

Planaria Price
with Helen Reichmann West

Claiming My Place

*A True Story of Defiance, Deception,
and Coming of Age in the Shadow
of the Holocaust*

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*For the Six Million,
whose stories can never be shared,
and for Sabina
—P.P.*

*For Hendla Gomolinska and Chaya Lau,
two strong, independent women who paved the way
—H.R.W.*

*Now go write it down on a tablet
And inscribe it in a record,
That it may be with them for future days,
a witness forever.*

—Isaiah 30:8

Preface

When you listen to a witness, you become a witness.

—Elie Wiesel (1928–2016)

It really was a dark and stormy night. My husband and I were sheltering from the rain at the bar at Nepenthe in Big Sur, California. The rain was so fierce that the place was empty, until two others came in and sat beside us. During the next couple of hours, Murray and I bonded with a woman named Helen West and her best friend, Marcia Greene, over wine and the free food sent forth from the kitchen, feeling cozy and protected from the raging storm. As we shared our stories, Helen's mention of being born in Munich opened our conversation to the tale of how her mother, Barbara Reichmann, had survived the Holocaust as a young woman in her twenties, always keeping one step ahead of the Nazis and evading capture. It was a tale of such courage, integrity, and smart choices, filled with odd twists, amazing coincidences, romance, and great losses that, despite my heavy sweater, I kept getting goose bumps.

The story captivated me for an additional reason. As a teacher of English as a Second Language to immigrant adults, I was often amazed and troubled by questions from some of my students after we read

Holocaust stories together. They would ask if those horrific things had actually happened. This wasn't ancient history. Many Holocaust survivors were still alive. How could my wonderful students, many of them refugees and survivors themselves, not know of the genocide of World War II? Perhaps a personal and unusual story like Barbara's, with the dramatic appeal of good literature, would make the tragedy of the Holocaust real to them.

"This needs to be a book!" I urged Helen.

"I agree," Helen said. "But I'm not about to do it. I'm busy enough with my psychotherapy practice. I write the occasional poem or personal essay or journal article, but I wouldn't know where to begin taking on a book and wouldn't have time if I did."

"I'll do it!" I blurted out.

"What a gift!" she said. "I'll run it by my mother."

After some initial reluctance, Barbara agreed to the proposal Helen and I presented to her: to share her life stories with me for a book. Helen and I would be partners, collaborating on every aspect. She and Helen entrusted me with authorship of the main narrative, crafting a book out of Barbara's memories from earliest childhood up to immigrating to America. Helen would write a coda at the end giving her perspective on Barbara's life from that time on. Helen would also serve as guardian of Barbara's story, ensuring that the characters and events were faithfully rendered. Barbara would have the final say on everything.

A few months later I was on a plane from Los Angeles to Washington, DC.

Helen invited me to stay at her home, and each morning for five days, ninety-year-old Barbara Reichmann—"Basia" to her family and intimates from Europe—drove from her apartment to Helen's house to let me interview her. We sat around the kitchen table, tape recorder on my left, laptop in front of me, yummy food from Helen surrounding us,

and we talked. Barbara, bright, elegant, charming, had the most incredible memory, going as far back as age three. She so graciously and warmly shared with me the most intimate details of her life: her joys and her deep pain. My questions brought forth memories, including not only a wealth of factual details, but also what she remembered thinking and feeling from her happy early life growing up in Poland to the years leading up to and through the Holocaust.

Back in Los Angeles, excited and stimulated by Barbara's story, I immediately started writing, e-mailing, and calling Helen for more information and clarifications from Barbara. I incessantly went over my notes and re-listened to the tapes to be sure to capture Barbara's voice. What Barbara told me was so vivid, so alive, so in the moment. I didn't feel *I* had the right to tell *her* story; only she should tell it. So I chose to write in the first person, and in the present tense, to capture the immediacy of her experiences, and as often as possible, I used her exact words and turns of phrase.

Helen was invaluable, helping me research details, linking me with people involved in Holocaust studies and with survivors. Emotionally consumed by Barbara's story, I finished the first draft in three months and sent it to Helen.

Two months later I was again in Washington, DC, to go over the draft with Helen and Barbara. We sat around Barbara's dining room table, feasting on her chopped liver, stuffed cabbage, and freshly baked almond cookies (*mandelbrot*). Barbara was able to add even more information and correct my Polish spelling; she said she was pleased with the manuscript.

This book is the result of that collaboration. All the events, names, details, and perspectives in this book are Barbara's. In addition to my personal connection with Barbara, I relied on Helen's insights into her mother's character and those of the many others appearing in this book,

keeping the voice and portrayals authentic and the story accurate. Where some of the dialogue or a few details necessary for the narrative flow have been invented, we tried to keep to a standard of depicting the essential truth, consistent with the nature of the characters described and the actual events.

What you are about to read is the story of a seemingly ordinary woman who was anything but ordinary: a freethinker, a sensitive soul, a defiant resister, a pacifist, a dreamer whose extraordinary survival can be traced back to traits of character evident from earliest childhood, as this story reveals.

Claiming My Place

Becoming Basia

I'm running from death

Looking over my shoulder

Heading straight for Her arms

—Helen Reichmann West, “Ouroboros”

1942

At long last the train is pulling out of the station. I wonder how long I have been holding my breath.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Pan (Mr.) Dobranski sitting next to me. I know it's not possible that he can hear the pounding of my heart. Even so, I reassure myself that the clatter of the train's wheels masks the sound. I am lucky to have him as my traveling companion. His typical Polish looks will help camouflage me from being discovered as a Jew.

Fortunately, there are no Nazi soldiers on the train; at least not in our car, at least so far.

Looking out the window, I see the houses of Piotrków fade quickly behind me. I slow my breathing and try to relax. I have six hours before we get to Nowy Sącz. Six safe, quiet hours to empty myself of my past, my name, my identity.

Sura Gitla Gomolinska is no more. According to my forged *Kennkarte*, I am now Danuta Barbara Tanska.

Suddenly, I'm in a panic to make sure I have my new identity papers with my new name. Barely moving, I put my left hand in my coat pocket. I won't take the card out to look at it. That could raise suspicions. Just feeling it between my fingers will give me peace.

It's not there!

A wave of nausea washes over me. With no identification I could be killed.

Desperately, my fingers search the deep pocket.

It couldn't have fallen out. This can't be happening, not here, not now.

My head spins until I remember that I had put it in my right pocket, not my left. I reach into my coat with my other hand.

There it is.

Such relief. I feel the card with my fingertips. I see it so clearly in my mind: there is my photograph; there is my new name on the gray cardboard the Germans use to identify Poles, not the yellow cardboard designating "Jew." I am no longer a Jew to be deported and sent to the camps, or worse; now, officially, I am a Pole.

But the sudden relief mingles with anger at myself. How could I have been so stupid to put the only thing that stands between life and death loose in a pocket, even a deep one? I had carefully decided not to put it in my purse. Purses can be stolen. But a pocket! Pockets have holes; a skilled thief could grab the card without my knowing. What was I thinking? But then I remembered that mad rush to get out of the ghetto. How could I have been thinking clearly about anything? I should have stuffed it in my bra where I put my money. As soon as I have some privacy, I will put it there.

I feel reassured now that I have settled on that plan. As the train rushes forward, I wonder what I should call myself. Danuta? It's so

perfectly Polish but I don't like the harsh sound of it. Barbara is nice and common but so formal. Sura Gitla was always called Gucia; such a sweet-sounding nickname.

My fingers are caressing the *Kennkarte* in my pocket and suddenly I see it, I hear it.

Basia . . .

That's who I will be. It feels so warm and familiar. It's a good nickname for Barbara and it has the same sweet sound as Gucia.

I lean against the window and say goodbye to Gucia and my past. Basia is now journeying forward to the resort town of Nowy Sącz and her uncertain future.

First Grade

A desire for knowledge for its own sake, a love of justice that borders on fanaticism, and a striving for personal independence—these are the aspects of the Jewish people's tradition.

—Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

1922

Gucia, Gucia!” Krysia calls to me. “Gucia, wake up. Have you forgotten what day it is?”

Krysia has been our maid since I was an infant. It is because of her that I speak such fluent Polish. She throws off my quilt, and when she sees me lying there, she gasps, covers her mouth, and jumps back in surprise.

I leap out of the bed fully dressed, shaking with laughter.

“But Gucia, with shoes on, and in your bed?” She is horrified but can’t stop herself from laughing along with me.

How can she think I would ever have forgotten this day? I have been awake since the Kosciul Bernardinski church bell struck three a.m. Then I had quietly dressed myself, being careful not to wake my ten-year-old sister, Hela, who was sleeping like a log next to me in the bed we share.

Today, as usual, when the sun peeped through the lace curtains at sunrise, Hela woke up and got dressed. I pretended to be sound asleep. She probably didn't remember what an important day it was for me and so she didn't try to wake me.

As I had lain there waiting for Krysia to come get me, my teeth chattered with excitement, little shivers going up and down my body. It is to be my first day of first grade . . . a day I have waited and yearned for as long as I can remember.

Krysia straightens my dress and unwinds my braids. She explains, as she often does, that my hair is just too fine to make good braids and that fine blond wavy hair is just as beautiful as thick straight hair. As usual, I don't believe her. She ties my wispy hair away from my face with a blue satin ribbon. Then she puts my pink knit cap on my head.

"Now, go see your mama and *tatte* (papa) and eat breakfast," she says.

I run out of the living room, where Hela and I sleep, and into the kitchen.

On this special September morning, Chana Chojnacka, our maid, who is Jewish like us, is stirring the porridge at the stove. Two-year-old Josek—my middle brother—sits on the floor, banging the lids on some pots and pans and making a racket. Four-year-old Idek is eating toast with cranberry jam at the kitchen table. Hela is on her way to school, hugging Tatte goodbye, and Mama is nursing three-month-old Beniek.

She holds out her right arm to hug me, understanding my excitement. She smiles and says, "*Kum aber, Gitla, meine sheine meydle.*" Come here, Gitla, my pretty little girl.

Mama always speaks Yiddish to me, but more and more I am speaking Polish to Krysia and my friends.

My mama is already elegantly dressed and ready to go to work. Soon she will leave the baby with Chana and walk the few blocks to Zamurowa Street to open our kosher butcher shop. Idek and Josek will stay

home with Krysia, without me to play with them for the first time in their lives.

“It’s my first day of real school, Mamashi,” I say, hopping up and down in my brand-new black patent-leather Mary Janes. “Can I walk alone?”

The school is only one block away and I have been walking by myself to visit friends since I was very little. The streets are so safe. There are no strangers, no streetcars, only the occasional horse cart.

Mama smiles at me and says proudly, “Of course you may. You are such a big girl now.”

I am excited to go all by myself, and I know that my parents can’t take me anyway. They are much too busy. They both work very hard running the business and our apartment building, and there are so many of us to take care of when they come home.

The only time all of our family gathers together is for dinner each day at two p.m., except for Friday evening when we eat after Tatte comes home from *shul* (synagogue). Even then, our mouths share food but few words, apart from practical matters. Hela gabs about her friends and clothes and whatever she wants our parents to buy her. My little brothers Idek and Josek only talk nonsense and Beniek, the baby, just babbles.

I feel so different from all of them. I am burning with questions. There is so much I want to understand. I want to know why people have to die. What are other countries like? Why are some people kind and others cruel?

But though I am hungry for attention from my mama and *tatte*, I don’t want to bother them with my questions and demands.

The answers, I know, are in books. When I was little, I thought people were just teasing me, pretending that the mysterious marks and squiggles in newspapers and the letters Tatte brought home from the

post office really meant something. But now I have figured out that in school I will learn to read. A teacher will be there to explain everything and answer my questions. And then I will know the world!

Mama kisses me goodbye one more time and I leave the apartment. When I get outside, Rozia Nissenson, who lives in the apartment next to ours, and Sala Grinzspan, whose father owns the apartment building next door, run to catch up with me.

It is a crisp, almost-autumn day. The leaves on the linden trees are just beginning to turn yellow. Their fragrant white blossoms are drying up and falling like snow.

I am very proud of my beautiful new clothes—a navy blue pleated skirt and a matching blue top with a starched bright white sailor collar. My skirt and top are made of soft merino wool and Mama says the deep blue of the dress is very becoming to my amber-colored eyes. I am happy that it isn't too cold, so I don't have to hide my beautiful outfit under a bulky coat.

On my head I have a little pink cap that Bubbe Gomolinska—my father's mother—crocheted for me.

I have never worn my new shoes outside before, although I tried them on many times when Hela wasn't looking.

My only disappointment on this glorious day is that there are no heavy blond braids falling straight down my back.

I am glad I haven't eaten breakfast—just two sips of tea with milk and honey—because my stomach is quivering with excitement and dread.

Will the teacher like me? What if I am not a good student? Will I know any of the other students besides Rozia and Sala? Will I make any friends? Will I be the youngest? Will I be the shortest? Will it be as disappointing and as awful as the kindergarten I was forced to go to when I was four?

Finally, we get to the door of the beautiful brick school. Through the side gate I can see a lovely flower garden in the back. It is an

extremely small school. There is only one classroom with the first, second, and third grades all together, but I know it is a prestigious private school for Jewish students from all over Piotrków Trybunalski, our town in central Poland.

Most of the students are already in the classroom, sitting in their newly assigned seats. There are two tables, each with a bench for two children, on one side of an aisle, and two tables and two benches on the other side. The tables and benches go back five rows. Most of the forty students are girls but there are some boys, too. The teacher is sitting behind her desk. It is on a small raised platform in front of a big blackboard. She is turned toward the door and holds a paper with all of our names.

My turn comes and my voice trembles a little as I announce, “Sura Gitla Gomolinska.”

The teacher seems very nice. She is tall and thin and is wearing a gray dress with black dots. Her hair is light brown and she has it tied in a tight bun at the back of her head. She has small, round gold earrings dangling from her ears and a gold crucifix hanging from a chain around her neck. Her eyes are almost as gray as her dress.

She smiles at me and then she looks at the list. “Excuse me, could you say your name again slowly?” she asks gently.

I repeat my three names as clearly as I can and she looks at the list again.

“I am sorry, Sura Gitla, but I cannot find your name on the list. There is no record of your registration.”

A feeling of horror comes over me, and for a moment I can't breathe. I realize, with my stomach sinking down to my shiny black Mary Janes, that my devoted father, who works so hard to take care of us, who never says no, and who would do anything to make us happy, has forgotten to register me for school.

I try to explain that my father has probably just overlooked this small detail of registration. My *tatte* has so many important things to worry about—our meat business and apartment building and large household.

The teacher says she understands. She expresses her regrets. “I am so sorry,” she says, and she seems sincere. “You will just have to wait for next year, because we have absolutely no extra room, no room at all in the class. All the seats have been assigned. Come back next summer and have your father register you then.”

And, as she gives me what seems like a death sentence, she smiles kindly and gently pats me on my head.

For the first time in my life I feel my heart break. It takes all my strength to hold back my tears as I somehow make my way home. As soon as I get there the tears burst out of me like a flood, racking my entire body with the sorrow and misery and helplessness I feel. And the anger and outrage at the injustice of it.

I want so badly to curl up in Mama’s arms. Knowing I have to wait until she comes home at two o’clock is torture. I tear off my new clothes, put on an old smock, throw my favorite rubber ball in its net sling over my shoulder, and run out to the backyard to climb our old apple tree near the gazebo, my favorite private thinking spot.

I’ve had that rubber ball as long as I can remember. All the children I know have one. Mine is pink, green, and white, about the size of a soccer ball. We carry them in a crocheted sling over our shoulders (my sling is pink) and then, when we are ready to play, we each take out our ball and throw it against the walls and play games with each other. I know that I am not to take my ball to school. I am too old to play with a rubber ball there. But now it is comforting and, sitting in the apple tree, looking down at the gazebo, I keep slinging the ball in its strap against the branches of my old apple tree. I go over and over every painful

detail of what has happened. And each time I start to cry again. I cling to the hope that Mama and Tatte will know how to fix this.

Finally, Mama comes home. I rush into her arms, sobbing, telling her my tragic story. She hugs me tightly and tries to calm me down. Soon Tatte comes home and Mama leads him to their bedroom to talk. When they come out, the look of pity I see on her face gives me a sick feeling.

“*Bubbeleh*,” she says to me, “if the teacher says there are no more places for now, there is nothing we can do. Your *tatte* will register you to start school next year. When you start next year you will be one year older and smarter and able to be a much better student. I know you’re disappointed now, but when you’re grown up it won’t even matter.”

Not matter? How can she think that? What will I do for one whole year? With all my friends in school I’ll have no one to play with. And then I will be one year behind everyone else forever, always feeling stupid and ashamed.

The idea of just giving up makes me want to explode. I feel so alone. And I see clearly that I have to fight for myself.

Standing there before Mama and Tatte I make a decision and say, “I’m going back to school tomorrow to beg the teacher to let me in.”

Tatte says, “No, you must not argue with the teacher. It would be disrespectful.”

But Mama looks at me not with pity, but with pride. She turns to Tatte and says, “Itzak, let her go.”

And as always, when it comes to the children, Tatte agrees with what Mama thinks.

So the next day, in my shiny Mary Jane shoes with my blue pleated skirt and blue sailor top and pink crocheted cap and wispy blond hair down my back, tied with a blue ribbon, I walk by myself to the school and present myself to the teacher.

The words burst out of me. “My name is Sura Gitla Gomolinska and I am here to learn. I cannot wait for another year. I cannot wait even for one more day. Please, please let me come to school.”

The teacher gets a strange look on her face: displeasure, surprise, respect? She calmly shows me that there is no empty space on any bench, and how can I learn with no place to sit or write? She tells me that I cannot come to school. I must wait for next year. I am not registered and there is no place for me.

With tears in my eyes, again I walk slowly home and climb my apple tree.

“It is not fair. I want to learn. I will not give up,” I say to the tree.

And so, I go back to school the next day, in my less-shiny Mary Jane shoes with my wrinkled blue pleated skirt and blue sailor top and pink crocheted cap and my thin hair down my back tied with a blue ribbon. And again I beg and again the teacher gently says no. But I do not give up. I return the next day and the next day and the next day and the next. Each time she says no and each day I go back. Week after week, every day but Saturday and Sunday, I go to school and plead with all my heart, fail in my efforts, and return the next day.

Do I just wear the teacher down? Does she feel pity for me after so many weeks of begging? Does she truly admire my perseverance, my stubbornness, my sense of justice, my deep, passionate desire for learning? I don't know. But one magical late-fall day, she finally gives in. She finds a little stool for me and places it in a corner of the room. After that, she allows my father to pay for the registration.

There is still no room, so I have to sit on the stool with my back to the blackboard, facing the other students, with no table to write on. I listen to everything the teacher says and try my best each day to learn as much as I can. The other students stare at me. My stubborn insistence to be admitted to school is unheard of. It would be too

disrespectful for them to laugh or tease me openly, but I can feel their silent mockery as I sit at the front of the room, on that little stool, facing them. I feel like an outcast, though lucky to be there at all. Soon the staring stops.

Then one day in late November, the teacher comes to me and says, “Gucia, sometimes one person’s misfortune is another’s good luck. I have just learned that Voicek Pavinsky has polio and will not be coming back to school this year. There is a seat for you on the bench at the front table. Go sit.”

I know I should feel bad for Voicek, but all I can feel is amazement that what I have given up even daring to hope for, to be a regular student with my own place like everyone else, has come to pass. I feel warm and glowing inside, triumphant. My standing up for myself has been rewarded. And just like that, my nightmare is over.

It is my first lesson in learning to think for myself and fight for what I believe is right—a lesson that will one day help give me the determination to fight for my life.

Piotrków Trybunalski

Ay, ay . . . the Yiddish print shops of Piotrków! They are known throughout the world. In the Diaspora or in Israel, when a book, a siddur, or a machzor is opened, the logo on the title page is clear and distinct: "Printed in Piotrków."

—Elazar Prashker, "A Stroll Through Our Piotrków"

1922

My parents own a large apartment building at 21 Piłsudskiego Street (proudly named after the Polish chief of state Józef Piłsudski), in the middle of Piotrków Trybunalski, our small town southwest of Warsaw and northeast of Kraków.

There are fourteen apartments in our three-story building, and we have the largest, fanciest one. It runs the full length of the second floor and has two lovely balconies facing the street. Ours, and three of the other apartments on that floor, have private flush toilets inside them. There is a big round porcelain box on the wall above our toilet, with a chain hanging down.

When we pull the wooden handle of the chain to flush the toilet, it makes an enormous whooshing sound. When I was a very little girl, I was terrified of the monster who lived behind the toilet.

The tenants in most of the other apartments in the building have to make do with an outhouse that stands near the back of the courtyard behind our building, just inside the fence separating it from our huge, beautiful garden. Bolek, the janitor, keeps the outhouse spotless.

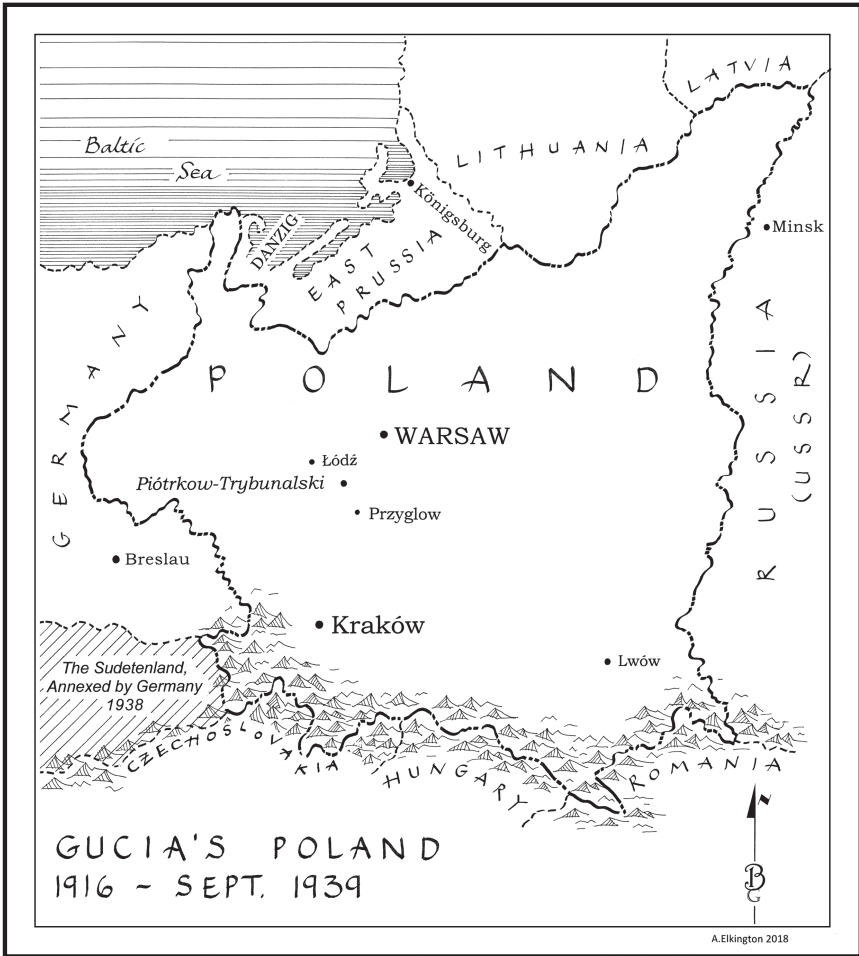
There is a bathhouse across the street where we go every two weeks, pay for a hot, steamy bath, and come home feeling fresh and squeaky clean.

On weekends, when farmers come in from the country to sell their fruits and vegetables, they park their wagons in our large cobblestone courtyard. At the north corner of the courtyard is a small shed where we keep our horse and wagon. Wojcek, the groom who cares for the horse, lives there, too. He has only one arm and I am afraid of him because of that.

On the south side of the courtyard are the four modest living quarters for the tenants who rent the four shops that face busy Piłsudskiego Street. Our garden on the other side of the fence has fruit trees, including my favorite apple tree and a lacy gazebo, and at the very back end of our property is a simple cottage rented by a poor, very nice Polish family, the Dobranskis.

In the back of the building there are a few rooms my parents use for storage and in the front, at street level, are four stores. There is the barber, Boris, a very nice man but not a typical Jew, because he keeps his shop open on Shabbos—the Jewish sabbath, which lasts from sundown on Fridays until sundown on Saturdays—so that the gentiles can get a shave and a haircut. I like walking past his shop because of the sweet smells of all his lotions and hair oils and soaps that waft outside.

Next to Boris is a dry cleaner and dyer named Pan Zarnowiecki. After his first wife died he married a very sweet, warmhearted woman who takes care of him and his son and the two more children they



have together. Often, when I walk past their shop on my way to school, Pani (Mrs.) Zarnowiecka gives me delicious freshly baked *mandelbrot*.

Then there is Heska Szwartz, who owns the small grocery store and kosher catering business. Pan Szwartz is very ordinary. Shlomo Besser, the watchmaker, is not. He often beats his wife, even on Shabbos. She runs down Piłsudskiego Street screaming for help, with her husband running after her waving his belt, and the people on the street just

laugh. Every time I see it happen I am outraged and angry. It is so cruel. People should go to her rescue but no one ever does.

Our apartment is quite comfortable and inviting, furnished with the most stylish decorations and modern conveniences. My mother cares deeply about having a beautiful home for her family and my father cares deeply about pleasing my mother. We were the first in town to switch from the old flickering, smelly gaslights to the new, bright electrical chandeliers. Our walls are not painted like in the other homes but are covered in a shimmery green wallpaper with golden fleurs-de-lis. It looks like silk. Our furniture is beautiful, modern, and tasteful. My mother's favorite piece is their large wooden bed, because of the lovely landscape she had an artist paint on the headboard.

The kitchen is my favorite room in our apartment. It is always filled with such delicious smells, and there is the comforting warmth of the stove during those cold Polish winters and springs, the always-steaming teakettle, and the sturdy pine table where Chana and Krysia prepare our meals. We usually eat in the dining room, but the kitchen is the place for the babies to play on the floor and for me to find cookies and bread whenever I want.

Each evening at bedtime our two maids set up their two small sleeping cots against the west wall of the kitchen, and every morning fold them up and put them away. Because Chana is Jewish, my mother trusts only her to understand our kosher food laws.

Krysia, who is Polish, talks longingly of the delicious pork kielbasa and bacon she eats when she goes home to the countryside to visit her mother. Of course Mama would never allow such *traif* (non-kosher) foods to be brought into our home. And Krysia never eats with us at the table like Chana does. I don't know if that is her choice or my mother's.

At two in the afternoon every day but Friday, we all sit together as a

family at the large, round, intricately carved mahogany dining room table for dinner. I love the scent and taste of Chana's fresh tomato soup with meat bones or the chicken soup with rice. In the winter we often have hot potato soup, or hot beef-and-cabbage borscht, and in the summer cold sorrel *schaav*, or leek-and-potato vichyssoise, or cold beet borscht with sour cream, a hardboiled egg in the center, and a little dill sprinkled on top. When it is a meat day we have meatballs with potatoes and carrots or spinach, and sometimes veal cutlets or schnitzel, and Chana's scrumptious chopped liver with *schmaltz* (chicken fat). There are always fresh breads from the bakery on the corner at Jerozolimska Street: bialys, hard white rolls, rye bread, or pumpernickel. Of course every Shabbos we have our special freshly baked *challah* bread, deep yellow from the egg, beautifully braided, unlike my hair.

(Little do I suspect that years later, during the war, we would feel lucky finding any bread to eat at all, even bad-tasting, moldy, days-old bread! And how memories of delicious food would one day lift me out of my sadness, fear, and exhaustion during those long years.)

As the sun goes down on Friday night, we usher in the Shabbos, which is called welcoming the Shabbos Bride. The house is filled with such heavenly smells from all the special delicacies Chana has spent the day cooking. We gather around Mama as she lights the Shabbos candles and then covers her eyes and makes a blessing over them. With the candles casting a golden glow on her face and hair, Mama looks radiant. Then we sit at the dining room table for a feast. Often an *orech*, a stranger, someone my father has just met at the synagogue, will join us; maybe a poor man, maybe a traveler. It is a *mitzvah*, a good deed, to invite strangers for dinner on Shabbos.

We wait for Tatte to say the blessings over the wine and the *challah*, and then when my father is finished we all begin to eat. We start with *gefilte* fish, ground-carp dumplings. Out of respect for his special place

of importance in our family, Tatte is served the head of the carp, the choicest delicacy saved just for him. Next comes chicken noodle soup. The noodles are always my favorite because I am fascinated by how much fun it is to make the dough for them. When Chana isn't too busy, she lets me help. After that, we eat the main course of roast chicken or goose with candied carrots and a butter lettuce salad with hard-boiled eggs and a sweet-and-sour vinegar-and-sugar dressing. After ending with a dessert of hot compote of apricots, prunes, and figs, we move into the living room, Tatte sitting in the special chair reserved for him alone.

On Saturday morning, Tatte goes to the synagogue, and when he returns at two o'clock we have our Shabbos dinner. Because we cannot light the oven for the twenty-five hours of Shabbos—using the oven is considered work and so is forbidden—this afternoon meal is mostly cold. We have *gefilte* fish and goose or chicken left over from Friday night, a cold meat aspic jellied from the front leg of a cow, and cold fruit compote. The main hot dish is the *cholent*, a delicious meat-and-barley stew. This is accompanied by a *kugel* of noodles or potatoes layered and baked separately, placed in the center of the table.

Each Friday, just before sundown, it is my job to take the pot of *cholent* and the pan of *kugel* that Chana has prepared to the Kalisher Bakery, a block away on Starowarzawska Street. Since the bakery ovens are already on, it is all right for the food to cook in the ovens on the Sabbath overnight. The next day, along with all of our neighbors, I pick up our own pots of steaming hot *kugel* and *cholent* for our Shabbos meal.

We are so full and happy that my family usually needs little else to eat until Sunday, but sometimes, on Saturday night, some of us go into the kitchen for a little cake and tea, but not all of us and not together. The food at our house is always plentiful, fresh, and delicious. But most of all on Shabbos.

Mama

*A woman of valor who can find?
For her price is far above rubies.
The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her,
and he hath no lack of gain . . .
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and eats not the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up, and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her.
—Proverbs 31:10–11, 27–28*

1922–1924

Even though I had to beg and plead and fight to be admitted to first grade, or maybe because of that, from the very first day I have loved going to school, a real school. It is nothing like the kindergarten where my parents sent me when I was four, after Josek was born.

I hated it from the minute I walked in the door. I suppose they sent me there to distract me, because at that time there was turmoil in our home.

Soon after Josek's birth, Mama changed. I knew that something was

different and not right. The apartment just wasn't the same. I had clear memories of my mother singing and smiling while she nursed Idek when I was two. Now there was a strange woman in the house who came to nurse Josek. Mama meantime had become wild in a way, walking up and down, up and down, mumbling and wringing her hands. Her once-sparkling eyes were glazed. When she looked at me, she seemed to look through me, as if she didn't see me at all. She didn't sing or laugh or hug me and she no longer brushed her beautiful golden hair one hundred strokes in the morning and one hundred strokes in the evening. Now when Mama went to open the butcher shop in the morning, she didn't seem to care about what she was wearing. Always before, she had been so stylishly dressed and had been extremely particular about her appearance. I was especially shocked to see my strong and loving mother scream at my father and say she hated him.

Unlike most Jewish couples, Mama and Tatte had not had an arranged marriage, a *shidduch*, but instead had met and fallen in love. Mama was smart and beautiful and lively and many young men had tried to win her. But she found all their showing off silly and instead was attracted to Tatte for his strong, calm, mature character and his dark good looks. They were always kind to each other, and though we could usually tell when there was trouble between them, they rarely argued in front of us.

Now she blamed all her unhappiness on Srul, the new employee who cut the meat at the butcher shop. From the first day since my parents had opened the store, Mama managed it, cut the meat for the customers, and took the money at the cash register, while Tatte had Wojcek drive him into the countryside to buy meat from the farmers and to help him load the horse cart. When Mama became pregnant with Josek, Tatte hired Srul out of concern for her health.

Mama wasn't so young anymore and she seemed more tired from this fifth pregnancy. Tatte saw how hard she worked—on her feet all day, lifting and cutting those heavy pieces of meat and running our household—and he knew she would cut her tongue out before she ever admitted anything was too much for her. So even though she told him she didn't need any help, he hired Srul against her wishes. Over the next few months of Mama's pregnancy, Srul got to acting like he was in charge, taking over and telling her what to do. She complained to Tatte that instead of a helper she had gotten a boss.

After she had Josek, it got worse. She came home angrier and angrier after spending all day in the shop with Srul. She said he was rude to the customers and disrespectful to her, and she begged my father to fire him. But Tatte said no. Tatte had an accommodating nature and had always admired Mama's ambition and gift for business, but on this he was accommodating to Srul at her expense and held firm.

Mama—suffering from what would one day be called postpartum depression—had become consumed by her hatred of their employee and her anger at my father. She felt Tatte didn't respect her judgment, and she was outraged at not being in control. She felt dishonored and helpless, and she broke.

I was frightened and bewildered that Mama had turned into such a stranger. And I was furious that I had to go to that stupid kindergarten every day. To me, that place was not a real school. It was just a silly waste of time—nothing but wild noisy little children running all over the place and playing meaningless games. The teacher was always screaming, and some of the children were not even toilet trained.

It was obvious that there would be no teaching or learning in this kindergarten. Since it was not a real school, I decided there was no reason to keep going. So, after about two months there, I simply got up

one day and left. I came back home and because of the turmoil in our house, no one seemed to notice that I had stopped going to school. Chana and Krystia never mentioned that I wasn't in kindergarten. I guess they liked having me around.

After several months of this terrible chaos, Mama woke up one morning, washed and combed her luxuriant golden hair, and covered it with her beautiful custom-made *sheitel*, the wig Jewish women wore to cover their heads in public. (It was only in the privacy of our home that we could admire and brush Mama's wavy golden hair.)

Then Mama put on her nicest and newest tailored emerald-green dress and went to the stable and told Wojcek to ready the horse and wagon. She rode out to visit the Radoshitz *Rebbe*, who was famous for his healing powers (a *rebbe* is a rabbi who is considered especially important and holy). She told the rabbi of her troubles and complained about Srul. She said, "*Rebbe*, I have five children, four at home and little Chanusck in the cemetery. I have to be a mother to my children, but I am so very sick."

The Radoshitz *Rebbe* put his hands on Mama's head and said, "Go home, you will be a mother to your children, and you will be blessed with many more."

Overnight, Mama was Mama again. Tatte fired Srul the next day. Mama handed Josek to Chana as she walked out the door to open up the store. By herself, she cut all the meat and sold it. She was again my mama, a confident, beautiful, loving woman: a powerhouse and a real *mensch*.

Now, two years later, there is peace at home and I am in a real school. I finally have a place on the bench with the other students. My seat is near the front and on the right side of the classroom, which is my good luck because I am deaf in my right ear.

Mama told me that when I was two, while she was out, I had been fascinated by a dust pile Chana made as she was sweeping the kitchen. We had no toys and I had to play with whatever was handy, and that dust pile apparently looked interesting to me.

When Chana went into the dining room, I started playing in the dust and found a small shiny brown coffee bean. I must have thought it was fun to put the bean in my ear, take it out, put it in, take it out, put it in, but then I couldn't get it out. It was stuck, and it hurt. I cried and Chana came running. She was so frightened. Mama wasn't home and Chana had to decide what to do.

She took me to a *feldsher*, a kind of healer, and when he tried to remove the bean, by mistake he pushed it in even farther. When Chana brought me home to my mother, Chana was distraught over what had happened and how hard I was crying. She told Mama how sorry she was; she was only trying to save money by not going to a doctor. Of course Mama understood completely and wasn't angry with Chana. She was just upset for me.

Mama said that the *feldsher* was a quack and immediately took me to a real doctor in Piotrków, but *he* pushed the coffee bean in so far it punctured my eardrum.

After that my ear would often get infected and pus would ooze out. It must have been painful but I don't remember suffering from it. What I do remember is how happy it made me to get so much attention from Mama. She took me to many doctors, once even to Warsaw, the biggest city in the country, when I was three. We stayed with her cousin. I was excited to be in the capital, and I went outside by myself to go exploring. There was a huge commotion when I got back, as if I would have wandered off and never returned, and I felt so loved in that moment because of the attention. Over those years I blossomed because of all the special love and concern I received from my mother.

As I got older, I became self-conscious about my deafness and decided to never tell anyone about it.

In school, I am a sponge and absorb everything that we are taught and more. I am never without a book in my bag, in my bed, in the apple tree. After the triumph of finally being registered and then getting my own seat and place at the table, I am the happiest child in the world. I am sure that I will always be able to overcome any future obstacle.

But then only a week later, after getting my own seat on the bench, I learn that happiness doesn't last for long. On a snowy Thursday, Rozia's father asks me to walk with her to school the next day. She is always late and he thought if she walked with me she would be on time. I enjoy walking by myself, singing and daydreaming, but of course I say yes.

As usual Rozia is late coming out of her apartment, and on the next block she slips and falls in some slush. After we brush the wet snow off her clothes, she walks very slowly, complaining that her ankle hurts. By the time we get to school, we are both late and the teacher is angry and punishes us. She makes us stand in opposite corners in the front, with our backs to the blackboard, facing the class.

Rozia laughs, her dark eyes sparkling, her black curls dancing on her shoulders, while I break down in tears. It is Rozia's fault but I am the one who suffers. I am extremely embarrassed, humiliated, and angry. After all those difficult weeks of begging and pleading to be admitted to the school, and then being stared at as I sat on my little stool, I lose control and cry in front of my classmates. This makes me feel even more ashamed.

Later, sitting on a limb of my apple tree, I vow I will never let myself cry in front of people again.

After that terrible day I am never late again.

* * *

Over the rest of these first three years of grade school, I come to feel even more at home in school than with my own family. By the end of first grade, Beniek is toddling all over the house. Unlike those awful weeks after Josek was born, this time life at home doesn't change very much, except now Mama has even less time to pay attention to me. So all my attention goes to school. Maybe if I had gotten the sister I have been secretly wishing for, my life at home would have felt more interesting. Even at school, while I do well and get good grades, I never feel like I am anything special, just me, until a life-changing event at the end of the third grade.

We are having an arithmetic lesson and the teacher asks us, "If a Polish worker makes two hundred new Polish *zlotys* per week, how many does he make each day?"

Many students quickly raised their hands to shout out, "Twenty-eight *zlotys* and fifty-seven *groszy*." But I say loudly, "No, the right answer is thirty-three *zlotys* and thirty-three *grosze*."

The teacher says, "*Dobra*, Gucia! In my twenty years of teaching you are the first student to answer that question correctly! What a bright thinker you are!" And she turns to the class and says, "Learn to use your mind like Gucia. Figure things out. Polish workers don't work seven days a week, you know. On Sunday they go to church and rest. You should have divided by six and not seven!"

I am glowing. I feel for the first time a sense of being special and a confidence that I can trust myself to figure out what is true, what makes sense, and how to solve a problem even if no one else agrees.

Fourth Grade

Happy the pupil whose teacher approves his words.

—Jewish proverb

1925–1926

The new year starts out bittersweet for our family.

First, in January, our Jewish maid, Chana Chojnacka, gets married and moves away to Belgium. Although we are very happy for Chana, we are sad for ourselves. She has been our maid since before Hela was born and she is like family to us. In fact, Mama holds the wedding in our front parlor and pays for Pan Heska Szwartz to cater the dinner.

It is a very small wedding because Chana has no family in Piotrków, nor does her husband, Herschel. Papa and Uncle Josef are two of the four honor attendants who hold up the *chuppa*, the ritual canopy held over the bride and groom to represent the new home they will create. Then Chana walks around Herschel seven times, symbolizing the seven days of creation. The rabbi recites the marriage blessings over a silver cup of red wine, and then Chana and Herschel each drink from that cup. Herschel puts a simple gold wedding ring on the forefinger of Chana's right hand and recites his vows. My mama cries when the rabbi wraps

his blue-and-white-striped prayer shawl, his *tallis*, around Chana and Herschel, as he pronounces them man and wife. Then Herschel crushes a glass wine goblet, wrapped in a white linen napkin, under his right foot, to remind us of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the sadness that we sometimes have in life, and then we all cry out, “*Mazel Tov!*” Congratulations!

Mama hugs Chana awkwardly, because Mama is very pregnant. Again!

In February, soon after Chana and Herschel leave, Mama has her seventh baby and I am happy that it is a little girl. Now at last I will have a sister I can play with. My other sister, Hela, is four years older than I and we have always been worlds apart. All we have in common is that we have shared the same bed since I was a baby. Hela is so stylish, with a taste for fine things, and she feels free to ask for whatever she wants.

Mama, who is generous by nature and especially with us, never says no to her children. I’ve heard some grownups say we are spoiled, so I deny myself things to prove them wrong. Mama is always wanting to buy me my own new clothes, but I would feel selfish to let her waste money like that when the clothes Hela has outgrown are so beautiful and still look good as new. So I find an inexpensive seamstress in the neighborhood, not like the expensive one who comes to our house, and she alters Hela’s hand-me-downs to fit like they were made for me! Even though I was saving her money, I think Mama was a little disappointed because she has fun dressing us up. But when she told me how proud she was that I am so resourceful, I felt a secret glow inside that gave me so much more pleasure than I ever could have gotten from a new dress.

And now I have a little sister, someone I can cuddle and take care of and play with. They name her Rifka after my father’s mother, who has just died. My little sister is very cute. She has Mama’s beautiful green

eyes and little wisps of strawberry-blond hair, like Hela. Mama lets me hold her as a reward when I finish all my homework early.

But then comes a shocking tragedy. Three months after Rifka is born, the new Polish maid, Anya, lets Rifka roll off the table as she is changing her diaper, and my little baby sister is dead.

The grief I feel is overwhelming. Everyone is devastated. Following our Jewish tradition, the day after little Rifka dies, we bury her in the Jewish cemetery in a plain pine box, next to Chanusck, the sister I never knew, who got sick and died a year after I was born, when she was three. All I am aware of are the prescribed rituals called *shiva* that get us through that first week of mourning. It is comforting having those procedures to follow when we are too numb to think. Uncle Josef, Mama's favorite brother, and Tanta Sura come right over. They cover all the mirrors and windows in the house with white cloths. The religious reason for this is to remind us that death is a time to contemplate the deep mysteries of life and not be distracted by vanity. The superstitious reason is that the Angel of Death is so ugly that if he sees himself in the mirror when he comes into the house he will get angry and take someone else, too.

Throughout that week of sitting *shiva*, those of us in mourning sit on low wooden stools as friends come to visit and comfort us in our grief. And each day a *minyán* of ten men, including Uncle Josef and Rozia's and Sala's fathers, come to say prayers. Tatte says the Kaddish, the mourners' prayer.

Going back to school, to my other life, gives me comfort in the face of this tragedy.

In September, I enter the fourth grade at a public school called Maria Konopricka. It is so convenient for me. The city had rented the ground floor of the apartment building next to mine, the one that Sala

Grinzspan's father owned and where they live. This is where the school is, so close that even Rozia won't be late for classes.

My school days all seem to run into each other. We have to memorize, memorize, memorize, and so often I am bored. But one big event stands out.

Sometimes a teacher will choose a favorite student to carry her books to school. It is always considered a great honor. It is near my birthday in May when my teacher, Pani Grabowska, asks me to come to her house to carry her books. I think I will fall off my chair I am so struck with shock and pride.

She gives me the directions to her house on the outskirts of the city. I get up two hours earlier than usual because I know it will take almost an hour to walk there and another hour back to school. Fortunately it is May and not cold and the blossoming trees and flowers, the cheerful songs of the birds, make me very happy along the way.

Pani Grabowska meets me at her front door and when she goes to get the books, I peek inside. All I can see is the large front room but I take everything in immediately. Instead of fancy gold-embossed wallpaper and shellacked wooden floors painted a shiny cinnamon color, like at our house, she has plain white walls and a dark wood floor with a small Oriental carpet in the middle. Unlike our heavy mahogany furniture, she has lots of wicker furniture painted a nice shade of forest green. There is a comfortable armchair, a rocking chair, a round table with glass on the top, and a big curvy couch. On the seats and backs of all the furniture are matching light green fluffy pillows, embroidered with large red and pink roses. On the sparkling glass top of the round table is a simply framed photograph of a handsome young blond man in a Polish soldier's uniform. Lying next to the photo is a single red rose and a small glass jar with a lighted religious candle. I remember hearing that Pani Grabowska had a boyfriend who was killed during

World War I. It all seems very romantic to me. Although she lives on the outskirts of the city in a little cottage, I think her house is much more beautiful and elegant than mine.

I take the heavy bag of books and practically fly to the school. For the rest of the week I carry those books back and forth. Pani Grabowska walks by herself and arrives at the school a little later than I do.

In 1926 Mama is pregnant again, and now that I am ten I feel differently than when I was eight. When Rifka was born, I had been so excited. Now, at ten, I feel embarrassed that my mama is having another baby and a little afraid that the new baby will die, too. When Regina is born, she looks just like Rifka, with large bright green eyes, but with curly red hair. She is a strong baby and the new maid, Janova, loves and watches her very carefully. While there would always be sorrow over losing Rifka, Regina brings the joy of new life back into our home.