

Chapter I |||

JAN MALECKI HAD NOT seen Irena Lilien for quite some time. As late as the summer of 1941, they still had seen a good deal of each other. By that time, the Liliens had been driven out of their home in Smug; but the German occupation authorities were not yet taking harsher measures against the Jews, so the Liliens, having paid off the necessary people, had avoided confinement in the Warsaw Ghetto. They had even managed to rescue some of their things, and with this remainder of their belongings, still quite sizable and valuable, the entire family moved closer to Warsaw.

The Liliens, who before the war had been people of means—and for several generations, at that—were possessed of such a deeply developed sense of security that, even in the new and critical situation in which they now found themselves, it did not occur to them to move to a different suburb. Zalesinek, where they rented an apartment, was located about a quarter of the way to Smug, and many people along the commuter line knew the Liliens, whether personally or by sight. They had become so much a part of Polish culture and customs that they had no idea they might arouse suspicion by their outward appearance.

Fortunately, the oldest generation of Liliens, the banker and his wife, did not travel to Warsaw. She, an immense, fat Jewish woman, had been incapacitated for a number of years and never left her wheelchair. Her husband, long ago having withdrawn from affairs at the bank, contented himself by sitting in the sun or, on rainy or cold days, by watching people play bridge. But his son Professor Lilien, his wife, and their daughter, Irena, still traveled to Warsaw as often as before. Mrs. Lilien attracted relatively little attention. Small, slender, and quiet, with irregular but pleasant features, she could pass for Aryan. It was much worse for the professor and Irena.

Irena went into Warsaw several times a week. She visited friends and acquaintances—and a desire to see Malecki occasioned other trips as well. She loved her social life and an atmosphere of fun; she liked to arrange meetings in the bars and cafés that were so fashionable during the war. Irena Lilien was very pretty: tall, dark-haired, and dark-complexioned. Her coarse, thick hair and eastern eyes, however, were strikingly Jewish. When Malecki explained that she ought to be more careful, Irena just laughed and said that the Germans knew nothing of such things. Of course, at that time, incidences of extortion by Poles already had begun to occur, but Irena did not take seriously the possibility of such a thing ever happening to her or to those close to her. Her beauty, and the social position to which she had been born and to which she had become accustomed, lent her a sense of security from all danger.

Professor Lilien, for other reasons, having more to do with his upbringing, likewise did not take seriously the possibility that anything could happen to him. The war had shaken him very badly. The triumph of bestiality over regard for human life put his innate humanity and liberalism to a hard test, but he emerged from it with an unswerving belief in life and in human progress. However, the defense of those threatened values cost him dearly. Juliusz Lilien, gifted with a remarkable historical intuition and imagination, was bereft of any imagination at all with regard to his own fate or that of those closest to him. There are people who, having attained a high position in society, cannot imagine the existence of any power capable of casting them down and depriving them of what they have achieved. Lilien was just such a person. Even after being driven from Smug and forced to exchange his luxurious and spacious villa¹ for three sublet rooms, deprived of his library, servants, and creature comforts, he remained in his sensibilities the same person he had been before the war: the scion of an old and wealthy family, a justly renowned historian, an oft-named university master and dean, and a member of various scholarly societies both in Poland and abroad. In the public mind, Lilien was reputed to be a Mason of some distinction, but whether he really was—and, if so, what role he might have played in the organization—would have been hard to say. He had influential relatives in all the countries of Europe and in America, as well as friends in academic circles, in international finance, and in politics. If he did not leave Poland after the September defeat and later failed to avail himself of the opportunity of travel to Italy, it was no doubt due primarily to his deep-rooted certainty that, through all of life's vicissitudes, he would remain

Professor Lilien. The first years of the war already had narrowed the scope of his activities and his significance but had not succeeded in altering his attitude. He worked incessantly, wrote and read, and visited those of his colleagues who remained in Warsaw. In his manner of living and in his thought and experience, he endeavored to affirm the rather illusory truth that the objective shape of the world and its events can be obliterated and pushed into the shadows by the interpretation one ascribes to things.

The Liliens spent the entire summer in Zalesinek, and Malecki visited them there several times. The neighborhood was typical of suburban Warsaw—barren and sandy, and crowded with ugly villas set among dwarfish pine trees. In comparison to beautiful Smug, charmingly set in the middle of an old park and ponds and surrounded by dense and abundant alders, blackthorns, and bird-cherries, Zalesinek was poor and sad-looking. The banality of the sublet apartment was ameliorated somewhat by the things the Liliens had brought with them from Smug, and there were still a good many books in the professor's room.

Malecki went to Zalesinek for the last time one Sunday in August. In addition to him, there was the young painter Fela Ptaszycza—nicknamed Birdie, despite her enormous stature—a friend of Irena's and an admirer of the intellectual virtues of the professor.² No other guests fulfilled their promise to come—a surprise, since on Saturday and Sunday many people usually visited the Liliens, and their expansive, two-story house in Smug would become as full as a boardinghouse or hotel. The Liliens had complained on occasion about the excess of guests, but they had become so used to it that they felt unpleasantly surprised by the lonely holiday. They served an excellent dinner, with chicken and a very elaborate dessert. But not even the purchase of French cognac from some German soldiers, which Irena poured into dark Turkish coffee, could set the awkward atmosphere aright. Although the professor was talkative, it seemed that his erudition and witty humor required numerous listeners to be truly effective. Irena was overly boisterous, laughing too much and too loudly. Ptaszycza carried within her massive body a tender and sensitive heart and, in her desire that a good mood prevail, time and again committed horrible social gaffes. That she did this so sincerely and with such evident goodwill only worsened the situation.

After dinner, wanting to be alone with Malecki at last, Irena proposed a walk in the direction of the old woods. But first the professor had to lay out

for Malecki a picture of the political situation of the world at war; then Ptaszycka again interfered and when, after a long while, it finally dawned on her that she was in the way, she was unable to extricate herself from her awkward role. In the end, Malecki returned to Warsaw on an earlier train than usual. Irena announced her intention to travel to the city on the following Wednesday, but neither on that day nor on any of the following days was there any sign of her. In connection with his work on the renovation of a certain Cistercian monastery,³ Malecki left for a remote province and visited Irena only after his return at the end of the following week.

During this time, the Liliens had encountered a number of unpleasant incidents. Someone must have informed on them, because on the Wednesday after that Sunday, the Gestapo⁴ began to take an interest in them. This time, matters were much more serious. First, the professor himself was seized and detained at headquarters for a day and a night. The following morning, the same agents came and transported Mrs. Lilien and Irena to the Warsaw Ghetto. They were there for only a few hours, and the professor too was released; but this time, as Irena related, it was evident that the ransom for his freedom had been very high. Of course, staying in Zalesinek was now out of the question. It was vital that they leave immediately and take with them only the most essential of their belongings.

The biggest problem was with the elder Liliens, the banker and his wife. Finally, after long deliberations and overcoming many and various obstacles, both were placed in a private clinic in Warsaw. The professor left for Kraków to survey conditions there, while his wife stayed with her distant family, which up to that point had been safe. Irena was taken in by Fela Ptaszycka. Shortly thereafter, within a very short interval, the elder Liliens both passed away. The professor returned from Kraków less vibrant than usual, nothing apparently having come of his plans. Only now did the Liliens decide to take out Aryan papers⁵ for themselves. Under the name of Grabowski, they settled once again on the outskirts of Warsaw, this time on the right bank of the Vistula, along the railway line toward Otwock. But two weeks later, when they barely had settled in, they had to move again hurriedly, changing location almost from hour to hour.

Malecki saw the Liliens for the last time at Fela Ptaszycka's. He found that the professor had changed the most. He was depressed, he looked very old, and he was unshaven and sloppily dressed. The unkemptness only under-

scored his Semitic appearance. He now closely resembled his dead father, who in his old age had looked unmistakably Jewish. Mrs. Lilien, likewise, looked the worse for her experiences and was even quieter and more withdrawn than usual. Only Irena was holding up well, as she attempted to turn the situation into a joke or some adventure that would certainly end both soon and favorably. Her nervous, restless gaiety was even harder to take than her parents' depression. Collectively, they did not know what to do with themselves. Ptaszyccka lived in *Saska Kępa*⁶ in her mother's villa, and, despite her best intentions, she could not keep Irena with her for more than a week, two at most. The Lilien family had fallen into unforeseen difficulties. The professor was lodging for the time being with one of his students, but this arrangement was not permanent. From what the professor said, one could guess that he had been disappointed by many people on whose help he had counted. It seemed that, for him, this blow was the most painful of all. He felt at once vulnerable and powerless. As the three sat in Ptaszyccka's studio on that sunny spring afternoon, drinking tea out of beautiful English porcelain, they seemed like hopelessly sad and dismal castaways with no place to turn.



A few weeks later, Malecki received a letter from Irena. She wrote from Kraków. By this time, Jan had become absorbed in important matters of a personal nature, and then he had to leave again for the Cistercian monastery; and so, not having answered her letter immediately, he did not answer it at all. After that, one more letter arrived from Irena, short and very sad, and in its tone not at all like her usual self. This time he wanted to answer, but the aforementioned affairs had so distanced him from Irena that he did not know what to say. He saw that Irena was unhappy, lonely, and that her life was going badly. He, by contrast, was happy. Despite all the wartime calamities, he was beginning a new life, and there is among people no dividing line greater or more absolute than that between the happiness of some and the suffering of others. Affairs great and small divide people, yet none so sharply as the inequality of fate.

By the time his marriage with Anna was finalized, the figure of Irena had receded into a far corner of Malecki's thoughts, and neither sympathy for her situation nor the remnants of their former friendship were enough to prompt him to reach out to her. Finally, Irena stopped writing. For a time, Fela

Ptaszycka still had news of her, but later even that broke off. Malecki visited his Cistercians a few more times, each time stopping en route in Kraków, but his attempts to look Irena up ended only with good intentions. In the summer of 1942, when the Germans began liquidating the ghettos and organizing the mass slaughter of Jews throughout the country, rumors spread about the death of Professor Lilien. But different versions circulated, and it was difficult to verify how much truth there was to them.

It was not until spring of the following year that Malecki unexpectedly, and amid quite special circumstances, met Irena again. It was the Tuesday before Easter.