his presence, he hovered; his large immaterial body shimmered before me. His eyes, the color of blue ice, bore into me through the veil of death. He conveyed a warning I could not fathom. The ghostly apparition had disturbed my peaceful slumber and I had brusquely shooed my grandfather away, reminding him that he belonged in the afterworld of the dead.

I awoke with a horrible feeling of guilt and remorse. Why had I not reached out to him full of the love we once felt for one another? I had not asked him why he was there. Instead, in the imaginary landscape of my dream, I had told him to leave and not to return. How could I have sent my beloved grandfather away? I tried to brush the vision from my mind and replace it with the happy memory of my grandfather as he was in life, Jekiel *starke*, meaning Jekiel the strong in Yiddish. Rhythmically swaying in his rocking chair, he impatiently waited for our

1 Horse drawn buggy

2 Grandfather in Yiddish

cherished daily routine—when I climbed on his lap and kissed him. Together we would rock as he told me stories of his youth, the security of his arms enfolding me, his white beard tickling until I was reduced to giggles. The fond memories of a favorite grandchild encircled me in a blissful cloak of warmth and safety, shielding me from the terrors of the dream.

My *zaida*, a pillar of our community, was sorely missed by all. Although my brother Abek and I were too young to attend his funeral, I remember my parents' description of that saddest of days. Seldom had there been seen such an outpouring of respect and honor for a citizen. My grandfather had been an important patron of an orphanage the Rothschild family had founded in *Radom* a century before. It was one of many institutions established by charitable benefactors to provide for those less fortunate. The Jewish community was well organized in caring for its own.

The funeral had been a solemn affair on a gray rainy morning. A special *dorozka*, drawn by white horses, pulled the funeral bier containing my grandfather's coffin. Behind in sorrow had walked my parents, grandmother, and sister, along with my uncles and aunts, cousins, friends of the family, and dignitaries from the community. Following them, walked more than a hundred children from the orphanage, flowing in a slow dignified river of grief to the old Jewish cemetery dating from the tenth century. There, my grandfather was laid to rest surrounded by ancient tombstones, testaments to the Jewish community's continuance and prosperity in Poland. For centuries the Jewish people had been persecuted and exiled from kingdom to king-

dom until finally they had found a safe haven given asylum by a benevolent Polish king.

My grief is an empty void within me and now I have driven away the ghost of my *zaida*. Turning from the window, I wonder if he will ever return to my dreams.

I hear my grandmother call from the next room, “*Dinale, kym a wek fin fencter est za speit ci gain ci shuleh.*” (Dina, get away from the window you are going to be late for school.) I hurry into the spacious kitchen and grab my grandmother from behind, squeezing and kissing her firmly on the cheek, “Good morning *Bubysy*, it’s the most beautiful day!”

“Good morning *Maidele*, come and eat your breakfast. Did you sleep well?”

“No, I tossed and turned, from strange dreams, I guess.”

“What dreams, tell me about them maybe we can make sense of them? They say that dreams are a premonition of what the future holds.”

“Don’t worry *Bubysy*. They can’t be very important because I can’t remember what they were.” How could I tell my grandmother I had spent the night wrestling with the ghost of her dead husband? She would attach all kinds of superstitious meaning to my visions.

“I am sorry you didn’t sleep well sweetheart, but at least today is Friday and you can sleep late tomorrow.”

Nodding, I give her a reassuring smile. I do not like to upset this sweet woman whose life is solely dedicated to her children and grandchildren. My grandmother lives with us, as had my grandfather before his death at age 72. The two had made an incongruous couple, visually at least. He was a strapping giant

of a man well over six feet and she a tiny bit of a woman barely reaching his chest. Spending time with my grandfather had been my greatest joy. Perhaps a bit jealous, my grandmother sometimes felt I occupied a little too much of his time and she would banish me outside when I was overtiring him. Several years before in a moment of childhood frustration, I had retaliated and struck back at her. Resentful of being cast off from his lap and forced outside to play, I had pushed my grandmother and she had lost her balance, falling down the stairs in front of our building. Fortunately, she was only bruised and not harmed, but I had received a severe punishment and was not allowed to play outside for a week. My father, who never spoke above a whisper, was furious with me, banishing me to my room until my grandmother was well enough to get out of bed. My grandfather, who always sided with his beloved granddaughter, forgave me without reservation, sneaking into my room to keep me company, his pockets laden with forbidden treats. The incident had filled me with a well-deserved sense of guilt. I was especially obedient and loving of my grandmother thereafter.

Snatching a freshly baked roll from the basket, I sit down at the table next to my younger brother Abek, tousling his tight blond curls.

He brushes my hand away from his hair. “*Mamashy* says you have to take me with you and Fela when you go to the movies tomorrow.”

“There is no way that you are coming, Abek! Fela and I have been planning this for weeks and we don’t need you to ruin our day.”

“You have to take me. *Mamashy* said so!”

“We’ll see about that!”

Abek looks pleadingly to *Bubysy* for her intervention.

“Dina, don’t torture your brother.” Grandmother places a bowl of fresh blueberries and cream in front of me and I begin to eat. Kissing Abek’s forehead she continues, “If your mother says Abek can go, than he will go.” She smiles at Abek smoothing his curls, “That is enough arguing for one morning. Now eat your breakfast *kindele*¹ and off you go to school.”

The effort to define my place in my family is a constant dilemma for me. I crave confirmation of my uniqueness as the middle child. My first-born sister, who is sixteen, is clearly the standard against which all comparisons are made, both in intellect and beauty. My younger brother of seven holds the lofty position of being the long awaited son and baby everyone dotes on. At ten, who am I next to these two bright planets in the universe? Sighing, I resign myself to the inevitable intrusion of my brother on my weekend plans. Bounding from the chair, I grab my book bag.

My grandmother kisses and hugs me, her last words dissolving in the air as I dash through the door.

“Remember Dina, straight home after school it is Shabbat and your parents will be home early.”

As I run down the stairs, I think of my mother and father who had left in the early hours of morning to open our butcher shop on *Rynek* 13, a few blocks from our home. I pictured my mother sweeping the front steps of our store, greeting the passersby on the street. Always cheerful, smiling, and welcoming, my mother has a devoted following of customers in the gentile

community and is admired as a successful businesswoman in the Jewish community. In Poland, it is unusual for a woman to work, but my mother loves the independence that working affords her. Maintaining a home is a huge job in itself, but mama prides herself on perfectly balancing her family and working life. In their large store, the tiles scrubbed to a dazzling sheen, my parents work side-by-side providing for their many customers.

The morning light half blinds me with its brilliance as I walk from the cover of our courtyard into the busy Friday pedestrian traffic. My neighbor and girlfriend, Fela waits for me on the street. “*Dzien dobry*¹ Fela, sorry I’m late, were you waiting long?”

Smiling Fela raises her thick brown brows and questions, “*Nu?* So, what’s up?” Fela had an uncanny ability to read my moods.

I shudder remembering the ghostly specter of my grandfather, “I had a dream last night that was so real; my *zaida* came to me and I sent him away. I can’t get it out of my mind, I feel sick about it. Do you think he will ever come to me in a dream again?”

“You are a goose. Why did you send him away?”

Turning and walking toward school, we cut through the slower moving people on the street.

“I was frightened; I’m not used to being visited by ghosts. He just stood at the foot of my bed glowing... trying to tell me something. I don’t know why I sent him away. I should have welcomed him instead of shoing him away. Why do you think he came to me?”

“He probably misses you as much as you miss him. Besides, it was a dream. Your grandfather loved you so much; even his ghost would forgive you anything.” She takes my hand and gives

¹ Children, Yiddish

¹ Good morning, Polish

a reassuring squeeze. “He’ll be back, don’t worry. Just don’t tell him to go away next time.” We walk in silence as I contemplate my doubts.

Changing the subject, anxiety grips Fela’s voice. “I wish it was only ghosts that I am afraid of. Day and night, all my parents talk about is Hitler. ‘Hitler’s henchmen are beating the Jews.’ ‘Hitler’s henchmen are seizing Jewish businesses.’ It is like a broken record with a needle stuck. All I hear, day and night is the name Hitler!”

“I know it’s horrible. My parents talk of nothing else but what Hitler is doing to the poor Jews of Germany and Austria. Every night they sit by the radio listening to him scream his hatred for the Jews. *Tata* says that he is afraid the Germans want Poland.”

Fela nods, her face a mask of foreboding. “I know. Ever since *Krystallnacht*, it has gotten much worse. Do you think the Germans will try to take Poland?”

I reply in a low voice, “I hope not, but *Tata* says that nothing can stop them if they attack us.”

The unforeseeable future shadows our steps as we walk in the dazzling sunlight, a sharp contrast to our worries. Fela and I know more about the current situation of the world than either of us would like. It is hard to ignore the constant barrage of bad news that swirls about us. A gloom settles over our conversation as we arrive at school.

Waiting for my teacher, Mrs. Felzenzwalbe, to arrive, I am consumed by the unusual dream of my grandfather. How I missed the man who had paved the way for the good life that my family enjoyed. My grandfather’s struggles as a young man making his way in the world, like so many Jew’s of his time, is a study in hard

work and industriousness. Traveling and developing a relationship with distant farmers, he began importing cattle from Russia and selling them in *Radom*. He achieved early success and was well respected in the community. A short time before his death, I was allowed to accompany him to the livestock market where he purchased beef at the large outdoor marketplace. My grandfather had suffered a wound in his heel that turned to gangrene. Unfortunately, the doctors were not able to save his leg and it had been amputated below the knee. Consequently, he walked with the aid of crutches. I attended him on this trip to carry his briefcase. I could not have been more delighted; it was a special honor to be chosen from his many grandchildren to accompany him. It was an adventure into worlds unknown, to observe the sights and smells of the marketplace. The grainy smell of hay and even the pungent aroma of cow manure combined with the earthy smells of the farmers and throngs of people created a heady mixture for a sheltered child. The Polish farmers had come from their surrounding farms to town with their cattle, calves, and other livestock. The large outdoor emporium was crowded with people. Varied languages filled the air, as vendors and buyers tried to outdo each other and obtain the best possible price. Their hands gesticulated and their voices rose to be heard above the din of the crowd. My grandfather walked among the stalls, stately and dignified greeting the farmers who vied for his attention. As we ambled through the crowd, he eyed the animals, stopping now and then to examine the eyes and mouth of a healthy looking beast. Finally, having found a cow that met his expectations, he engaged in a lively exchange. After a minute or two of haggling, he walked away saying over his

shoulder, “Too much money! Come Dynka.” I had run behind him trying to keep up.

“*Zaida*, are you angry? Wait for me!”

Slowing his pace, he patted me lovingly on the cheek, “No, Dinale, I’m not angry. It is the nature of trade, the way business is done. Commerce is like a game, where you have to anticipate your partner’s next move. Like in chess, each person tries to outwit the other. Now stay close to me. I don’t want to lose you in this crowd.”

As we moved away from the farmer’s stand, I heard him call behind us.

“*Pan Frydman, Pan Frydman*, please sir come back!”

The farmer sensing failure and the possible loss of a sale came running after my grandfather, his arms waving, calling him back to his stall. After several minutes of fierce negotiations, they both smiled and shook hands, finalizing the bargain. We purchased the cow whose fate was sealed on its journey from farm to market. Several times that day, I witnessed the ritual of market etiquette and the game of commerce engaged in by two willing partners of buy and sell.

As I daydream of my grandfather, the rising volume of my classmates beckons me back to the present. “Hitler,” “Czechoslovakia,” “Poland,” “Invasion,” the words of war flutter around me like leaves falling from a tree in a winter’s wind. None of us has ever experienced war first hand but our parents growing fears are alive within us. We are keenly aware of the danger facing all of Europe from Germany’s aggression; it is a daily discussion taking place in every home across the continent.

Mrs. Felzenszwalbe enters the classroom and the childlike exuberance of our voices fades to whispers.

“Good morning *Pani Felzenszwalbe*.”

“Good morning children. Please take out your math notebooks to begin today’s lesson.”

Happy to focus my mind on something other than my fears, I open my book and the thoughts of war recede into the background.

Mrs. Felzenszwalbe controls her classroom with a strict manner and a warm smile. Her deep blue eyes reflect the intellect of a probing mind and a life spent educating children. Her students respect and adore her, making for few behavior problems among us.

Adjusting her glasses, she sets about the morning session of mathematics and we begin our calculations in our notebooks. All thoughts of the belligerent nation of Germany are forgotten.

The Jewish and Polish communities in Poland live in segregation, as encouraged by church and state. Excluding business relationships, our daily contact with the Christian community is minimal. My friend’s and my parent’s friends are Jewish. However, my mother enjoys close professional ties within the Christian community as she deals exclusively with non-Jews at our butcher store. The students at my school are Jewish, but the curriculum is Polish, designed to meet the standards of every other public school.

I love school and try hard not to fall short of my sister’s performance, as she left a good impression on Mrs. Felzenszwalbe. On my first day of school, to my dismay, she singled me out and asked, “Dina Frydman is Nadja Frydman your sister?”

Embarrassed as all of the students had turned to scrutinize me, I stammered, “Yes *Pani Felzenszwalbe* she is.”

“If you do as well as your sister, I will be very happy with you.”

Angrily I had complained to my mother how it wasn't fair that I should be compared to Nadja in front of the whole class. But Mrs. Felzenszwalbe, like the best of her profession, soon inspired me, opening new vistas of thought and reasoning. I studied diligently to gain her approval.

After school, Fela and I make our way through our neighborhood. The shopkeepers are closing their stores and hurrying home to celebrate *Shabbos*. Peacefulness descends upon the streets and the sweet perfume of freshly baked *challah*¹ and the fragrance of stewing meats and ground spices permeate the air. It is hard not to be caught up in the holiday magic of Shabbat. The turbulent storms of the world seem hard to imagine amid all the normalcy of everyday life and simple routine as our neighborhood prepares to greet the Sabbath Queen.

Fela and I stop to pick up my brother from his *cheder*² after school. The young boys emerging from the red brick building are loud and boisterous. My brother's enthusiastic greeting enfolds us as he spots Fela and me in the crowd of parents and siblings, “*Shabbat Shalom Dina! Shabbat Shalom Fela!*”

“*Shabbat Shalom Abek,*” I take his hand and we begin the walk home. “How was school today Abek?”

“It was great. The Rabbi's are teaching us the story of the golden calf. Remember when Moses went to Mount Sinai and God gave him the Ten Commandments and when he returned the people had melted all of their jewelry and molded it into an idol

1 Yiddish for the traditional woven egg bread

2 Private religious school for Jewish boys

of a calf. The Jews were dancing around worshiping the golden calf as if it were a god.”

“Yes silly, of course we know the story of Moses.”

“The Rabbi said that for forty days Moses prayed and begged God's forgiveness until finally on *Yom Kippur*¹ God relented and forgave the people for worshipping a false god. God then commanded Moses to have the faithless Jews melt the golden calf and remake it into a golden tabernacle so that he could dwell among his people. He forgave the fickle Jews and showed them that their God was merciful. He also promised the Jewish people that he would dwell among them and return them to the land of Israel where they would live forever in the land of milk and honey. I told the Rabbi that maybe it is time for the Jewish people to go back to the Promised Land. Maybe that is why the Nazi's have gained power. Maybe they are a sign from God that it is time for the Jewish people to go home.”

“Your teacher must have been stunned Abek,” says Fela.

“Yes, so what did the Rabbi say?”

Abek stops walking and assumes the Rabbi's posture of contemplation, “He scratched his beard and rolled his eyes as he pondered what I said. Then he said he would have to think about my theory over the weekend and discuss it with the other Rabbi. He proposed that we continue our discussion on Monday. He also added that it was an interesting way of looking at the Nazi threat.” Abek's face lights up in a proud grin.

“Yes well, you certainly gave those Rabbi's something to think about.” I can't help but be impressed with my brother's reasoning. “We all know how smart you are. In fact, you are so smart;

1 The Sacred High Holiday for the Day of Atonement

I have decided you can come to the movies with Fela and me tomorrow.”

“I can? I can? Oh thank you, thank you Dina.” His small hand presses mine in gratitude and I am reminded of how young my brother really is.

“Please stop fussing Abek, before I change my mind.”

“I promise I will behave Dina. I promise I won’t talk during the movie.”

“You’d better not talk or I will never take you to the movies again!” I try to mask my amusement and portray a stern demeanor, but I cannot help but love my little brother whose birth has been such a godsend. Childbirth is dangerous and my mother had suffered several miscarriages between my sister and me and again between Abek and me. His birth has insured that the Frydman name will continue. My father has three sisters and all of their children carry their husband’s names. My sister and I are Frydman’s only until we marry.

Abek, beams with pleasure his crown of curls bouncing as he runs ahead. I smile as I ponder the future: my brother and his sons will carry on the Frydman name forever.