

The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman

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Also by Andrzej Szczypiorski

The Shadow Catcher

Self-Portrait with Woman

A Mass for Arras

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The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman

Andrzej Szczypiorski

Translated from the Polish by Klara Glowczewska

With a new introduction
by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



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Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

What a gorgeous novel this is. Its biggest triumph is not merely that it is wise, in the rare and enduring meaning of that word, but that its sagacity is worn lightly and with humour. This book is about Nazi-occupied Poland, and its attendant horrors, and yet the reader laughs often, in recognition, in broken-hearted discovery. “A Jew is eating cake!” a character cries about a Jew who is indeed eating cake in a café, an ordinary act for people in Warsaw, but suddenly a crime for a Jew. And in that single line of dialogue lies, illuminated and dramatized, the absurdity at the heart of the Nazi oppression.

The English title feels almost like a ruse, unlike the original Polish title “The Beginning,” as though “The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman” were a familiar soft way to draw the reader into a rewarding but certainly not a soft novel. Irma Seidenman’s beauty is significant because it becomes her salvation. She is not stereotypically Jewish. Her blond hair and blue eyes

enable her to pass herself off as a Catholic widow of a Polish man, until an informer turns her in to the Gestapo. We see in what follows how easily mediocrity sits beside courage, how base and petty humans can be, and yet how dignified. Still, this novel is not narrowly about Mrs. Seidenman, but about a revolving cast, seen briefly and yet fully formed, among them a street criminal, a Gestapo officer, a nun who converted Jewish children to Catholicism and thus both saved them and caused them to lose their heritage, and an amiable professor murdered in a summary execution. The character of Pawełek is the most enduring and endearing, as we see him “entering that period when love and death become a man’s inseparable companions and the thought of them never leaves him.”

Szczypiorski is unsentimental, his world is filled with a kind of pragmatic resilience, and an implacable insistence on the realities of history, on the fact that what happened happened, or as a character muses, “I don’t believe that history has a conditional tense.” And yet there is a restrained romanticism at the core of this novel—particularly in Paweł: his love of Mrs. Seidenman, his bond with his childhood friend Henio. It is unbearably moving to read of Henio’s loss, a Jew sentenced to death by an accident of birth. We mourn that immense tragedy as well the tragedy of a lost friendship—for when a childhood best friend dies, he takes with him the childhood itself, so that the memories dissolve because the person with whom they were shared is no more.

What is a literary stylist? Whatever it is, this novel is the work of one. Szczypiorski leaps in time, elegantly and to great emotional effect, so that we see a present where the future also stubbornly lives. It is a particularly poignant reading experience to follow a character as he muses about his present situation in war-wrecked Poland and then in the next sentence learn of how he dies, and that his bones will whiten, and then darken into the foundation of a new building. He breaks other literary conventions with equal grace, going from minute details of a character's appearance to philosophical meditations about God and justice and politics, and the result is not a novel unsure of whether it wants to be a narrative novel or a novel of ideas, but rather one certain that it can be both. It is a model of lyricism, with a layered alertness to language; first in its own aesthetics—conquering the art of the sentence, beautiful lines sliding off the tongue—and then in its awareness of the political repercussions of language. “The world lied,” Szczypiorski writes. “Every look was debauched, every gesture vile, every step abject. God still withheld the hardest trial, the yoke of language.”

Fiction's loyalty is often first to literary aesthetics, sometimes at the expense of political accuracy. Not in this novel. Szczypiorski understands that so much of politics is human psychology, and that it is literature's piercing inquiry that best mines it. In the parts of the novel that are almost gossipy—all great literature is almost gossipy—we see the characters wrestling with the stereotypes of identity. Müller thinks of

Russia as “tyrannical, dark, and unbridled.” A Polish-German thinks of himself as “an unfinished German, formed not at all in the German manner but with some kind of a defect in the heart, who sees all this through the Slavic experience, a German infected with the blessed disease of Polishness, which is beautiful precisely in that it is imperfect, unfinished, unrealized, uncertain, searching, flighty, capricious, unbridled . . .” Or when a character muses about the “tyrannical perfection without which Germans cannot live” and notes that “If history ever imposes on Germans the duty of hypocrisy, they will become the most excellent hypocrites under the sun.”

And so here is a novel of moral courage, questioning identity and ideology, questioning while also celebrating nationalism, because it is at heart a paean to Poland. It is the love letter of a disappointed son. It is written in memoriam to Jews who were “soon to die in battle, later to live on in legend.” A witness to the brute ugliness of Nazism while being impatient with Polish self-congratulation, his bright light turned from the beginning on the deformed ambitions of Poland’s post-war years. Szczypiorski shows us that there is no real redemption, and we are never allowed to forget that even the characters who survive the war will bear many griefs, and many forms of physical and emotional exile.

Chimamanda Adichie
Lagos, Nigeria
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I

The room was in twilight because the judge was a lover of twilight. He didn't like it when his usually unfinished and hazy thoughts fell into the trap of light. Everything on earth is dark and unclear, and the judge loved to plumb the depths of the world. That was why he would often sit in a rocking chair in one corner of the immense living room, his head leaning back, so that his thoughts could sway gently to the rhythm of the chair, which he set into motion with a light touch of the foot, first the left, then the right. He wore ankle-length felt slippers with metal clasps that glistened blue against the rug when they caught the lamplight.

Kujawski the tailor watched the clasps on the judge's slippers and calculated in his head how much money he would lose buying the gold-framed painting on the wall. It showed a naked fellow with horns sitting on a cask of wine. Kujawski believed it was the devil, one of those merry devils, partial to

the bottle and the ladies, that painters of old liked to depict, often against a dim and murky background. With some effort the tailor could just make out a water mill or the ruins of an old castle. They weren't very beautiful paintings to be sure, but they had their value, and the tailor was putting his money into art because he was a patriot and a man of culture.

"So you're saying, dear friend," said Judge Romnicki, "that you've had enough of this war. Yes, enough! And, besides, peace is man's natural state. We all want it, you said. . . ."

"That's what I said," the tailor nodded, looking at the devil on the cask. Suddenly he remembered that this devil was called a faun, and a sweet feeling of serenity descended upon him.

"Well, all right. Let the war end," said the judge. "At once. This very moment. . . . Would you want that, my dear friend?"

"Who wouldn't, your honor?"

"Please consider carefully. I'm being absolutely serious. Peace is the most important thing, isn't it? So let us end this war. At once, without a moment's delay. Be very careful, dear Mr. Kujawski. Where are the Soviets? Let us say they're at the river Don. The British and the Americans? In North Africa. Splendid. So our dear Adolf Hitler controls Europe. And today we end the war, Mr. Kujawski. Because you were so kind as to point out that peace is the most important thing. Isn't that so?"

“But sir,” Kujawski exclaimed. “How could we? With the Germans on our back like that?”

“Make up your mind, my friend. Anyway, the Germans will change. We’ll have peace, we’ll have peace! First the preliminaries, of course, then the peace conference, some concessions on both sides. The Soviets this, Hitler that, the British and Americans something else. But since you subscribe to the view that peace is the most important thing, then they’ll have to reach some sort of agreement, that’s why we have diplomats, heads of state, various government offices, overt and covert, exchanges of documents, top hats, limousines, champagne, peace to men of goodwill, Mr. Kujawski.”

“Your honor . . .” the tailor muttered.

“You yourself wanted this!” the judge exclaimed. “Please, don’t be shift. There are plenty of others in the world who are. Ah, my dear friend, cheer up. . . . After all, we have peace! And because there is peace, the occupiers can’t behave so abominably anymore. All right, we’re not free. But we are used to that, Mr. Kujawski. After all, we were both born into slavery, and we will die in it. Oh, yes, at first they will exploit us ruthlessly. Fourteen hours of slave labor a day. A bowl of watery soup. Whippings, beatings. . . . But that will pass with time. Because there is peace, they won’t have a chance to get any new slaves. They’ll have to take good care of those they have already. Cheer up, dear Mr. Kujawski. A few short years, and we’ll be working eight-hour days, they’ll give us ration cards, there will even be coffee, tea, and why

not, since there's world peace, since there has to be a common market. . . . Will the English drink all the tea of India themselves? Will the Soviets not supply crude oil, wheat, potatoes, whatever? We will live, Mr. Kujawski, under a foreign heel; it's true, no use pretending we won't, but we will live in peace. For from this evening on there will be peace in the world, and that is mankind's highest good, for which our souls long so desperately, our anguished, foolish souls, Mr. Kujawski, shamed by slavery, grown used to humiliation, abasement, servitude—not today, that much is clear, not yet, but with time. After a couple of short years, they'll give us our own schools, naturally with every single class conducted in our own language, when we'll be eating bread with bacon, and maybe even have a little bottle of French cognac now and then, maybe some herring, a Cuban cigar! Just think, my dearest friend, how many admirable qualities and noble deeds will bloom in the sunshine of this European peace. . . . How joyful will be the lives of our little slaves, our boys and girls, who will get presents of candy from their rulers, perhaps even a small painted toy. For our rulers will take good care of the children; they will introduce Ovaltine into the kindergartens, so that the children will grow healthy and strong and later make good workers, receiving a modest but honorable reward, a healthy and relaxing holiday, in accordance with the principle, *Kraft durch Freude*, meaning strength from joy, meaning that one has to rest, take care of one's health, brush one's teeth, eat sensibly, and lead a hygienic life, because that

is the indispensable condition of productive and disciplined work. And as you know, dear Mr. Kujawski, *Arbeit macht frei*, work makes man free, and it makes him especially so in the sunshine of European peace. We will lack only one thing. Only one! The right of dissent. The right to say out loud that we want a free and independent Poland, that we want to brush our teeth and go on holiday in our own way, conceive children and work in our own way, think in our own way, live and die. This is the one thing we will find missing in the sunshine of European peace, which you, my friend, hold to be the highest good.”

The tailor licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. The metal clasps on the judge’s slippers, which only a moment ago reminded him of two tiny, twinkling stars, now seemed to him the eyes of a wild beast.

“Your honor, please. . . .” he muttered. “I want peace, of course, but under different conditions. First, Hitler must go.”

“For Hitler to go, there has to be another war, Mr. Kujawski,” said the judge. “So what will it be, my friend? Doesn’t peace suit you anymore this evening? Are you already yearning for battle? Haven’t we had enough of all this madness? Does a bloodthirsty executioner lurk inside of you—is that it? That I didn’t expect, Mr. Kujawski! Haven’t you had your fill of victims, of fires, of Polish and non-Polish blood being spilled in the world?”

The judge started to laugh. He stopped the rocking chair. The eyes of the wild beast went out.

"All right, my friend. We're agreed at last. Remember, Mr. Kujawski! We should always be concerned with Poland, with Polishness, with our freedom. Not with some European peace. That's bunk for fools. But Poland. Am I right?"

"Of course you're right, your honor," Kujawski answered. "I'm a dwarf not only in stature, but also in intellect."

"Never say such things out loud! The walls have ears. There might be some home-bred demiurges in there, only waiting for people to lose faith in their own reason, to begin to doubt themselves and to wonder if they don't really have, as you said, a dwarflike intellect."

"Demiurges?" the tailor repeated. "I've never heard of this. Are they like plumbers?"

"They're tricksters, my dear friend, who peddle mankind's salvation. Before you know it, they'll come crawling out of some hole—first one, then another. In their pockets they carry the philosopher's stone. They all have a different one, and they throw these stones at one another. Only they usually manage to hit the heads of honest people like you and me. . . . They want to arrange our future to their own liking. And they want to dress up our past to their own liking, too. You haven't come across their sort before, Mr. Kujawski?"

"Maybe I have," the tailor said in a conciliatory tone, and again greedily eyed the faun in the gilded frame.

"On the other hand," the judge continued, "your remark about the plumbers is most interesting. I hope you're not a

prophet, dear Mr. Kujawski. For the day might come when they'll flush us all down the drain. Then we will truly be in a pretty pickle."

"As to the picture," the tailor resumed delicately, "I could still take this faun today. Figure the cost of the frame separately. The boy will come with a rickshaw, we'll wrap the picture up in paper, tie it with string, and it will be set to go."

"It will be set to go, Mr. Kujawski, but I'd like to hear your offer first."

"You mentioned to Pawelek that payment could be partially in provisions."

"Why, of course. That would be most welcome. I was thinking especially of meat."

Kujawski wagged his finger playfully at the judge.

"Your honor is supposed to be quite an intellectual, but you also have a good head for business."

He said this gaily, but instantly felt nervous. He wasn't certain if it was proper to speak to the judge in this way. Kujawski had more cash on him than Romnicki would see in an entire year, yet he felt awkward in the presence of this old man in the rocking chair. Not only because the judge had once been his benefactor, but for a rather banal reason: because he knew his place in the world. The time hadn't yet come when money and power decided a man's position. The tailor belonged to an era founded on a spiritual order that was as delicate as porcelain yet as durable as Roman aqueducts—a

hierarchy of human souls. Everyone knew there existed an aristocracy not of birth but of the spirit. Kujawski felt uneasy and looked at the judge. But Romnicki laughed.

“I wish I did have a good head for business, dear Mr. Kujawski. I wish I did; I can’t pretend otherwise,” he said merrily. He was sensitive as a seismograph, with that special sensitivity poets call the intelligence of emotion, so he said also: “But fate has blessed me by bringing me together with you, and you have the head to think for both of us. I put myself in your hands entirely, whatever you propose.”

And then, so as not to offend Kujawski and spoil the pleasure he took in doing business, he added firmly: “But don’t think I won’t bargain stubbornly, dear Mr. Kujawski.”

“That’s understood,” the tailor answered. He thought he would overpay for the painting, just so he could sit again on the threadbare little couch in this living room, with its odor of old objects and the dust from many books.

II

Pawełek Kryński opened his eyes and looked at his hands. He always did this after awaking. Had they already turned blue, were they dead, with blackened fingernails, emitting a cadaverous stench? Or were they still his own, alive? Pawełek—that's what everyone called him from the time he was a child—was about to turn nineteen, and extraordinary things happened to a young man of that age living in those times. Already he understood well the difference between the sexes and was losing his faith in immortality. He would regain it much later, but his early manhood, like his old age, accustomed him to death. Pawełek Kryński was entering that period when love and death become a man's inseparable companions and the thought of them never leaves him.

A few years later, an eighteen-year-old displaying such fear and anguish would be merely comical. But Pawełek belonged to an era when the young wanted to be grown

up. Boys of fifteen donned men's suits and demanded duties and responsibilities. They fled childhood because it lasted too long. Children had no honor, and these young men wanted honor above all else.

He opened his eyes and looked at his hands. They still belonged to him. Relieved, he collapsed again into the pillow. Henio had visited him during the night. But Henio's features were blurred, and his voice so soft that Pawełek couldn't make out the words. He only understood Henio's gesture. As always, Henio gave a signal during Pawełek's sleep. Then Pawełek would say, "Where are you, Henio?" but he'd get no answer. He didn't like this recurring dream, but if one morning he awoke with the feeling that Henio hadn't come, he was disappointed. Where did he disappear to, that monster? he would wonder.

He opened his eyes and again examined his hands. It occurred to him that he was neglecting his relationship with God. He didn't believe as strongly as he had before, or as he would again; he felt skeptical, rebellious, contemptuous, hesitant. But even as he counted on heaven's patience, he feared its anger.

His hands were a good color, they were strong. He sighed with relief and jumped out of bed. He had many important things to accomplish today, things requiring valor and dignity. Two women appeared at his bedside. Mrs. Irma Seidenman, gold, violet, and beautiful, whom he was renouncing, and

Monika, silver, dark, like a Russian icon, whom he was starting to love passionately.

Irma was Pawełek's first, boyhood love. Before the war she had lived in the apartment next door. Pawełek was thirteen when he began to love her. She was the wife of Dr. Ignacy Seidenman, a radiologist and scholar. The doctor liked Pawełek. Meeting him on the stairs, he would ask him about school, give him candy, and once he even invited the boy to his office with its X-ray machine. Irma was a golden-haired beauty with azure blue eyes and a slender figure. Even before the war Pawełek dreamed of her at night. He would awaken terrified, not recognizing his own body, which was hot, taut, aching. Irma was like an illness, she caused only torment. When she offered him candy or chocolate, he was mortified. For her he would conquer exotic lands, plunder fortresses, vanquish hostile hordes. They didn't speak the same language. He sailed toward her in a mighty ship, in a galleon with one hundred guns, in an Indian dugout; she approached him with a praline in her hand. Later, he no longer rowed a canoe wearing a feathered headdress. Irma was moving around Warsaw. A Jewish widow with a Nordic face, full of determination. It was wartime. Pawełek was finishing classes in secret underground schools and trying to earn money to help his mother. His father was in a German POW camp for officers.

Dr. Seidenman died before the war and Irma lived alone, moving from one apartment to another on the Aryan side of

the city. Pawełek always had time for her. She could count on him. She was trying to save her husband's research files so that after the war radiology could develop along the lines established by the discoveries and observations of Dr. Ignacy Seidenman. Pawełek helped her in this. She was more and more beautiful. He feared for her safety and was tormented by jealousy. Irma was in her thirties, and there were many men around her.

Pawełek passed his final exams in the underground schools. He earned a little money acting as a middleman in the art trade. During the occupation, educated and formerly wealthy people with nothing to live on were selling off paintings, furniture, books. New, sometimes immense, fortunes were made, whose sources were not always clean. In part they came from the underground economy, without which the country, a mercilessly exploited hinterland of the German war machine, could not exist; and in part also from the plunder of Jewish property, for although the Germans, of course, took the greater portion of this loot, more than one valuable crumb fell into Polish hands. Pawełek moved about on that singular border between the ruined collectors of prewar days—those once well-to-do owners of engravings, canvases, and silver settings who were now forced to sell—and a small but vigilant and enterprising group of nouveaux riches, insatiable, hard, cold, boastful, among whom one could find now and then genuine connoisseurs and lovers of beauty. Perhaps they were people who were unlucky before the war—former travelers of

the byroads—who now at last could step up onto the main track and retaliate against their once more fortunate competitors. In the final analysis, these were rather shady affairs, but some of the participants were people like Kujawski, the tailor, a rich man and a collector but who, to the surprise of his clients, often proved to have a good heart and a generous spirit. Pawełek stuck to him, and the tailor liked Pawełek. For a time they were inseparable. Then relations relaxed somewhat, not because of any business disagreement, but because Pawełek was kept busy with his classes at the underground university and with affairs of the heart.

He met Monika. She was eighteen, with raven hair, a silvery complexion, a cameolike profile, and the languid grace of a lazy beast of prey. In the late fall of 1942, Paweł kissed Monika. Her mouth was cold, her lips tightly pressed together, her eyes hostile.

“Never again!” she said. “Never again.”

But a few days later he kissed Monika’s mouth again. She returned his kiss. He nearly died. He loved her. She was beautiful, wise, good. He was nothing next to her. A pebble by the roadside. An autumn leaf. A homeless ghost. Once, in a rickshaw, he put his hand on her knee. She stiffened. He withdrew his hand. He felt the wings of death beating above him. On another day, as they were walking on Marszałkowska Street, they met Kujawski. He lifted his hat. He was a man of great delicacy and cared about good manners.

Monika said, “What a funny little man.”

Pawełek acknowledged that Kujawski was a funny little man.

A week later, when they had some business together, the tailor brought up Monika.

“You’re very lucky, Pawełek.”

“How so, Mr. Kujawski?”

“That girl I saw you with on Marszałkowska Street. She’s beautiful, definitely beautiful. . . .”

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head and added: “Definitely? What am I saying? She is infinitely beautiful. . . .”

Pawełek acknowledged that Kujawski was a wise man, an art expert, a serious connoisseur.

He loved Monika, but he also loved Irma. They were different loves. With Monika, he wanted to spend his entire life; with Irma, a few hours. With Monika, he wanted to grow old; with Irma, to grow up. But he lived in cruel times. His dreams didn’t come true. The first time he declared his love to Irma, on the terrace of a café near the Avenue Kléber in Paris, she was already an old woman. And the beautiful Monika had been dead for thirty years. Neither woman contributed significantly to Pawełek’s emotional growth. The women who were to stamp and mark his life were to come later. But Irma and Monika accustomed him to death. For this he remained grateful.

But this morning, looking at his hands as he got up out of bed, gratitude was not what he felt. He was energetic and

determined. Today, he resolved, he would finish once and for all with his love for Irma and would give himself wholeheartedly to Monika. He still believed that he was master of his own choices. He believed in freedom. He must be forgiven. He was not yet nineteen.

He washed himself in cold water, snorting, and was almost happy. But not quite, because he remembered again Henio Fichtelbaum. His classroom friend. The boy of the Mosaic faith. His best friend from childhood, boyhood, and early adulthood. Henio Fichtelbaum, who helped Pawełek in his math assignments. Capricious, handsome, dark, intense.

There were moments when they hated each other. Henio pouted.

"I don't give a fig about you, Pawełek," he would say and storm off into the trees of the Saxon Gardens, small, loathsome, with a satchel on his back. Pawełek kicked the chestnuts in helpless rage. They detested each other. Sometimes cruel Henio would turn around and come back. Pouting, looking down at his feet, also kicking chestnuts.

"Have it your way," he would say. "We can go together to Królewska Street."

At other times, Pawełek would set off in pursuit of Henio.

"Stop! Wait! I'm coming with you. . . ."

They were Indians. They were Abyssinians. Henio would throw a plaid blanket round his shoulders and say to Pawełek, "I'm Haile Selassie! And you are the commander of my armies."

At other times Pawełek took the blanket and was emperor. They let out battle cries; the Italians fled. Henio shot from cannons, Pawełek fired pistols. They took aim with bows and arrows, threw spears.

Henio Fichtelbaum liked sweets; Pawełek liked films. They argued. Henio wanted to have some chocolate; Pawełek wanted to go to the movies. They argued because parting would have been unbearable. They were the kind of friends adults never have. They died for each other in play and were prepared to die for real because they didn't understand death yet and so weren't afraid of it. They lacked the imagination.

Later, they didn't need imagination. In 1940 Henio Fichtelbaum moved to the ghetto. Two years later, he escaped and turned up at Pawełek's, who set him up in an excellent hiding place at a watchmaker he knew. Henio Fichtelbaum moved to an attic. Pawełek kept him supplied with books and information, but Henio rebelled, whined. The ghetto experience faded in his memory and the attic drove him crazy.

"It's a prison!" Henio Fichtelbaum said.

"For God's sake, Henio, you should have your head examined. Where is it going to be any better? You've got to be patient."

"I want to go out, Pawełek."

"It's out of the question!"

"I'm going to go out!"

"You're a moron, an idiot, a fool!" Pawełek screamed.

Henio didn't go. Then, later, he couldn't stand it anymore. When he returned, Pawełek made a scene.

"But you see, everything's fine," Henio Fichtelbaum would say, cool as a cucumber. "I went out and I'm alive. Nothing happened."

"You have no conscience!" Pawełek would cry.

They were friends. Henio gave in. Not because he feared for his life, but because he loved Pawełek. But two months later he vanished without a trace. Pawełek prayed fervently. Weeks passed with no news. The whole winter passed. Henio didn't exist anymore. Only late at night, when Pawełek was falling asleep, he would appear in the darkness and give a signal. It's a sign of life, Pawełek thought, and would fall asleep. Women woke him in the morning. Irma and Monika. All three emerged from Pawełek's dreams. Only Henio Fichtelbaum was not physically present at any other time, was always horribly absent. He has died, Pawełek would think during the day. But Henio would come again at night and give the signal.

He also came later, for many years. The world in which Henio had remained behind no longer existed, but still he appeared at night and gave Pawełek the signal. But by then Pawełek thought it was the sign of death, not of life. Don't call me, he would say to Henio Fichtelbaum's shadow, you have no right. He fell asleep unafraid, for he knew that Henio Fichtelbaum wasn't God's messenger, only a good memory. Maybe they are one and the same thing, he sometimes thought.

But he firmly believed that God was also love.

For in the end it is fair to say that Pawelek was one of those favored by destiny. He survived the war and experienced love. It's an astonishing thing. He was practically a child of fortune! When he was little more than twenty, everything he had ever known went up in flames. This city had been the only world he had. Not even the whole city, just its nucleus, the several streets between the Belvedere and the Castle, between the shore of the Vistula and the Wola cemetery. The air, the sky, and the earth were different here. Buildings blocked out the horizon. As a child he had trod every square centimeter of this bit of ground. He had no other country. At its center lay the Saxon Gardens and its adjoining streets—on one side beautiful, light, and elegant; on the other noisy, ugly, and poor. No border separated these two worlds. In the shade of the chestnut trees of the Saxon Gardens, ladies in smart suits, veiled hats, and high-heeled shoes and men in trench coats, derbies, and fur collars rubbed elbows with dark-haired passersby in stained smocks and boots, shrill market women in wigs, boys with corkscrew curls and skullcaps, and weary old men with canes, in trimmed jackets, round peasants' caps, and the worn-out shoes of poor, overworked people. Sitting around the fountain could be seen the insurgents of 1914, the light cavalry soldiers of 1920, nearsighted schoolteachers who in their youth had curtsied to Orzeszkowa, various conspirators and former deportees to Siberia, prisoners of Moabit and of the fortress in Olomuniec, textile merchants

from Nowolip and metal wholesalers from Gęsia, antiquarians from Świętojarska Street, young diplomats from the Brühlowski Palace, prostitutes and pious women, the unemployed and the wealthy, Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, French tutors from the former estates of the gentry, White Russian refugees, marriageable young women, students with peasant faces and empty pockets, thieves, and gossips. It was here that Pawełek argued with the cruel Henio over who had won the game of marbles. It was here that they beat up the bolsheviks, forced the Duce's crack regiments to flee, and brought down General Franco's planes, which had dared to bomb the ramparts of the Spanish Republic.

One could take a few steps and find oneself amid palaces, government buildings, limousines, the aromas of coffee and perfume. Or one could go in the opposite direction, toward Graniczna Street, Żabia, Rymarska, and arrive at the very heart of the Jewish diaspora, among small hardware shops, a noisy Hassidic throng, huge porters from the produce market in oilcloth caps and laborers' shirts, the bustle of commerce, the neighing of horses, the dusty display windows of impoverished hatters' workshops sporting the sign *MODES* or *DERNIER CRI*, fruit shops, candy shops, barber shops, shoemakers and purse-makers, street peddlers hawking jeans and bagels.

One could also walk in still another direction, toward the steeples of old churches and the musty little buildings and convents, toward the world of proletarian torment and of the rebellious dreams of the common people. It was precisely there

that the Royal Castle touched the cathedral, the cathedral the Market, and the Market the Vistula and the Jordan.

This was Paweł's entire world, which in the course of a few years, as he stood helplessly by, disappeared underground before his very eyes. It literally disappeared, collapsed into ruin, burying in the rubble both people and the Polish way of life.

Paweł survived the war. Wasn't that enough? No, he still experienced love. It's astonishing. He was indeed fortune's child.