## Chapter One

## Awakening

It was a terrible dream.

At first I couldn't find my bearings in it – I didn't know what I was actually dreaming about, what I felt afraid of, or what those big chunks of raw meat were supposed to be; despite being beaten to a bloody pulp, they were still showing signs of life.

Only a while later, when an image loomed out of the confusion, moved towards me and came into sharp focus did I catch sight of an infinite multitude of human tongues, torn from the living or the dead, tongues that somebody's invisible hands were using to erect a huge pyramid-shaped building, or else a sky-high sacrificial pyre.

I watched in horror as more and more tongues kept appearing: brown, livid blue, or almost black, and it looked to me as if thousands, millions of mouths still had power over them, for even as they joined up, lumped together and turned into the shapeless mass that was serving as a building material, never for a moment did they come to a standstill – they just kept on moving in feverish convulsions, as if the whole of mankind, cruelly mutilated, as if the whole world – our world – were… crying for help? asking a question? cursing? praying? begging for mercy?

I was surprised I hadn't woken up with a scream of alarm, bathed in a fearful sweat. Why did I wake up without the slightest sense of fear? I simply opened my eyes and found myself lying in bed, breathing deeply and evenly; my congenital heart defect wasn't making itself apparent, and altogether my return to reality was calm, extremely calm.

Here I was at home in Warsaw, in my flat on the first floor of a low-rise house on Henryk Siemiradzki Street, named after the artist who a hundred years ago painted the pictures on an enormous canvas, the biggest theatre curtain in Europe.

The winter's day was taking its time to get up. Darkness still reigned, and I could only read the titles of the books on the shelves surrounding me from memory. I raised my head to check the time on the Sony tower. The digital clock said six, so it was five; I

hadn't yet reset the clock since the time change that autumn, so it was running an hour fast.

I spent a while trying to remember the name of the winter time we'd moved to: was it eastern, western, or central European? I thought it must be eastern, but I had some doubts. Maybe in fact it was western? Anyway, it made no difference. Ever since the Spirit had come down and renewed the face of the earth – this earth, ever since the communists had given up power, ever since the wall had come tumbling down and the Empire had collapsed, the time changes announced each year no longer had the symbolic political meanings I used to bestow on them with such childish naivety.

It was five. Five-o-three.

I knew that not long now, as soon as the final hour of nocturnal silence was over, the concrete mixer would roar into life under the old tenement building opposite, where mansard apartments were being built in the spacious attic for the employees of an American bank; the goods lift would also start rasping to and fro in its steel shaft, summoned by shouts of:

"Uuuuuup!"

"Doooown!"

"Uuuuuup!"

"Doooown!"

"Uuuuuup!"

"Doooown!"

I should have slept for at least two more hours, but I wasn't drowsy. I lay there with my eyes open, listening to my heart beat, and for the first time in ages I couldn't feel the slightest irregularity, as I wondered what the newly breaking day would bring me.

That day my eighty-two-year-old father was going to work for the last time ever, and I had promised to help him take in a cake and some pastries that he planned to offer his guests at a modest farewell party.

As a graduate of the Cadet Corps and a Second Lieutenant of Infantry, in September 1939 he was taken prisoner by the Germans, and spent five years in a POW camp at Woldenberg before returning to Poland – the new Poland, where he said goodbye to his uniform, got married, became a pharmacist and started work at his father-in-law's –

my grandfather's – pharmacy. Soon after, when the communists took all the pharmacies away from their private owners he went to work for the state and tried to make ends meet.

At the city isolation hospital, which before the war had belonged to the Bauman family, my father was never once late for work and never missed a single day. He just worked and worked, doing the best he could, and after twenty-five years on Labour Day – the First of May – he was given a Bronze Service Cross and an imitation pigskin briefcase. To mark the occasion, the health service workers' trade union newspaper published an article about him, with a photo.

My father regarded the final sentence of the article as scandalous, and angrily hid his copy of *Health Care* away. We had to spend a long time asking him to show it to us. When my mother finally got hold of it and saw the headline to the piece about my father, she burst into hysterical laughter.

"FROM THE BAYONET TO THE TABLET", it said, and at first I thought it very funny too.

"Well, I never… What an idea! 'From the bayonet to the tablet'?" said my mother, shaking her head in disbelief and, laughing though tears, she read the article aloud.

"The field-marshal's baton may even have lain in his knapsack, but Rudolf Hintz was destined for another responsible post in the service of his motherland, the Polish People's Republic", she read the final sentence, froze with her mouth open, as if struck dumb in mid-word, then furiously threw the newspaper to the floor and began to trample it underfoot. I watched as the photo of my father in his white coat was ripped to shreds.

"What a dreadful rag! What a dreadful rag!" screamed my mother. "I've never read such nonsense in all my life. Why didn't they say how much he earned and how he was supposed to keep a family on it?"

I knew something awful was just about to happen. My father was staring at my mother, clenching his teeth, and trying to fold up the ragged newspaper.

For as long as I can remember, my parents never lived in harmony.

(…)

## Chapter Three

## The typewriter

I bought my flat – a single room plus kitchen, twenty-four square metres – in exchange for our most valuable family heirloom, a gold watch with a black relief on the cover, a memorial watch commissioned by my great-grandmother after the defeat of the January Uprising.

My mother gave me the watch three months after the communists imposed martial law in Poland. That year I had reached the age of thirty and was asking myself more and more often whether or not my life was finally going to take on the deeper meaning that so far had eluded it.

At the time I was still living with my parents. To supplement my father's pension, my mother ran a private kindergarten. Day in, day out, from early morning ten children used to romp about on the floor in my room, shrieking as they wrenched from each other's grip a pair of cymbals, a drum, some lead soldiers, a steam train, a wooden clown, some building bricks, a stuffed monkey who had lost both his lower limbs, and lots of other broken toys that had passed down from generation to generation in our family.

At three in the afternoon Mrs Kuś, the helping hand hired by my mother, finished work, and at that point I took on care of the children. In an effort to curb the clamorous horde, I used to scare them with the typewriter, an old German Rheinmetall that they all regarded with superstitious fear ever since four-year-old Kuba had almost lost a finger in it by pressing on the tabulator.

The last children were collected at around five and, like Gulliver in Lilliput, suddenly deserted by its citizens, I was left alone in the room amid the miniature plywood chairs and tables, tossed about higgledy-piggledy. I'd gather them up, put them in a box with the toys, and take the whole show out onto the balcony, then air the room and unfold the table-top that served me as a typing desk, in order to sit down and finally get on with my work.

The old German typewriter, bought for my mother before the war as a twentieth birthday present, was an object that had fascinated me for as long as I could remember, while also making me feel downcast in a quite specific way. There was something unusually dismal, something sepulchral about its large, solid shape. Huge and heavy, fitted with shining silver handles and grips, it had the company name Rheinmetall inscribed on a disk in Gothic lettering and looked like an ornate sarcophagus, or some other, equally fanciful eternal resting place; like the raised hood of a droshky its black, creaking cover added even more to its funereal majesty.

For many years, right up to his death, my grandfather kept the typewriter in perfect working order, devoting a few hours each year to giving it a careful inspection and cleaning. I used to watch with bated breath as he drew off the cover, raised the spools, checked the tape, rubbed the roller with a rag dipped in alcohol, then smeared olive oil on the carriage rails and spent ages cleaning each of the keys with an old toothbrush, the hairs of which had been cut to half-length specially for this purpose.

In the past, my mother had learned to touch-type, and was happy to show me the level of proficiency she had reached after a couple of weeks' intensive training. She rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, put it straight, then set the correct margin width, while I tied a purple scarf over her eyes and made sure she couldn't see anything.

"Ready?" she asked, raising her hands over the keyboard, like a pianist preparing to play his opening bars.

"Ready!" I replied, and that very second the keys began to strike the roller with their familiar rattle:

*marriage college porridge*

*budget margin fidget*

*passenger messenger stranger*

*jungle tingle mangle*

wrote my mother at lightning speed, and after the word "mangle" she unveiled her eyes.

"Not a single mistake," she showed me triumphantly. "You see!"

Amazed how nimble her fingers were, I read out each of the words in turn; they sounded like a children's rhyme or an incomprehensible poem by an avant garde poet.

In her youth my mother used to write poetry herself, and apparently Kazimierz Wierzyński, for whom of all the Polish poets living at the time she had the highest regard, couldn't praise her enough.

"He read my poems," she used to tell the story. "He read them and he kissed my hand *three times*… 'Miss Mierzejewska,' he said, quite ecstatic with delight, 'Miss Mierzejewska, you have talent, and you mustn't waste a talent like that – with a talent like yours you could reach great heights'."

Sometimes I thought my mother still wrote poetry on the quiet, which explained why she so often shut herself in the dining room with her typewriter. But when I sneaked a look into all the nooks and crannies where she kept her papers, instead of poetry I found the official correspondence she'd carried on for years with the Housing Department: applications, appeals, numerous copies, an endless stream of shame in the form of complaints levelled at the sub-tenant who was imposed on us and whom we tried in vain to get rid of. I can still remember those desperate letters by heart:

*On 4 December of this year Citizen Wanda Olczak brought two unknown persons to our flat (probably a married couple) and showed them round the premises. In response to my enquiry concerning the nature of their visit, the strange man arrogantly informed me that once Citizen Olczak had vacated one of the rooms, he was going to occupy it. In view of Citizen Olczak's uncouth behaviour throughout the entire duration of her tenancy, in view of the constant scenes that have caused my mother, an old lady, to lose her health and have reduced me to a state of severe nervous collapse, I would humbly request that the Housing Department allow us to make our own choice of sub-tenant. The person whom we would like to move in is currently residing in temporary accommodation and is a white-collar worker. Her quiet disposition and innate good breeding provide a full guarantee of harmonious co-existence…* (Signed)

*After many harrowing years during which Citizen Wanda Olczak has offended the entire household by frequently repeating that in her place she will move in "some guys who will sort us out", we are very much hoping that once she has left we shall finally*

*enjoy the peace and quiet we so greatly need. I feel I should mention that during his incarceration in the officers' prisoner-of-war camp at Woldenberg my husband was brutally beaten by a German guard (receiving an extremely heavy blow to the head inflicted with a rifle butt), since when he has permanently suffered from nervous excitability and migraines, and is tormented by anxiety and insomnia. In view of these facts, I beg to implore the Housing Department to assign my husband some extra living space, and not to allocate accommodation in our flat to any persons recommended by Citizen Olczak…* (Signed)

Although as a child I was not allowed even to touch the typewriter without my parents' knowledge, I often broke the rule and reached cautiously under the cover. Wanting to hear the sound of the keys crashing against the roller, I would hit one of them at random. One day, my mother caught me standing over the typewriter, twiddling my fingers in the air and pretending to write. This comical sight unexpectedly moved her to tears.

I had moved up into the second class at primary school when *The Little Flame*, a weekly for older children and youth, announced a competition entitled "Describe your motherland". Anyone who wished could send in a short, pithy description that the Soviet cosmonauts would take in a sealed capsule to Mars, Venus or some other planet; according to the rules it could not be longer than one side of paper. So I wrote my essay by hand, and then, using two fingers only, I printed it out on the typewriter, which only at the eleventh attempt did I manage to do without making any mistakes.

Although I didn't win a prize or even a mention ("Thank God," said my father, "or he might have ended up writing for the *People's Tribune*"), my mother agreed that I had made a step in the right direction, and from then on they allowed me to use the typewriter whenever I wished.

One day I found an old typing manual at home, and resolved to work my way through the exercises until I'd learned to type with all ten fingers, just like my mother.

*The TASS press agency issues interesting reports*, I tapped out on the Rheinmetall keys. Following the recommendation of the manual's authors I repeated the exercise three times:

*The TASS press agency issues interesting reports.*

*The TASS press agency issues interesting reports.*

*The TASS press agency issues interesting reports.*

*The workers' great effort has not been made in vain.*

*The workers' great effort has not been made in vain.*

*The workers' great effort has not been made in vain.*

*The hop fields are blooming in Lublin county district.*

*The hop fields are blooming in Lublin county district.*

*The hop fields are blooming in Lublin county district.*

Once I'd got through more or less half the exercises, something went wrong with the typewriter. Every once in a while, when I hit the key for the most commonly used vowel, "a", I heard the nasty muffled sound that's usually made by a dead key; the carriage wouldn't shift automatically onto the next symbol, and to stop the next letter from being printed on top of the last one I had to give it a gentle nudge.

Not long after, the tape-winding mechanism started causing trouble, and the tape (which because of its non-standard width of fourteen millimetres couldn't be replaced by the kind sold in the stationery shops) was so worn out that it had holes in it and kept getting hooked on the type guide, making marks on the paper.

Towards the end of the 1970s, when my mother only retained the shadow of a hope that I was a gifted child, and that of all our family members I was the one who would go furthest in life, the typewriter was urgently in need of major repairs. But for lack of cash, from month to month we kept putting off the decision to take it to one of the workshops on Wilcza Street.

As I was using the typewriter on a daily basis, I tried to anticipate the moment when something inside it would refuse to obey, but even when I focused my attention to the utmost, at least half the time I had set aside for my work was taken up with fixing faults, washing my hands and correcting mistakes.

I’d roll paper into the typewriter, press home the crumbling bail rollers, wash my hands, write the first sentence, unhook the tape that was caught on the type guide, wash my hands, write the second sentence, nudging the carriage every time the “a” key got jammed, and when for the umpteenth time the tape got caught on the type guide, I took off the spools and inspected them under the light, staring into the faded black ribbon, as if trying to interpret the signs stamped on it by millions of letters over many long years as the forecast of a better future for myself.

Evening was falling. Next door in the dining room my mother was laying the table for supper, and my father was trying to listen to Radio Free Europe. Annoyed by the infernal noise of the jamming, he kept turning the radio in every possible direction and begging the ferrite aerial to bring him the most crucial broadcast of the day, “Facts, events and opinions”.

“I saw it all coming, I saw it all coming…” he kept saying, as his favourite Radio Free Europe presenter, Józef Ptaczek, announced the latest news in a low, graveyard voice.

“Oh, yes,” my mother cut in sarcastically. “You’ve always seen ahead. It’s just a pity you didn’t see in advance how much you were going to earn. Pity you didn’t tell me about it before I married you. Pity you didn’t…”

My father turned the dial until he’d set the radio to full volume, so my mother’s final words were jammed by the voice of Józef Ptaczek being jammed by the jammer. I thumped my fist on the wall and shouted: “Quiet! I can’t work! Quiet! Quieet! Quieeet!” (…)

## Chapter Six

Are you still talking? Yes, I am still talking!

The digital watch on my Sony tower said nine twenty, so it was an hour earlier – high time to top up my potassium levels. Because of my congenital heart defect I had to take medicine every day, namely Lanoxin, with potassium ions. Potassium was very important, because whenever its level in my system dropped, my heart reacted with an irregular beat. Over the years I'd managed to get used to its frequent one-off spasms, which though unpleasant, no longer scared me. I was only terrified when there were several spasms, sometimes more than a dozen, and when they came in quick succession, running together in a chain, what the cardiologists call a *salvo*.

I went into the kitchen for some water to take my medicine, and took a look at the spider that had set up home there in the autumn. One day, just before the switch from summer to winter time, I'd found its newly made web in the kitchen, draped between the ceiling and the window sill. Shining silver in the sunlight, the web was so artfully spun I thought it would be an act of barbarism to destroy such a wonder of nature.

I once read that a spider's thread is far more durable than a steel fibre of the same thickness, and although extremely light, it can support a spider weighing four thousand times as much. Apparently spiders that haven't caught any prey for a long time eat their own webs out of hunger; eventually they make a new one, but it's a bit smaller.

My spider had been driven by hunger to eat his own web lots of times. There weren't any flies at all in winter, and he left the crumbs of wholemeal bread I tried to feed him with untouched.

"The spider cast a net into the void to catch the shadow of its shadow", I thought, remembering a line of poetry. Just at that moment the spider, who at first sight looked dead, started twitching, spun a long thread and lowered himself at lightning speed, as if descending a rope.

"Uuuuuup! Uuuuuup!" I could hear from outside.

The man working on the roof of the building opposite had stuck his head out of the red roof tiles and kept shouting over and over again: “Uuuuuup! Uuuuuup!”

I looked downwards. A sleepy lad in a woolly hat with a coloured pompom had forgotten to shift the lever in the goods lift, and was busy staring at the lady concierge, who was saying something to the workman running the concrete mixer while furiously gesturing towards a statue of the Virgin Mary, which stood with its back to me. I soon worked out what the concierge was on about. She must have noticed that the concrete mixer was standing so near the statue that whenever it was switched on, it spattered the Virgin Mary in cement.

The workman laid his spade on the ground, stepped over the fence round the statue, climbed onto the grey stone plinth, looked the Virgin Mary straight in the face and started wiping her with his sleeve.

“Stop that! Don’t touch!” shrieked the concierge, grabbed the workman by the legs and pulled him off the plinth.

“Take off your hat!” she commanded him. “You don’t seem to realise whose presence you’re in.”

The workman took a step backwards, picked up his spade and shielded himself from the concierge with the handle. He couldn’t take off his hat because he wasn’t wearing one; in black overalls and a black balaclava helmet with only his mouth, nose and eyes showing, he looked like the devil out of an illustration in a children’s book.

In the main room the phone rang. I hesitated, wondering whether or not to answer. At that time of day it was usually a wrong number, but it could also be my father calling. I waited a moment, then on the fourth ring I picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“It’s me,” I heard. “Can you hear me?”

The voice was faint, as if my father were calling from Vladivostok.

“I can, but you’re very faint.”

“Should I try calling again?”

“No need, Dad. I can hear you. Go ahead.”

“Wait a minute, I’ll just fix the cable. Something’s not connected properly…”

Some shrill crackling noises came booming down the receiver. For months on end my father's home phone had been broken, and even though I'd brought round two new ones, he hadn't made up his mind to swap it for either of them. Nor was he willing to call in a repairman to fix the fault.

"Hello?" I heard. "Is that better? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can. Go ahead, Dad. What's up?"

"Ooh, it's not worth mentioning. I had a dreadful night."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I couldn't go to sleep. I didn't get a wink before five. It was dawn before I dozed off for a while."

"Easy does it, Dad," I said, not knowing what to say to calm him down.

"Dad, Dad," he said fretfully. "How many times have I told you not to call me 'Dad'? You know I can't stand it."

"What am I supposed to call you? 'Father'? I always called my mother Mum."

"Call me what you like. It's all the same to me now."

Silence.

Silence.

Whenever my father took me on a worker's holiday, year after year to the same place on the River Vistula (upstream, five hundred and sixty-six kilometres from the source), every few days we went to the post office at Goławin to order an inter-city call to Warsaw.

Although the post office was only about forty kilometres away from our house, we used to wait an awfully long time for the connection. The post office clerk would turn the phone handle to connect with the exchange and give the required number. An hour later, if there were no faults on the line, my father would enter one of the phone booths, unhook the receiver and start talking to my mother. Sometimes they both fell silent, upon which the operator, who was evidently keeping an eye on the connection the whole time somewhere at the exchange, would shout down the receiver: "Are you still talking? Are you still talking?"

“Yes, I am! Please don’t cut us off!” my father would say crossly, but the operator’s voice would soon be heard in the receiver again, sounding just as importunate as before.

“Are you still talking? Are you still talking?”

“Yes, I am still talking!” my father would scream, purple with rage. “I’m still talking! talking! talking!”

“Hello?” I heard him say. “Are you there?”

“Yes, I am. Go ahead, Dad, I’m listening.”

“I’ve got a favour to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“I know it means nothing to you,” he said, as usual not coming straight to the point, “but other people attach importance to this sort of thing.”

“What’s your point, Dad?”

“What’s my point? The point is you should give your shoes a good clean before you leave the house. And you mustn’t be late.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll be with you at twelve on the dot.”

Cleaning shoes, packing suitcases… In all my life I’ve never met anyone who could pack a suitcase better than my father. The first principle, he would explain to my mother, wherever you’re going, is to take as few things with you as possible. My mother had no intention of complying with any such principle. Every time she went to the sanatorium where she took cures for her upper airways, she got so many things ready to take with her that they looked impossible to fit in a single case.

“Is that everything?” my father would ask, staring at the pile of clothes towering next to the suitcase lying open on the floor.

“Yes,” said my mother, tossing another blouse onto the heap.

“Now leave me on my own for a while,” my father would say, and as if wanting to conduct some mysterious ritual on his own, he’d shut himself in the room.

Half an hour later he’d open the door and show us the suitcase, all packed, but so heavy that the station porter had to carry it to the train on his back.

Packing suitcases, cleaning shoes… It was a long time before I stopped thinking those were the only things that went well for my father in life.

Two pairs of shoes, one black and one oxblood, served him for fifty years. Soled and heeled with metal strips to infinity, they sat supported by shoe-trees under a stool and were always polished to a shine.

My mother used to claim that if only my grandfather had managed to sell his two recipes for failsafe bootblacking – "regular" and "instant shine" – to the right person at the right time, we'd have made a fortune.

*Regular bootblacking*
*1.5 kg bone-black*
*9 kg soot*
*1 kg finely chopped gutta-percha*
*0.5 kg stearin*
*2 kg gum Arabic*
*nitro-benzene*

*Instant shine bootblacking*
*1 kg refined shellac*
*1 kg spirit*
*1.5 kg Venetian turpentine*
*camphor oil*

My father never used bootblacking. In fact, he never even used Kiwi shoe polish. He cleaned his two pairs of shoes with nothing but plain milk, and drank a glass of it morning and evening for his health.

As I gazed at his shining, milk-imbued shoes standing in the hall, increasingly often it occurred to me that when my father died the black pair would go with him to the grave, while the oxblood pair and their shoe-trees would be left under the stool, and I'd never know what to do with them.