

In Sight of Crisis

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THE DEATH OF Marshal Jozéf Pilsudski (May 12, 1935), a man who does not receive nearly enough credit as a statesman and a factor in European politics between the two world wars, radically changed the balance of power in Central Europe in favor of Germany. Pilsudski was remembered as the warrior who stopped Tukhachevski's march westward in 1920, thus effectively halting Communism's expansion into Europe, containing it instead behind a formidable *cordon sanitaire* stretching from the Gulf of Finland all the way to the mouth of the Dniester river near Odessa on the Black Sea, with Poland serving as the center piece of the barrier. But Pilsudski was also a man who was ready and able to stop Hitler a dozen years later by starting a preventive war against Germany if only France would go along. Such a proposal was made in 1933 but rejected, allowing Germany to conclude a non-aggression treaty with Poland in 1934, thus securing itself in the East—and in general, as it turned out. The following year Pilsudski was dead, Hitler was firmly in power in Germany, and Europe stood on the threshold of an approaching crisis.

These designs and developments were lost on a school boy writing compositions about storks in the late 1920s and reciting patriotic verses in the early 1930s, but they burst upon him in the fall of 1935 on entering the gymnasium, which in Poland, as in all of Europe, was not only a factory of the intelligentsia but a school of traditional values, civic virtues, and patriotism. It was an elite grammar school, hard to

get into, but very easy to be expelled from. Its stress on history, geography, languages, including Latin from the beginning, made it hard for most of the students to cope while carrying as many as ten subjects, spending six hours a day in school six days a week, and doing piles of homework. No wonder the rate of attrition was high: in my class, out of six freshman sections only two made it to the senior year. Those who remained were getting an education second to none, and with it a knowledge of the world and its problems.

The problems of the world were intruding on our young minds even earlier. I remember my father bringing home news about Japan starting a war in Asia. We looked at him surprised. We all knew about Japan and its great victory over Russia some quarter of a century ago, but we did not think of Japan as an aggressor. It was only later in the day, at dinner, that we read in the paper and heard on the radio about the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This was 1932.

The year 1932 was memorable for several other reasons, both domestic and international. For one thing, our town, the Town of Hawk, finally received electricity, enabling us to listen to the radio and affecting our lives in other ways as well. The beautiful kerosene-burning table lamps did not disappear, but were simply wired for current and thus made safer, cleaner, and lighter, with their containers henceforth empty. The entire house was wired for electricity, and so were the main streets in town and the railway station,

ending the darkness that earlier reigned supreme from dusk to dawn and banishing the children's fears of it. The arrival of electricity was a great liberating experience not only in Poland, and particularly, as in my case, in Upper Silesia, in the period between the wars. It was a slogan and a battle-cry in many countries. In distant America electrification was a political campaign promise of many candidates, notably in Lyndon B. Johnson's Congressional campaign in Texas in 1937. Closer to home, it had been a part of Lenin's famous battle-cry for the emerging Soviet Union: "The Soviets plus Electrification equals Communism," first expressed, allegedly, to the British writer H. G. Wells. But in 1932 there was different news seeping out of the Soviet Union, particularly the Ukraine, the sad and disturbing news of hunger on an unprecedented scale brought about by Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture.

Yet, the biggest and most significant news in the memorable year 1932 came out of America and, to a lesser but mounting degree, Germany. Politically, both countries were in the process of a change-of-guard: in America, from the Republican Administration of Herbert Hoover to the Democracy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt; in Germany, from the constitutional presidency of Field Marshal Hindenburg to the National Socialism of Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Economically, both leaders, who were to be inaugurated within five weeks of each other early the following year (and, by a strange coincidence, were each to serve in office twelve years), promised to take their countries out of the horrors of the Depression in their own way: Roosevelt, through his New Deal; Hitler, through public works and armaments, the latter putting both countries eventually and inevitably on a collision course. But even before the change-of-guard, America gave the world a spectacle and a celebration the like of which the world has not seen, namely the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games.

This writer would like to call the 1932 Los Angeles Games the last smile of the

world at peace, chiefly because of the California sunshine, the vicinity of Hollywood (among whose stars were many champions of earlier Olympic Games, notably the fabulous swimmer Johnny Weissmuller of Tarzan films fame), and the general mood of optimism generated by the Roosevelt campaign and voiced by Will Rogers in the Hollywood Bowl. It did not matter that the Soviet Union did not participate (it was not yet officially recognized by the United States), or that Japan was proceeding with the occupation of Manchuria. The argument for the changing nature of the Olympics thenceforth was precisely the excellent showing by Japan, by then already militarized, and the relatively poor showing by Germany, in comparison with its great successes in 1936, simply because in 1932 Germany was not yet on the march. Otherwise the Los Angeles Games were excellent, and among the nations which contributed to their excellence was Poland.

Despite early existence of organized sports, Poland did not, and could not as a partitioned country, take part in the first Olympics of the modern era in 1896 in Athens. It was also impossible for Poland to participate in the remaining pre-war Games: in Paris (1900), St. Louis (1904), London (1908) and Stockholm (1912). When the Olympic Games resumed in Antwerp in 1920, Poland was at war with the Soviet Union, and it was only in 1924 in Paris that Poland was officially, even if modestly, represented in the Olympic Games, winning a silver medal in team cycling. A vastly more meaningful success came in 1928 in Amsterdam.

In the mid-1920s Poland already had an extensive athletic network and the beginning of sports legends and traditions, just to mention the six Kuchar brothers and the all-round woman athlete Halina Konopacka, who in Amsterdam won a gold medal in the most traditional of all Olympic competitions, the discus throw. By winning and becoming a legend in her own lifetime, Konopacka started and encouraged a tradition of excellence in sports among Polish women, famous so

far in history for beauty, heroism, and, since the Positivist period, for literature. Now they excelled also in sports, an excellence which culminated in the next generation for Poland in having the best woman athlete of all time in the person of Irena Kirszenstein-Szewińska. An earlier candidate for such a distinction was already present in the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1932 in the person of the fastest woman in the world, Stella Walsh (Stanisława Walasiewiczówna), a young Polish-American from Cleveland who chose to run for Poland and won a gold medal in the 100-meter sprint.

The story of Stella Walsh, who challenged the legendary Babe Didrikson-Zacharias of the United States for primacy in women's athletics, is not the only thing that made the Los Angeles Games so memorable for Poland. Among the male athletes was a long-distance runner, Janusz Kusociński, who was going to break the hegemony of the Finns by challenging the great Paavo Nurmi in the 10,000-meter race. The much-heralded duel did not take place owing to some infraction of the amateur rules by Nurmi and subsequent disqualification resulting in an easy victory for Kusociński over the field. This mishap did not prevent both men from competing against each other many times in the future and becoming symbols of sportsmanship in their respective countries with yearly memorial athletic meets held in their honor in recognition of their role in their countries' wars as well. It is no wonder that the Polish team, having men like "Kusy" and women like "Stasia" in its midst, was showered with affection by the entire nation. All of Poland bade the athletes Godspeed! when they embarked on Poland's own trans-Atlantic liner *Józef Pilsudski*, which also served as the team's quarters in Los Angeles, and all of Poland greeted them upon their return. But there was something else about the Los Angeles episode, a feeling that this was a time of change, a critical time, and that somehow Germany was going to disturb the world. It was a feeling shared by every schoolboy in Poland, particularly

in Upper Silesia, where Hitler's increasingly shrill speeches were easily heard on the radio across the Polish-German border. It was a prophetic feeling, if one considers that in a few years many of the Polish athletes, including Janusz Kusociński, were going to die at German hands, and that even the proud liner, *Józef Pilsudski*, hit by a German torpedo while ferrying troops between Australia and England, would go to the bottom with its captain off the Cape of Good Hope.

The period between 1932 and 1936 in Europe could be placed under a heading of German preparations for the Berlin Olympic Games. The world watched with fascination, and forebodings, the new German cult of physical culture. For someone growing up in Poland in the mid-1930s, especially in border areas like Upper Silesia, what was happening in Germany was known down to the smallest detail, from newspaper reports, news on the radio, and from the constant stream of visitors and guests criss-crossing the arbitrarily drawn border. Soon, the traffic would stop, except for an occasional guest with a special pass, but while it lasted we had first-hand reports on what was going on in Germany. The entire country was being covered by a network of Autobahns reaching to all the borders, by youth camps, and what appeared to be labor camps but were probably rallying points for construction gangs and for various para-military organizations, precursors of the mighty *Wehrmacht*. Sports and physical fitness in general were stressed to an unprecedented degree in all the camps, as can be seen in German documentary films made for propaganda that have survived to this day. This was not just propaganda, but concrete achievement, of which several sports-minded boys in our hometown were indirect beneficiaries. A young man, Werner Traub, who divided his time between living with his widowed mother in Poland and his relatives in Germany, where he was undergoing some youth training, taught us to swim in the modern free style, as practiced by Johnny Weissmuller, a far cry from the dog paddle prac-

tioners most of us were. Next to swimming, I spent most of my free time reading. This was the last chance I had for unrestricted reading before entering the gymnasium, where the reading would be strictly assigned and controlled. Never again would I do so much free reading, because never again would I have so much free time, except in a prisoner-of-war camp during the war.

My reading in the mid-1930s was prodigious, and not entirely haphazard. The impact of the Los Angeles Olympics made me curious about America, and, almost symbolically, James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* replaced the German Karl May's *Winnetou* stories. I was pleased to learn that Poland's great Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz, met Cooper in Paris in the 1830s and thought highly of him. After Cooper, I read everything American I could lay my hands on—of course, all in Polish translations, which were good. Such American classics as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (*Chata wuja Toma*) and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* were next, followed by Jack London, James Oliver Curwood, and the westerns of Max Brand, which are collectors' items today.

From American literature I moved to English, reading all the available Charles Dickens, starting with *David Copperfield*, and then moving to Sir Walter Scott, highly popular in Poland, where the historical novel has always occupied a special place in readers' preferences. *Ivanhoe* and *Quentin Durward* were my favorites, especially the latter, in which the Scottish bowmen in French service captured my imagination. I knew that they had also served Polish kings, but I had no idea that many of them had remained in Poland and that a few years later I would serve in a Polish division commanded by General Prugar-Ketling! I had also no inkling that still later I would be serving in Scotland and looking for Prugar-Ketling's ancestors. It was at that time that I recognized my reading as a source of things of value, which I consciously filed away in my mind for future

reference. This discovery became particularly true when I moved in my reading back to the Continent, to books from French, Spanish, Czech, and Russian literature.

My obsessive reading was partly caused by a desire to fill the void after the death by suicide of my favorite teacher, Kram. Kram had given me many books, among them Korzon's excellent 3-volume *Universal History*, which I consult to this day. Here began a life-long habit of combining the reading (and study) of history and literature, and of catching *and* correcting historical mistakes in literature, and later, the media. It is no wonder that my very first publication thirty years later was a letter to *The New York Times Magazine* correcting a mistake Arnold Toynbee made in an article about the Second World War; the second, a review article, "History as Literature." The new habit became very useful and necessary when reading Polish classics written under the partitions, which meant under censorship, when writers had often to leave out things unacceptable to the partitioning power under whose jurisdiction they lived, leaving it to the readers' imagination and knowledge to fill the gaps.

It became clear to me why almost the entire Polish Romantic literature was written abroad, and why the Positivists who were against insurrections and advocated "organic work" instead, could write successfully in Poland, chief among them Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916), Poland's first Nobel Prize winner. Considerably younger than the leading Realist writers, Sienkiewicz at the turn of the century was probably the most popular writer in the world, filling the void when the others were already gone (Dickens, Dostoevsky, Flaubert) or silent (Tolstoy). Translated into all literary languages, he was best known for his novel about early Christianity in Nero's Rome, *Quo Vadis?*, made into a movie several times in Hollywood, but it was his massive *Trilogy*, consisting of three parts dealing with Poland's seventeenth-century life-and-death struggles with the Cossacks, the Swedes, and the

Turks, in that order, that endeared him to the nation. By going into the past (as he did, too, in the *Teutonic Knights*, which also ends with a great victory), Sienkiewicz accomplished several things: he lifted people's hearts, his declared purpose; he gave them what in this case is referred to as "retroactive compensation" for the dreariness and uncertainty of contemporary life; and he used literature with a purpose, and was very successful in it.

Perhaps even more successful in it was Sienkiewicz's fellow-Positivist, the incredible but not nearly enough appreciated poet and short story writer Maria Konopnicka (1842-1910). During the height of Bismarck's Kulturkampf, Konopnicka wrote a hymn-like poem, *Rota*, which is an assertion of the Polishness of the lands under Prussian rule and a readiness to fight to preserve it. Set to music, the song has power and majesty, unequalled in the annals of hymnology, except, perhaps, for the American "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Although strictly forbidden, or perhaps because of that, the song almost became the national anthem. But it was another of Konopnicka's poems, the heart rendering "The Prussian is Torturing Polish Children," which proved, even more pointedly, that the pen is indeed mightier than the sword. Written and set to music in Italy, the poem became another battle hymn, protesting the mistreatment of Polish children in Prussian Poland on account of school strikes against the forcible Germanization of Polish schools. Translated into European languages, the poem shook the throne of the Kaiser, embarrassing him in front of Europe. For me it uncovered the depth of Polish-Prussian enmity and, by extension, the Polish-German problems looming ahead.

For the moment they seemed far away, despite my father's warnings after Germany's first move, the successful plebiscite in the "Saargebiet" in January of 1935. I kept reading, discovering in the process that as Prussia had practiced Germanization, Russia had a history of Russification in Polish territories, and that only Austria was innocent of the crime. I

made another discovery, namely, that the strength of Poland was not in its nobility but its peasantry, very thoroughly and constructively presented in a four-volume Nobel Prize winning masterpiece, *The Peasants*, by Wladyslaw Reymont (1867-1925). As I read, life went on around me. My two oldest brothers were called to the army, the third had already left for the seminary, and my oldest sister was getting married. I witnessed these separations with a book under my arm, viewing them as leaving more room for books in the house. To plow through the multitude, I secreted myself in a shed of my own making in the nearby woods, where I was disturbed only by my mother's calls summoning me to meals and occasional household chores. When I finished all the books, it was time to get ready for the gymnasium entrance examination. When I emerged from the woods, Marshal Pilsudski was dead (I learned about it while serving early mass—the priest received a message at the altar), Mussolini was invading Ethiopia, Franco was about to start a civil war in Spain, and the most-talked about book in the world was Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

For passing the gymnasium entrance examination with distinction (for vividly describing the Sahara desert, of all things), my father rewarded me with a trip. It was a long-distance trip, to take advantage of my father's free-travel allowance but also to visit my brother Henryk, who was at a Silesian seminary in Czerwińsk on the Vistula, just below Pomerania.

Czerwińsk was a beautiful place, a former Masovian castle overlooking the Vistula and a historical site of the meeting of the Polish forces of King Jagello and the Lithuanian ones of his nephew, Grand Duke Vitold, in 1410, on the eve of the decisive battle with the Teutonic Knights at Grunwald (described so masterfully by Sienkiewicz in *Teutonic Knights* that the novel became a favorite reading of Teddy Roosevelt). Grunwald was much on people's minds in Czerwińsk in the summer of 1935, because the Teutonic Knights, although thoroughly defeated in 1410, were never wiped out entirely or driven

out of Prussia, becoming eventually a secular Protestant principality, which gave rise to the powerful kingdom of Prussia which, in turn, succeeded in uniting Germany and causing the First World War. Like a ghost from the pages of history and a testimony to old Poland's blunders, the former Teutonic Order's possessions were again poised over central Poland, this time as strategic German East Prussia.

I visited Czerwińsk forty years later. There was no more East Prussia to the north, it was Poland now except for the northern part, which was taken over by the Soviet Union after the Second World War, a dubious solution to an old problem and a sequel to a history of Polish blunders. Not to repeat such blunders was exactly how the purpose of our education was viewed by our professors in the gymnasium when we returned in September. We were all to be reserve officers in the armed services eventually, but with a difference: well educated but also fit, according to the old Roman principle, *mens sana in corpore sano*.

Perhaps with this principle in mind, when the secondary school system was reformed in the mid-1930s, it was condensed, speeded up, trimmed in some places (ancient Greek was eliminated from all not strictly classical curricula), expanded in others (the first break at 8:45 was turned into a 15-minute nation-wide Swedish calisthenics session broadcast on the radio), thus presenting a highly efficient and orderly program. The freshman year, particularly, was an educator's dream, especially an educator believing in going back to the beginning, to the basics. It revolved almost entirely around antiquity, from ancient history, rooted in Egypt, Greece, and Rome, to Latin, rooted entirely in Rome, but with references to Greece. The centerpiece of the freshman program, Polish, was also anchored in antiquity, with the bulky reader, appropriately entitled *Centuries Speak*, consisting almost entirely of materials from Greek and Latin literature (*The Odyssey, Aeneid*), or from Polish works dealing with antiquity

(*Pharaoh, Quo Vadis?*). Furthermore, Polish grammar used Latin nomenclature almost exclusively, as did also some of the natural sciences. Even drawing classes had antique themes occasionally. For example, two hours of history on Mondays were followed by two hours of Polish and two hours of drawing, both taught by the same teacher, who decided with the history teacher to use their combined time to re-enact the siege of Troy, using an old castle with a pond outside of town. Everybody had a part, and behaved accordingly: I was Hector. After the fall of Troy, we went back, drew the scene, and wrote about the Trojan War at home.

I found the school invigorating, both mentally and physically. The important thing was to make good progress in Latin, as this was very helpful in other subjects. Another important thing was to write well, and here, too, I had no problem, my very first composition placing me at the top of the class right from the beginning. Since I also kept accurate notes, and notebooks were graded (and sold astonishingly well at the end of the year), I had an easy time at school, which I needed, because otherwise my schedule was a difficult one. But it was a healthy routine disturbed only by international events which were, however, also part of our education.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia put us in touch with a land most of us had heard of thus far only in connection with the biblical Queen of Sheba. Suddenly an Emperor with a name like Haile Selassie became a world figure, referred to frequently also as "Negus" (king of kings). We also learned of Menelik, one of his predecessors, and Ras Guga, one of his commanders. On the Italian side, Il Duce Benito Mussolini had of course been heard from for some time already, but now we also heard of his commanders, Graziani and Badoglio, and the elegant Count Ciano, who was to visit Poland often in the late 1930s as Mussolini's Foreign Minister, with his wife Edda, Mussolini's daughter. There always was much good feeling for Italy in Poland, and vice versa, going back to the Renaissance (Poland sending students to Italy and im-

porting Italian culture, including a Queen), Garibaldi (a fellow freedom-fighter), and, more recently, the Italian pro-Polish stand, even active support, during the Silesian Uprisings. Italy even figures in the Polish national anthem. For these reasons, and to assure continuous Italian support, Poland did not join other countries in condemning the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, despite a genuine feeling of sympathy for that country and a scattering of volunteers who went to fight on its side. But, officially, Poland was looking for allies in the approaching crisis, which a new move by Germany made even more certain.

On March 7, 1936, in clear violation of the Treaty of Versailles and to the disbelief of the world, Germany reoccupied the Rhineland, a demilitarized industrial region under Allied control. German troops simply marched in, filling the vacuum left by the French, who had withdrawn earlier. There was shock in France and a call for action. Had France mobilized and acted, it would have altered the course of future events, but just as no sanctions were taken against Italy, none was now taken against Germany. But Germany did not press its luck. There followed what Churchill called a "Loaded Pause"—a two-year interval during which Germany, in full control of its 1918 borders, was forging the Berlin-Rome axis, building fortifications on its western border to prevent France from entering, expanding its army now based on regular conscription, and building a formidable air force, the legendary Luftwaffe that was soon to surpass the equally legendary R.A.F. of Britain, a country temporarily paralyzed by the death of George V and the famous abdication of Edward VIII, both in 1936. The "Loaded Pause" began with the Summer 1936 Berlin Olympic Games and with the almost simultaneous outbreak of civil war in Spain, both events not entirely unconnected.

Much has been written about the Berlin Olympics, most of it dealing with the human aspect, such as the story of Jesse Owens, the Black American who became by far the most outstanding athlete of the

Games. Yet for reasons not entirely clear to this day, Germany emerged the overall winner, a fact of enormous propaganda value to Hitler and his followers. Home ground advantage had something to do with the success, but not so much as careful preparation and organization. Young Germans of both sexes were exposed to sports in Baldur von Schirach's youth organizations which had existed under the aegis of the NSDAP since 1926: the Hitler-Jugend and the Bund Deutscher Mädel. In the re-organization after Hitler came to power a Ministry of Sports was created, headed by Reichsportführer von Tschammer und Osten, and coordinating all matters pertaining to sports. Yet even these advantages could not by themselves account for the incredible progress Germany had made since the dismal showing in Los Angeles in 1932. There was something else that often made athletes win where they had no chance of winning, as when Stöck emerged the winner in the javelin over the Finns, who in 1936 had eight of the best ten in the world in that sport. There is a memorable sequence in Leni Riefenstahl's remarkable film of the German Olympics, when the camera follows Stöck's winning throw as the javelin cruises through the air, as if the cameraman knew that something was happening here that was inhuman. What was it that made athletes perform like that for a system that in a few years would turn Europe into one huge battleground, for that much they knew, from their Führer's own speeches.

The fact that Berlin was awarded the 1936 Games is often interpreted by those not in the know as an example of early appeasement and accommodation. This is simply not true. Berlin was to host the Games in 1916, and since they did not take place that year, for obvious reasons, it was only fair that they should be awarded to Berlin at the first opportunity. Berlin's gain in 1936 was Barcelona's loss, for good reasons, as it turned out, but not convincing enough to the Spaniards. They organized their own Popular Olympiad in Barcelona, with 5,000 athletes from 16 na-

tions to participate. It never took place. Instead of opening ceremonies, there was street fighting in Barcelona, marking the beginning of civil war in Spain. (When I passed through Barcelona eight years later I saw traces of the destruction that this and future fighting and bombing had caused.) Suddenly there was a war in Europe, soon turning into a miniature world war, with Italy and Germany openly supporting the military rebellion of Francisco Franco, and the Soviet Union openly supporting the Republican government, with other countries strictly neutral, but represented unofficially in the International Brigade fighting on the side of the Republic and most probably consisting of citizens from Popular Olympiad nations, including a Polish general whom Hemingway mentions in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*.

Returning to normal after the summer of 1936 was not easy. For one thing, Poland did not do at all well in Berlin. The great Stella Walsh had to settle for silver, beaten in the final by an American, Stephens. Kusociński was out with injuries, and so was Poland's great hope in the javelin, Lokajski, who could have beaten Stöck. It seems that luck, too, was on the side of the Germans. At least Poland did better in soccer than Germany, finishing fourth. Back in school in the fall, the Olympics were thoroughly discussed in the physical education classes, whose instructor, a newly hired graduate of the prestigious Central Institute of Physical Culture, himself an athlete of almost Olympic class, was determined to "discover" and train one of his students for the 1940 Olympics, scheduled for Helsinki. My prowess with the javelin excited him, as it did my father, who one day had an entire old railway carriage transported from the railway yard to the corner of our yard, placed all my athletic equipment in it, and gave me the only lock and key to it. The carriage became a second home to me, filling fast with more equipment, charts, nets, and an old couch.

The discussions in the academic subjects in school centered not around the Olym-

pics, but the civil war in Spain. There was a purpose to it. Since the sophomore year revolved around the Middle Ages, while studying and reading about the origins of Spain, Italy, Germany, Russia, as well as France, Britain, the Scandinavian and Balkan countries and, of course, Poland and its smaller neighbors, we would relate the present to the past, which was not easy, considering the evolving scenario according to *Mein Kampf*. The Olympics were not entirely absent from the discussions, even if there was nothing comparable in the Middle Ages, except, perhaps, the courtly tournaments, and that was just the point. Unlike them, the Berlin Olympics gave the Germans a feeling of arrogance and superiority, manifesting itself even in our school town. By sheer accident, across the street from our gymnasium was a German gymnasium, which Poland was obliged to maintain according to the reciprocal minorities agreement with Germany. The insults and boasting by the German students were hard to take, leading to frequent fights in which the police had to be called to separate the combatants. One such fight, after a German win in soccer, ended in a virtual invasion and occupation of the German school, creating a famous international incident.

There were other incidents, of young men disappearing without a trace, usually on the eve of military service, which was compulsory in Poland, or after coming in conflict with the law. Nobody knew for certain where they went: one, whom I met in 1944 in Algeria, had ended up in the French Foreign Legion. Yet, there were whispers that the young men were defecting to Germany, talked into taking the step by mysterious strangers arriving ostensibly to take a cure in our town, which was becoming an increasingly popular health resort on account of its healing waters. There was talk about a German "Fifth Column" in Poland, a term gaining wide usage following reports from Spain about Generalissimo Franco marching on Madrid in four columns and using a fifth for internal infiltration. Poland did not have a genius who, taking advantage

of its robust fighting qualities, would know how to create a defensive fist to deal with any danger, which became real when, *exactly* two years after the Rhineland, in March of 1938, the Germans marched into Austria. The "Loaded Pause" was over.

I was in the junior year in school when the Anschluss took place, and because our academic program revolved, in natural progression, around modern history (from the fall of Byzantium, the Renaissance and the discovery of America to the First World War), I knew all about the Habsburgs and the Austrian Empire, and the disappearance of its remnants filled me with sorrow. Most depressing was the sight of the refugees, mostly Jews, arriving at the border crossing in nearby Zebrydowice on last trains from Vienna. Among those greeting them was a wealthy merchant Kochane (a name deriving not from a Jewish version of *kochany*=beloved, but from a Polish version of Cohan or Cohen), in whose dry goods store in nearby Strumień, in the formerly Austrian part of Silesia, my mother often shopped. He now put his considerable resources at the disposal of the refugees.

Kochane was one of the only three Jews I knew so far in my life. The very first one I met was my namesake, addressed by everyone in the Silesian version of the name—Froncek. He called himself a travelling salesman, but was really a peddler of materials for clothing, which he sold from door to door. I met him at the railway station where he was debating with himself how to transport the huge bundle he had just arrived with. Since the priest I was waiting for with my cart did not arrive, I offered Froncek to be his porter. I took him home, where he gave my mother and all the girls pieces of cloth and, upon hearing that I was about to enter the gymnasium, he promised to give me enough material for a uniform, and even tailor it for me, if I helped him some more. The help consisted in accompanying him on his rounds, all a familiar territory to me, and then seeing him off. He was, after all, carrying large sums of money. Because of that, we would usually

make him spend the night in our house, rather than have him leave at night. Our house became a storage and local headquarters for him, in exchange for which we all wore suits made from materials provided by him.

It was while wearing my new uniform from Froncek's material that I met the second Jew in my life. He was my classmate, Better, a bright delicate boy whose parents owned a shoe store in the marketplace of the school town. He was not very strong, did not participate in the physical education classes, carrying an extra subject instead, and was usually absent during the flareups with the German students, and if he was present, I would take it upon myself to escort him home. The rape of Austria upset him enormously. Noticing this, and noticing also the haunted look on the faces of the refugees, I began to realize for the first time the danger the Jews were facing if the Germans ever invaded Poland, and I decided to study the problem over the summer.

The summer of 1938 was in many respects a momentous one for me. In school those who were promoted to the senior year received military uniforms to be broken in during the summer before the Military Preparedness sessions beginning in the fall. It was a lighter uniform than the regular army issue, more like fatigues, but more elegant and comfortable. It is no wonder that I wore it when going with my father on a long-planned trip. I wanted to visit the eastern part of Poland, where most of the minorities lived, constituting almost one-third of Poland's population of 35 million. We crisscrossed the eastern territories, travelling by night and stopping in towns by day, marvelling at the number of Belorussians in the north and Ukrainians in the south and Jews everywhere. In Wilno (Vilnius now, the ancient and present capital of Lithuania), we received permission to cross into Lithuania and even Latvia (both once part of the Polish Commonwealth), as far north as Riga. Travelling south through endless expanses we looked east thinking how much farther

they once stretched for Poland. Many of the towns had much history attached to them, and outside one of them, close to the border, we had a look at Soviet border guards. Near the Romanian border, we received permission to cross it and travel to Cernautsi (now Chernovtsy), a Romanian-Jewish-Ukrainian-Polish town, where we spent a good part of a day buying wines and fruit and marvelling at the high respect everywhere for Polish currency, especially the 10 zloty silver piece with Marshal Pilsudski's image on it.

In Lwów (now Lvov) on the way back, a chilling incident occurred which reminded me of the fifth column and the dangers ahead for Poland. Outside the station, near the loading platforms, I saw a white-covered station wagon with the lettering "Maslosojusz" (a Ukrainian farm co-operative) on its sides, the exact replica of a car I had seen a week earlier outside our school town, near the German border. Even the driver, who was helping to transfer some long wooden boxes from his station wagon to a horsecart, looked strangely familiar. My father alerted the railway police, who ordered one of the boxes opened and found inside German military rifles.

When I returned home, I was appointed military commander of the youth division ("Sons of. . .") of the Silesian Insurrectionists, a para-military organization. Since my older brother Maks, who had already served in the army, was upon his return appointed commander of the "Riflemen," a para-military organization upholding the traditions of Pilsudski's Legions, between us we commanded all the young people in the region, organizing sports festivals, shooting competitions, and even amateur theatricals.

Back in school the academic program revolved around contemporary issues, and very aptly, too, because just then the fate of Czechoslovakia was being played out right in front of us, with the Czech border only a few kilometers away. For some of us, Czechoslovakia was like a second homeland, with the nearest town, Frystat, just across the border river, Olza,

which we crossed barefoot at will to go to a movie or buy oranges or bananas, which were plentiful there, or the inexpensive Bata shoes, which we wore on our way back, to the good-natured amusement of the Czech border guards. All this was now to end, and with it the beautiful Czech music on the radio, the exciting broadcasts of great soccer and hockey matches, with Malecek, perhaps the best hockey player in the world, scoring goal after goal, with the crowd responding each time with great shouts: "Malecek! Malecek!" All this was now to end, an entire way of life irreversibly lost because of some inexplicable mental paralysis and the spiritual sterility of men like Chamberlain and Daladier.

The shame of the Munich Agreement of September 1938 was not only the blindness of the Western democracies, but another colossal blunder by Poland, which this time did not lose, but by helping itself to a piece of Czechoslovakia, it sealed its own fate. Poland in 1938 had a historic opportunity to stop Hitler, who was in deep disagreement with his generals about the Czech adventure, and was almost stopped by them. The slightest sign of active foreign support for the Czechs would have saved them, as we know from the Nuremberg trials. The fate of Czechoslovakia was for Poland a matter of life and death, and this message should have been conveyed to Hitler, who was not yet in position to fight on two fronts. He was, however, very astute at guessing what his opponents would, or would not, do.

For me the Munich debacle had a personal side, which haunts me to this day. As commander of the "Sons" I was ordered to march with a detachment into the Teschen area Poland was annexing to create an impression that it was a popular move. I saw some of the Czech fortifications, some of the tanks and other equipment, and I convinced myself that the Czechs could have defended themselves with very little help from outside. I also saw the reproach on their faces, and this was the worst part of all. I never touched the pay I received (ten silver Pilsudskis),

taking it with me only when I left Poland.

As if by a strange cabal, Hitler's important moves took place in the months of March and September. We noticed that in school when the final dismemberment of Czechoslovakia took place in March of 1939, just like the annexation of Austria a year earlier and the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936. Since the annexation of the Sudetenland and the Teschen area took place in September, we concluded that by next September Poland would be pressured into ceding some of its own territory. Some demands indeed came and very soon, concerning Danzig, the "Corridor" or at least an extra-territorial highway across it to East Prussia, all these demands growing in intensity and calculated to soften Poland's will to resist. But Poland, which had behaved so badly in 1938, behaved well in 1939. Its resistance stiffened and its resolve hardened. There is something in the Polish national character, something which even Churchill recognized while chastising Poland for 1938, that makes the nation stronger in adversity. The new Polish resolve earned Poland guarantees of Western support, a fact which the same Churchill found remarkable, in view of Western inactivity in 1938, when Germany was much weaker. Poland's resolve to take on Germany and trust the Western allies was admirable, but not very wise. Poland should have made sure that her allies would not just help, but help at the right time, without delay. When the summer of 1939 came, almost everyone in Poland believed that war was inevitable, and all German demands were rejected outright.

My memory of the summer of 1939 is one of digging trenches, nabbing suspicious individuals and cooperating with the army and the police on steps to be taken in case of a German attack. I also took a final examination in the gymnasium and qualified for pre-university training in the humanities in the Lyceum, the next step under the new reformed educational system. But I did not believe that we would return to school that year, and, as a matter of fact, no notices were sent out about the

new school year which would normally have begun on Monday, September 4. Instead, I began to get used to the military uniform, which I wore almost constantly, except when going to church. Little did I know that I would wear a military uniform, of one kind or another, for the next ten years.

In August, my two brothers were mobilized, which was fine, except that Poland made another blunder by calling off the mobilization, despite the fact that on August 22 there was a non-aggression pact signed between Germany and the Soviet Union that was probably directed against Poland (as it was, as it turned out). When mobilization was restored, there were fears that many of the men would not have time to reach their units (and many did not). My brothers left on the evening of August 31, and made it (the oldest, Paul, I was never to see again).

The next day was Friday, and as was the custom on the first Friday of the month, the family went to church, except father, who left for work, travelling in the direction of the German border. I remember his uneasiness about leaving for work, because since early morning there were some strange rumblings in the sky, despite beautiful weather, and what sounded like explosions in the distance. We had no telephone at home, so it was impossible to ascertain the meaning of the noises. They continued while we were making our way to church, and even intensified once we were inside and the morning Mass started.

Towards the end of the service, around 7:30 a.m., there was a huge explosion just outside the church, as if a bomb were exploding. Father Macherski turned around and looked questioningly toward the vestry. After a while the sexton approached the altar and whispered something in the priest's ear. There was great sadness on the priest's face as he listened, then he made a big sign of the cross, and announced that a few hours ago Germany had attacked Poland and there was fierce fighting along the entire border. Then he added, in almost total silence, "*Ite missa est!*", made another sign of the cross, and

left the altar. All I could think of was that something similar had happened in the church four years before, when Marshal Pilsudski died, except that now the message was one of WAR.