

CHAPTER 1

Wojciech sat on a quiet hillside looking past the mountains to the east and saw Jesus walking toward the monastery. The Lord had the hood of his robe pulled over his head as protection against the early autumn chill. Even at this distance, Wojciech could see the details of Jesus' leather sandals. The robe he wore was more tan than white. Wojciech moved his eyes up. The Lord's hands were not as dark as he had anticipated, but his skin was certainly not the pasty white Wojciech had seen in so many European paintings. Wojciech was amazed. He could see Jesus' face, even though the Lord was wearing a hood.

"I have seen the face of God," he said quietly in Polish.

Wojciech returned his attention to the walking figure and looked closely at the tone of his skin. It was olive with a hint of chocolate. Wojciech concluded that Jesus appeared to be Lebanese or perhaps Greek, but he definitely did not look like an Arab. In contemporary terms, the Lord clearly seemed to be a man from the Mediterranean. Wojciech thought back to the religious paintings. Jesus plainly did not look English or French and his beard and hair were darker than the ones shown in the pictures Wojciech remembered.

The Crusaders, Wojciech thought – so many wrong impressions had come from them. Judging from the record they left, Wojciech decided that most of the Crusaders must have traveled to the Holy Land without seeing God.

The hood shadowed Jesus' eyes. In the European paintings, Wojciech remembered the Lord's eyes were almost always blue and penetrating. Perhaps when he comes closer or the light shifts I might see his eyes, Wojciech hoped.

Wojciech turned his attention to the subject of language. I spoke in Polish, he recalled, but the Lord speaks Aramaic. How shall I talk with him, Wojciech wondered? Clearly his thoughts were disordered by the shock of seeing the living Christ walking in the desert so close to where he was sitting, because the obvious answer to his concerns about languages eluded Wojciech. He continued to work though the problem. Latin, Wojciech concluded suddenly. Latin is the language of the church.

Then Wojciech faced a new set of doubts. I'm in trouble, Wojciech thought. Prayers and chants are all the Latin I know. It looks like my talk with Jesus won't be much of a conversation. How will I know what he is saying without understanding the language.

Wojciech looked up and Jesus was gone.

"Fool," Wojciech mumbled.

"The Lord will never talk with me. I have nothing important to say. Here I sat wondering what language to speak, as if that mattered. Now my chance has passed."

Wojciech noticed that his skin was slightly wet. The moisture that seeped through his cassock came from melted snow. Today the sun was bright; but yesterday morning, Wojciech

had watched an early snowfall decorate the New Mexico mountains. Yesterday's snow was gone, but seeing the gray skies and snow brought memories of Wojciech's childhood in Poland.

In that reverie, tears trickled down a young Wojciech's face.

"They said my father killed babies, Grandpapa," the little boy said sobbing.

"And you believed them, Wojciech?" his grandfather asked.

The boy looked at his shoes.

"Is your father the kind of man who would kill a baby, my son?" Wojciech's grandfather asked gently.

Once again Andrzej Jablonski would try to help his grandson understand the complex conditions prevailing in Poland in the aftermath of World War II. For it was the history of hate and bad feelings between Poland and the Soviet Union, which lay at the root of the painful teasing young Wojciech was forced to endure from his playmates. The explanation was puzzling even for adults who understood the history that had led to the postwar hates and suspicions that Wojciech could not understand. Wojciech's father, Peter, had been a member of the Red Army that captured Poland after the war. Polish girls, like Wojciech's mother, who married Russian soldiers, usually became outcasts.

Wojciech looked into his grandfather's kind face. His grandfather smiled and his eyes twinkled.

"Why do they hate me?" Wojciech asked quietly.

"Because they are children and children are sometimes foolish, especially when they have heard foolish things from their parents."

"They say I am a Russian spy, Grandpapa. Am I?"

"You don't scare me very much," the old man laughed.

"Have any Russians ever asked you to spy for them?"

"Of course not, but why do they say it?" Wojciech smiled.

"Many people in Poland hate all Russians, even kind men like your father."

"Just because he came from Russia, Grandpapa?"

"Yes, Wojciech, and I suppose it is worse because he was a soldier when he came here."

"Am I a Russian, Grandpapa?"

"You are a fine young Polish man. Your father named you Wojciech after my father."

Andrzej Jablonski took his grandson's hand.

"It's time to go home, son."

Andrzej had hoped that moving his daughter's family to Zakopane would get them away from the hatred the Polish people felt for Russians, but he had been wrong. At least in Andrzej's mountain village, his family was safe from physical attack. That was not true in the politically charged climate of Krakow, where they had lived before. There, emotions boiled

over easily.

Poles in Krakow and Warsaw often could not keep their frustrations in check. Their resentment at the Soviet occupation of Poland sometimes led to nasty incidents. Occasionally, stones were thrown at Russian soldiers. Sometimes a Russian child was beaten in a schoolyard. When these things happened, the Soviet masters demanded harsh retaliation from the Polish puppet government and the cycle of mistrust spiraled upward.

In Zakopane, Wojciech had few friends, but his grandfather devoted his life to teaching and guiding the young man, hoping to make up for the hurt they boy suffered from the other children. Even if Andrzej could no longer ski and could not sled down the hillside the way Wojciech did, he could go along and share the boy's fun. Andrzej saw to Wojciech's education and made sure his grandson got special instruction from the priests and sisters. Andrzej had plenty of time for Wojciech, since his daughter, Adrianna, could take care of the customers in the family's small shop and Peter, his son-in-law, did all the chores. Andrzej and Wojciech kept shop in the late afternoons giving Adrianna time to prepare dinner for the family in their apartment upstairs, above the shop.

Dinner was a special time. The whole family was together. Peter and Andrzej were good friends and laughter filled the apartment. Andrzej was not too old to fish; and most Sundays from April through October Andrzej, Peter and Wojciech fished the lakes above the village. During the winter, when it was too cold to fish, they took turns entertaining with fishing stories.

Sometimes, Peter told stories about things that had happened when he fished as a boy near Stalingrad. Both Peter's parents had died in the war, but he and the other teenage boys in the orphanage fished often in the Volga River.

"We would bring the fish home with us on the streetcar," Peter would say when telling the story that was Wojciech's favorite.

"And all the other passengers would hold their noses to keep from smelling our fish."

Wojciech always laughed when his father told stories. At night in bed, when Wojciech felt sad about not having friends his own age, he reminded himself how much worse things had been for his father, who had lost his parents, sisters and grandparents in World War II.

Later at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Wojciech relived those fishing trips when he felt lonely. Their good memories always brought a smile that carried him past even his biggest challenges. Years later, at the monastery in far off New Mexico, when Wojciech thought of home or his childhood, it was fishing at Morskie Oko with his father and grandfather that came immediately to mind.

Study consumed Wojciech as a young man. If he had chosen any field other than Polish literature, he undoubtedly would have received a doctorate. Even when he applied to teach, his degree in Polish studies raised suspicions and handicapped his chances for a successful career. In Communist Poland, authorities feared what the Russians might think and always

avoided rewarding those who appeared to lean toward Polish nationalism or democracy. Wojciech was assigned to teach English instead of literature.

However, at the Church of the Virgin Mary, Wojciech taught in Polish and he mixed in the stories of the heroes of Polish literature and the Polish drive for independence with the religious lessons. He loaned books to the students who were interested. In that way, Wojciech's lessons in Polish literature and history helped lay the intellectual foundation for young people who went on to lead the democracy movement in Krakow, and eventually helped Poles gain their freedom and drive the Russians out of the country.

Wojciech dutifully studied the teachings of Marx, but his sympathies were closer to those of his neighbors in the Polish mountain village of Poronin, not far from Zakopane. During World War I, they arrested a suspicious Russian hiding in their mountains.

The Russian was Vladimir Lenin.

Wojciech had never joined the Communist Party. In fact, he had almost no political ideas during his early years as a teacher. In the beginning, he wasn't working to end Communism and he wasn't trying to promote democracy in Poland. Wojciech simply wanted to expel the invading Russians from his country. In his mind, Wojciech was a Pole. He never viewed himself as someone with a Russian father and Polish mother.

Peter Zirinski had been happy in Poland because he had family – a wife, a son and father-in-law. Peter hated being an orphan, so he belonged in Poland because his family was there. Wojciech Zirinski belonged in Poland because he loved being Polish. He had surrounded himself with Poland's rich and wonderful culture. For Poland to regain her identity, the Russians had to leave. Wojciech had no interest in the Soviet Union, Karl Marx or Vladimir Lenin. They were not Polish and Wojciech believed they did not belong in Poland.

Wojciech hated violence. He could never throw a bomb or shoot a gun at anyone. He was a Christian, a man committed to peaceful and civil behavior. Maybe his religious faith was not as deep as his mother's was, but the church was part of Poland and Wojciech loved it for that reason.

Poland's Communist government liked showing pictures of racial violence in America on the state-controlled television. The Communist rulers of Poland regularly told viewers that racial injustice in America proved that democracy was a sham in the United States and the other capitalist countries; but Wojciech saw beyond the police dogs, fire hoses and bombed black churches in America. He read about Dr. Martin Luther King, a man who could mobilize hundreds of thousands in the name of peace and justice. If Negroes in America could become free, certainly Poles could be free; and they could do it without violence, Wojciech believed.

There was much more personal and political freedom in Poland during Communism than in Russia or East Germany. Poland kept her church, which the Communists destroyed in most other places they ruled. Most farms in Poland were privately owned. Families

frequently had shops like the one belonging to Wojciech's grandfather. All of Eastern Europe needed the food and goods Poland produced, so International Communism tolerated these vestiges of capitalism. Polish farmers produced in such abundance that they even had food left over to sell to Americans. Those sales brought dollars into the Polish economy. This is the way Krakow was, when Wojciech was teaching there.

There was also a sinister aspect to Wojciech's Poland – the secret police. It was known as the UB and was patterned after its Soviet counterpart, the KGB.

“Bronislaw, lower your voice! The UB has very big ears,” Wojciech admonished his student.

“Pigs,” the young man spat.

“They must be erased from our country.”

“I do not agree,” Wojciech continued quietly.

“The key is to get the world's support for our struggle. That will make the Russians leave and rid Poland of the Communists.”

“You are so naive, Mr. Zirinski. It was the Americans who sold us out to them in the first place. They do not care what happens to us. We are not like the Arabs. We have no precious oil that Americans want. Do you think the American's care so much for our Polish hams?” Bronislaw taunted, the volume of his voice rising.

“And do you not have cousins living in Chicago, Bronislaw? Who in Poland does not have relatives in America or England or Canada? You may think the world will ignore the right of our cause, but it will not. The Russians and their puppet government in Warsaw have made you cynical. I tell you: their tanks may defeat our Molotov cocktails; but they can never crush a thousand years of Polish culture and thought.”

“The world did not save our grandparents from Hitler? And they will not protect us from the Russian tanks and bombs” Bronislaw asserted, feeling certain he had won the point this time.

“Hitler and the Nazis have passed. So too will the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. Poland will be free. That is the way of history. The mightiest and most awful tyrants eventually die.”

Wojciech stood and extended his hand to the young man.

“Study hard, my son,” he said as teacher and student shook hands.

Wojciech began walking away from the bench he and Bronislaw had shared, framed by the Town Hall Tower in the background. It was now dark and the children who had played around the flower stands and umbrellas in the square when the two had begun their talk had now retreated to their apartments. The cafes were still open, but the shops were being shuttered. In a few minutes, Wojciech was climbing the stairs to his own flat. He looked on the floor. Seven or eight messages had been shoved under the door.

Careless, he thought. Perhaps he should take his own advice about the UB more seriously.

What would the security police want with him? After all, Wojciech was only an instructor at the academy. Maybe he was being too cautious, but it was not good to be careless. After his supper of bread and tea, Wojciech wrote answers to each of the messages. Most of his responses were lengthy, because the messages asked for detailed information or for his comment on a proposed strategy, paper or letter. Wojciech began each reply with the same words.

“We are being too careless,” he wrote, then went on to list several places where he would be available to exchange messages, a different spot for each day of the week. For the first time, Wojciech began to feel like a conspirator, perhaps even a revolutionary.

Is that what I have become? Am I a revolutionary, he wondered? Then he was asleep.

The next afternoon Wojciech made the first of his scheduled stops, a tobacco shop on Dominikanska. As he left, a young lady followed him. After half a block, Wojciech heard her voice.

“Excuse me, please. Are you Professor Zirinski?”

Wojciech stopped and turned toward the voice.

“I am Wojciech Zirinski, but I am only a prep school instructor, not a professor.”

“I am Rosa Gierek, a student at the university. Jan Jurworski is a friend. He said I would find you at the tobacco shop today.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?”

Wojciech began examining the young lady. She was perhaps twenty-two. She had rusty red hair and naturally florid skin that she made more noticeable with bright red lipstick. Rosa was not fat using Polish standards, but she might have been considered slightly so in Paris or London. At first her face looked stern, but as the period of silence lengthened, it softened. Her head tilted slightly and she opened her eyes widely. She smiled just a little.

“I think the street you want is over there,” Wojciech said, pointing into the distance and in the opposite direction of what he told the young lady in a low voice.

“I’ll meet you in the churchyard behind us in a few minutes,” he instructed.

“But come back around on another street after heading in the direction I am pointing,” he finished, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Oh thank you,” Rosa said politely, understanding instantly that Mr. Zirinski was being cautious and acting to appear genuinely appreciative for his directions.

Ten minutes later, when Rosa entered the courtyard, Wojciech stood to greet her.

“I’m sorry for the secrecy, but I am becoming concerned for my students. I would not want some careless mistake to bring them under suspicion from the UB,” the teacher explained.

“You are right to be cautious,” Rosa agreed.

“We have heard that several university students in Warsaw have been arrested by the UB.

They were not beaten. But they were taken in the middle of the night and told to pay strict attention only to their studies instead of democratic activities.

“The threat was clear. The next time the security police might not be so understanding.

“Jan and some of the others think the Russians are encouraging the UB. I’m not so sure.”

“Miss Gierek, I suppose you are right,” Wojciech responded.

“I would like to think all Poles are good, but the fact that anyone would agree to become a secret policeman in order to torment and spy on fellow Poles ... well such a person might not be so good after all.”

Wojciech’s face saddened momentarily.

“But how may I help you? Why did you come?” he asked.

“I am one of ten women medical students at the university. We would like you to meet with us and deliver one of your lectures on history. Everyone says they are quite good,” Rosa said.

Wojciech was honestly modest and blushed slightly.

“Perhaps that would not be good for your careers,” he suggested.

“You are part of a very elite segment. Many women would give anything to be where you are.”

“But doesn’t that make our responsibility greater, too?” Rosa asked.

“I’ll consider it and I’ll get word to you through Jan, all right?” Wojciech concluded, rising to his feet and shaking hands very formally with the young medical student.

As the week went on Wojciech was troubled. There were many reasons he wanted to meet with the young lady’s group. They were bright women, Poland’s future elite. Too few women were in the movement for democracy. What better way to change that than by enlisting the most prestigious female students in the country? The argument on the other side: it was too dangerous.

By Friday, Wojciech was losing sleep, maybe for the first time in his life.

His students were his only friends, the only ones of his life except for his father and grandfather; but they were an extension of his world of history, books, literature and his absorption in the spirit of Poland. One thing Wojciech’s world did not include was women.

That was it! That was why Wojciech could not sleep. Other than his mother, Wojciech had never had a woman in his life. This woman with the red hair, Rosa – she was something uniquely different in Wojciech’s life.

Was that it? Was Wojciech attracted to a woman for the first time in his life? Rosa made him nervous. That was a sign, wasn’t it? Being ill at ease could indicate the beginning of an involvement, or fear of involvement. Wojciech rejected the whole idea. He had never noticed any of his female students before, but Rosa was older – too young for him certainly, but older than the girls he taught at the academy.

Coeducational classes had been a Russian innovation. The church, when it ran education,

had never permitted boys and girls in the same classroom. Of course there had been women students at the university when Wojciech was there, but he had never noticed any of them. Why now? Why Rosa? No wonder he could not sleep. This was too confusing – too new to deal with.

Saturday morning, when Wojciech went to the *Rynek* for coffee, Jan was waiting.

“Good morning. How is my favorite teacher?” Jan called.

“Good morning, Mr. Jurworski,” Wojciech replied.

“It’s a surprise to see you here. How are your studies at the university?”

“Very well, sir. Very well, indeed. I enjoy economics,” Jan answered, acting the part of a good young Communist.

“I knew you would. You were so good at the academy. I wish you would find time to come by and share your experiences at university with our students,” Wojciech invited.

“Perhaps, I can do that,” Jan replied, still pretending the meeting was completely by chance.

“Well, I certainly didn’t expect to see one of my prize pupils this morning. Can you join me for coffee?” Wojciech queried.

“I have an appointment,” Jan hesitated.

“But I suppose I could spend a few minutes.”

The two men sat and ordered coffee and Wojciech ordered a pastry. When the waiter was out of earshot, Jan dropped the masquerade.

“Rosa and the other women students want your answer. Will you meet with them?” Jan asked quietly.

“I’m concerned for their safety,” Wojciech replied.

“They could be important to the movement,” Jan pressed.

Is this a movement, Wojciech wondered? Is that what I’m involved with, a movement? Wojciech supposed it was true. Bronislaw and some of the others were right. Wojciech was naive.

“They could lose everything for this,” Wojciech said finally.

“They know what they are risking. They also know that their grandchildren could live under Communism, if they are not willing to take some risks,” Jan asserted.

“They told you this?” Wojciech asked.

“Their very words,” Jan answered.

“I hear they are studying our economists in Moscow,” Wojciech said loudly enough to be heard two tables away.

“That is true. Our Soviet comrades are beginning to admire the work we do right here in Krakow,” Jan chimed in, understanding that Wojciech had probably noticed something that gave him concern about whether their conversation was private.

“The time has slipped away. I’m afraid I’ll be late,” Jan said, looking at his watch.

Both men stood and shook hands. Jan hurried away, but paused to wave once he was in the square.