

10

September 1939

*The world is never ready
for a child's birth.*

—Wisława Szymborska

Not many things delighted Ola as much as the anticipation of motherhood. As with her trip to Paris, she would remember every detail of her preparations. She told me how she bought the best produce, describing exquisite berries, pears and apples – her favourite fruit. I was to be a strong, robust baby. Nor did she economise on baby paraphernalia. My first cocoon-like bedding was made of white Swiss cotton filled with down, trimmed with lace and ribbons, definitely on the frivolous side. And there was nothing sensible about her peach-coloured *négligée*.

In telling me all these details, Ola wanted me to know how much I was wanted. Apparently, I was a planned baby.

Some plan. For all Władek's political astuteness and Ola's careful calculations, between them, they arrived at a perfect mistiming. When Ola was preparing for motherhood, she should have been preparing for war.



On the very day Ola took herself to the maternity clinic on Żelazna Street – where she'd worked for many years – Stalin signed a pact of nonaggression with Hitler. Poland was divided and a second world war was looming.

My mother was placed in the operating theatre which was no longer in use. There she was, alone, anxious, unnerved by the stomping of the soldiers' boots hitting the pavement. The odd fragment of a poem kept running through her head:

*I can hear a new deluge rising
and the pounding of millions of steps
it is for me to choose
the words, the deeds, and the ways.*¹⁸

The threat of war hung over Warsaw. Everybody talked about it, thought about it. Everybody hoped that somehow it would not come to the worst, because it was summer, 'and the summer was beautiful that year'.¹⁹ People were still enjoying their holidays or were busy preparing their children for another school year: new books and pencils had to be bought. Also because life can never be put on hold, and because war is impossible to fathom. And yet, there was no end to the speculations; some theories were even calming: that the German army was short on fuel and ammunition,

that Hitler was merely posturing and, yes, we were strong and well prepared.

And yet, long strips of paper were glued across every window, for protection against shattering glass; and everybody, especially those who remembered the previous war, was stocking up on essentials. Military authorities commandeered civilians to dig ditches, to set tank traps and to shore up fortifications. My father joined in. A maze of deep trenches appeared in parks, city squares and gardens. Sandbags were stacked against shop windows and those who could afford them bought gas masks.

The usually calm, composed Ola – nicknamed ‘Panzer A²⁰’ for her strength – was frightened. The war could not have come at a worse time. Furthermore, her three long days of labour were excruciatingly painful and distressing.

On the morning of 27 August, Władek came to the hospital early. He wanted to tell Ola the latest, before rushing back to his new duties. I was born later that day, so when he returned to the hospital the following morning, my mother had already planted a little ribbon in my hair. I looked cute. My father held me in his arms and cried, overwhelmed as much by happiness as dread. He had no illusions about the impending war.

In the evening, Ewa came to see her little sister. She gave Ola a long warm bath, a gesture my mother would never forget. Never before had she felt so isolated as then, in this huge, spacious, chrome-gleaming operating theatre. This day should have brought her nothing but happiness.

But instead she was alone, preoccupied by the ominous threats outside. Apparently, somewhere in the heart of city, theatres and cinemas were still open, people were going to cafés. But all around Ola, everything was unsettlingly quiet. The blinded windows muted all sound, the streets were blanketed by silence. No one walked without a reason any more. Life was held in suspense.

Her room was full of roses. Afterwards, she could not recall who else had visited her and who'd delivered the flowers. We were still in that hospital room when the war began four days later, when the real bombs started falling on Warsaw, when people were killed, buildings ablaze from incendiary bombs.



A few days later our hospital, too, was on fire. As the flames and smoke spread, screaming terrified women ran out of the wards. Some, in haste, left their babies behind and were now screaming for help to retrieve them.

According to family legend, my father carried the two of us out of the burning hospital. As wonderful as this tale is, it is wide of the mark. I am certain he would have tried, had he been there, and had he been able to lift my not-too-light mother and me at the same time. A Herculean task.

As it happened, Ola, torch in hand, holding me tightly, grasped her little case already packed for such an emergency and went out into the street unaided. The descending darkness was illuminated only by searchlights, fires and her torch. Someone directed her to the nearest shelter.

The basement in Twarda Street was packed with people, with still more pouring in all the time. Every new blast brought cries, curses and prayers. It was suffocating, with nowhere to sit down. After a few minutes, Ola left me in someone's arms and went out in search of something better. 'You left me with a stranger?' I ask, risking a joke to ease her pain. But my mother, engrossed in remembering, cannot be diverted or consoled.

She ran upstairs, knocking at doors. One of them opened slightly, enough to reveal a young couple: a man and a woman in advanced pregnancy, the woman's eyes wide with fear. Ola, short of breath, asked if she and her baby could stay, if only for the rest of the night. She desperately wanted to call home, to let them know we were alive but, receiver in hand, staring at the dialling disk, she could not recall her mother's phone number. She remained forever grateful to these two strangers who took her in, because they understood her distress and her need for shelter.

Most importantly, she remembered to retrieve me.

Rushing along the dark staircase she collided with someone. It happened to be Władek, his face and clothes covered in grime. He'd been looking for us in the hospital and in here, in Twarda Street. For a short, precious moment they were together, ecstatically happy, so relieved to have found each other. But they could not stay together for long. Ola was in a hurry to pick me up, and Władek to return to the burning hospital. A peaceful night with both adoring parents beatifically leaning over my cradle was not my fate.