

*How was the room?*

It was long and narrow, with a tall ceiling, filled with the rose and honey light of a kerosene lamp, shadows along its walls looking like rows of tall men dressed in long black robes, stern-looking, but kindly disposed toward me. They would nod approvingly as I was bathed, before being put to bed, in a sit-up zinc tub in warm water, turned light brown from the oak bark steeped in it which made my skin squeak. Sometimes, mint was steeped in it instead and its fresh smell accompanied me to the cozy world of my bed.

There was a big soft moss-green tufted sofa against one of the walls, a huge wardrobe of shiny varnished straw-colored wood along another one, and a big round table in the middle, covered with a dark green velvet cloth that in places reached to the floor. I loved to hide under it, pretending to be in a tent looking out for Indians who were coming to scalp me, at whom I was going to shoot a long wooden pen with its sharp steel point dipped in red ink to make it poisonous, using a bow I had made myself.

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In the evening, father would walk around it with a furrowed brow, his head bent down and arms crossed behind his back, engrossed in thoughts, while I watched him as I lay on the sofa. They'd dress me in night clothes if I wasn't wearing them already and had fallen asleep and would put me to bed without my waking up. It was nice to wake up in the morning cuddled by the soft down comforter inside its white case.

*A psyche mirror?*

It was in my parents' bedroom, where I also slept, part of a dresser of shiny varnished straw-colored wood that went with the wardrobe in the big room and with my parents' big bed and the two night tables that stood on both sides of it.

The drawers on the right of the mirror went up higher than those on the left and there was a little platform between them on which I would climb up and do things while watching myself in the mirror. When you tipped it one way, you could see more of your feet, and the other way—the ceiling above your head.

*What was the room in?*

Inside a long single-storied stucco building with a green metal roof. Our apartment took up most of the building while the rest was occupied by the office in which father spent much of his time during the day. Big blackcurrant bushes grew along its long front wall in which I in turn spent much of my time while playing outside. The strong, winy smell of their leaves

has stayed in my memory to this day like a wisp of smoke hanging still in the air.

*Where was the building located?*

At a manor estate consisting of a park overgrown with huge old trees which was crisscrossed by roads covered with hard-packed yellow sand and had marble statues of human figures, some naked, other dressed, standing along them in places. It was filled with the singing of birds, which you could never see because they were high up in the trees. It seemed there were deep puddles of beautiful sounds high up among the leaves and the birds were bathing in them, splashing them with their wings as they washed, so that they fell in drops to the ground.

The park was surrounded by a tall brick wall covered with stucco, and the manor house stood in the middle of it, with a wide lawn in front. The building we lived in was on the other side of the lawn facing the manor house, along a circular drive cutting through it.

*What was the manor house like?*

Big, two-storied, made of brick and stucco and under a tall red-tiled roof, with a portico in front that carriages and cars could drive under and a single-story wing on each of the two sides. An open gallery ran along the middle of the main facade on the second floor which connected to a terrace on the right with a balustrade around it. There were palm trees growing in

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huge pots along the gallery and on the terrace, and rhododendron bushes on the ground along the two wings.

Inside, there was a long corridor with doors leading to rooms on the right and left and windows on each of the ends. The floor was covered with black marble tiles on which the light from the window you faced reflected, making it look like it was checkered black and white.

*Who lived in the manor house?*

*Hrabia*—count—Karol and his family as well as the servants. There was his wife, *hrabina*—countess—Apolinaria, his sister Anna, and the two teenage identical twin sons Karol Adam and Karol Bogdan, called Adek and Bodek, respectively. Adek came into the world half an hour before Bodek and played the role of the elder brother which Bodek accepted without any protest as if it were the natural thing to do. The two were away most of the time, as they went to school in a big city, but would often come home even for short holidays and spent entire summers at the estate.

*What about horses?*

In addition to work horses, there were a few for riding, maybe seven or eight. The *hrabia's* horse was a big bay called Marszałek, the *hrabina's*—a small white mare Marysia, a beautiful dappled horse father rode called Tarant, but also often Jan Amor, and the two boys' chestnut horses, Adek's and

Bodek's, called, respectively, Stan and Ollie after the movie comedians the boys were crazy about. (They would be gone sometimes for a couple of days in order to see one of their movies if they learned it was playing in some far-away city.) There was also a short-legged, long-maned dun Shetland pony called Wee Jerzyk that was used mostly to pull a little two-wheeled carriage, which I was sometimes permitted to ride on. The two boys had spent some time in England at a school and often spoke English to each other, which no one understood. It was they who had named the pony.

*Nora?*

Nora? "*Nora*" means a burrow, a hole in the ground an animal lives in—a dark, dank place. She was my sister. Played the piano incessantly. She took the bus or rode the bicycle a few times a week to see her piano teacher in the village unless he stopped by at our place. She always walked past me looking through me as if I wasn't there. Played with the two daughters of the school principal in the village and walked around with them holding hands as if afraid they'd lose each other.

*Your mother?*

She had huge blue eyes and chestnut hair cut short on the sides and in the back, exposing the nape of her neck. She was nearsighted and wore gold-framed *pince-nez* glasses we called "*cviker*," from German "*Zwicker*." She tried to avoid wearing them, but still they left permanent tiny kidney-colored

and –shaped marks on the bridge of her nose. She was often sick and would then move slowly, stopping frequently, as if not sure she could make it to where she was going. Wore beautiful clothes, loose blouses or dresses with skirts just below the knee, golden or copper-colored silk stockings, and high-heeled shoes. When the weather was colder, she wore loose overcoats that she kept wrapped tightly around herself. In the winter—a long red-fox fur coat and a matching muff. She rarely went bareheaded outside and wore cloche hats pulled down low over her forehead which seemed to cast permanent black-circle shadows under her eyes. She spoke softly to servant girls in the kitchen and to everyone in general. Sometimes, when she wasn't teaching at school, she would go into Nora's room and play the piano—beautifully and softly, so that you could barely hear it. (Nora always banged away furiously at the keys.) I preferred to sit then on the floor by the door in the next room, leaning on the wall even when it was open, listening to her play. The music seemed more beautiful that way.

Being very health-conscious, she made Nora and me drink an infusion of bitter wormwood before each supper, to help our digestion, and in wintertime breathe the vapor of potassium hypomanganate by making us lean over a basin filled with boiling water with our heads covered with a thick towel, to prevent us from getting a cold. I liked both, the first one because it tasted bad and I had to prove to myself that I could do it, and the second because the basin seemed a beautiful round lake of purple water over which I glided way up in the

sky like a hawk on its silent wings. Nora hated the first, but I don't know how she felt about the second. She never talked about it.

There were many photographs of mother before she married father—in the winter, in a skiing outfit and on skis with a bunch of friends on a snow-covered mountain slope, fencing, doing gymnastics in a strange outfit, swimming, some duplicates, often in different tints—blue, green, pink, brown, black.

*And your father?*

You could tell he was a soldier even when he wore civilian clothes. His back was always straight as if he was sitting on a horse no matter what he was doing. He even walked like that except when walking around the table at night thinking his thoughts. Then he looked like everyone else. There was a permanent halo of silver-gray light around him—his steel-gray eyes, silver temples, smooth-shaven vertical cheeks, lips tightly pressed together like a steel lock, and the well-tailored gray suits. But his lips and breath were warm as he kissed me to sleep at night. And so was his strong hand that held mine as we walked outside.

But he looked best in his mustard-colored, tight-fitting officer's uniform with the high four-cornered cap on his head which had a shiny black visor with a metal rim around its edge, the silver insignia on his collar like a lightning flash caught and forced to remain there still forever, the wide brown belt with

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its brass buckle around his waist, a matching pistol holster with the pistol in it on the side, and the tall shiny black boots. Most fascinating was the pistol which was black but shone as if made from silver, with a mysterious red dot in one spot, which I was sometimes permitted to look at and even touch, but never to take in my hands.

Each summer he would go away for a couple of weeks for military training, and even though I missed him then, I also liked to think about what he was doing, ordering the troops to do this and that while sitting high up on his horse. When he came back, I would ask him to describe what he had been doing and it was like I'd been there myself.

*There was a bench by the building?*

There was a park bench by the side of the building next to the drive that curved around to the manor house. It was made of thin wooden slats painted white that neatly curved down up front to make your legs feel comfortable and also high up in the back where you leaned.

*And a photograph of you on the bench?*

There was a photograph of me being held by my mother as she is sitting on the bench, with Nora on her left and father behind them, standing up. It must have been taken either in early spring or late fall because all of us are warmly dressed, although not as you would dress in winter. And there is no

snow on the ground. Actually, it must have been in early spring of the year after I was born because I look more than just a few weeks old which would have been if it was in the fall of the preceding year but definitely not more than a year. I have a white knit cap on my head tied under my chin and a matching warm knit baby suit with feet. Nora has also a knit cap on her head, but it's gray and hugs her head tightly and has two flaps that go down over her ears. She's wearing a light-colored overcoat and dark thick stockings we called "*rajtuzy*," that is tights. Mother is wearing a dark overcoat and a gray cloche hat and father a gray wide-lapelled overcoat and has a gray fedora hat on his head.

*Just one picture?*

There were a few of them, not different color tints like those of mother but all the same black and white except with parts of them cut off with scissors. I remember now, there was actually another woman sitting on the bench a little away from mother, on her right, and in the picture I described above she has been cut off. She looks young, younger than mother, and is also wearing a gray overcoat and has a little round black hat on her head. And father isn't standing behind mother and Nora but in the gap between mother and the woman.

And then there was still another picture with both the woman and father cut off as well as a second uncut version.

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*Who was the woman?*

I think it was probably *panna*—miss—Adela. She looked different in the picture than I remember what she looked like, but that may be because she was a few years younger then.

*Who was Adela?*

I'm not sure. She was someone father worked with sometimes but I don't know if she was a relative of the hrabia or an employee. I think she stayed sometimes at the manor house but lived someplace else most of the time.

She liked me a lot and would pat me on the head all the time and sometimes give me a kiss—on top of my head or on my eyes. She said I had beautiful eyes.

*Who cut up the pictures?*

I have no idea. It may have been Nora, who wanted to have a picture of father by himself, so she cut off that side by mistake in two of the pictures and then cut off the picture of father in one of them to keep, or if it wasn't Nora then it would have been most likely mother, wanting to have a picture of only the four and then the three of us.

But it was most likely Nora who'd done it for a reason only she herself knew. She was mysterious in many ways.