

*IN THE
BEGINNING*



*Chaim
Potok*

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TO

Adena

MY WIFE

AND TO

Robert Gottlieb

MY EDITOR AND FRIEND

In the Beginning



ONE

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I can remember hearing my mother murmur those words while I lay in bed with fever. “Children are often sick, darling. That’s the way it is with children. All beginnings are hard. You’ll be all right soon.”

I remember bursting into tears one evening because a passage of Bible commentary had proved too difficult for me to understand. I was about nine years old at the time. “You want to understand everything immediately?” my father said. “Just like that? You only began to study this commentary last week. All beginnings are hard. You have to work at the job of studying. Go over it again and again.”

The man who later guided me in my studies would welcome me warmly into his apartment and, when we sat at his desk, say to me in his gentle voice, “Be patient, David. The midrash says, ‘All beginnings are hard.’ You cannot swallow all the world at one time.”

I say it to myself today when I stand before a new class at the beginning of a school year or am about to start a new book or research paper: All beginnings are hard. Teaching the way I do is particularly hard, for I touch the raw nerves of faith, the beginnings of things. Often students are shaken. I say to them what was said to me: “Be patient. You are learning a new way of understanding the Bible. All beginnings are hard.” And sometimes I add what I have learned on my own: “Especially a beginning that you make by yourself. That’s the hardest beginning of all.”

I marvel that we survive our beginnings. Mine was filled with strange accidents. In the very beginning there was the accident that occurred about a week after I was born: my mother, bringing me home from the hospital, tripped going up the front stoop of our

apartment house and fell forward heavily onto her knees and then sideways onto her left elbow before my father caught her and helped her to her feet. My nose and the left side of my face had struck the stone edge of the top step.

Of course I have no memory of that accident; but that accident has much to do with what I am able to remember of subsequent years.

My mother's knees and elbow were badly scraped. I appeared to be uninjured. The blanket I had been wrapped in had protected my face, and only very little blood, as if from a small scratch, had come from my nose. Our family doctor—a short, pink-faced, red-haired man who spoke Yiddish and English fluently and wore a pince-nez—came quickly, conducted his examination, and announced that no injury had been done to me, I was lucky, we were all lucky, at least twice a week he had cases of mothers tripping on stoops while carrying their babies in and out of buildings and sometimes the babies were badly hurt. But I was all right. However, if my nose swelled, or my mother's knees or elbow swelled, they were to call him. My nose did not swell and my mother's scrapes healed rapidly.

Dr. Weidman had spoken with authority, and neither my mother nor my father had thought to question his judgment. They had the European immigrant's awe of doctors and reverence for medicine. It was a few years before they discovered that our doctor had erred.

Then there were the bird and the dog I killed accidentally when I was about four. The bird was a canary, a gift of my father's to my mother. She loved that bird; she would sit in the living room and listen to it sing. After a few minutes she would begin to smile, her tight, nervous features would grow calm, and her darting eyes would slowly relax and become limpid with joy. Once a week my father would close all the windows in the apartment and let the canary fly around the house. I lay ill in my bed one hot day, unable to breathe through my clogged nose, my throat painfully tight and dry. I forgot about the bird and opened my window. The bird flew out and was gone. My father hit me for that accident. A cat would now eat that bird, he said. Only feathers would be left of it, he said.

The dog belonged to a downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Horowitz, who let him roam our New York block. Everyone liked him. I would

sit alone near my brother's carriage and watch the children playing with him. One day he got up on his hind legs and poked his shaggy head into the carriage while my brother slept. I hit him and he ran into the street and was hit by a car. Mrs. Horowitz shrieked at me when she saw her dog crushed and dead along the curb. "But it was an accident," I kept saying. "It was an accident."

There was Eddie Kulanski, the boy on my block who hated Jews with the kind of mindless demonic rage that remains incomprehensible—and terrifying—to me to this day. He was only six years old but his hatred bore the breeding of a thousand years. A few months before my sixth birthday he accidentally came near to killing me.

The street we lived on—before our world fell to pieces and we plunged into the decade of the Depression—was wide and tree-lined and lovely. It was a quiet, sunny, cobblestone street filled with well-to-do families who owned cars, went to their synagogues and churches, spoke English civilly to one another—the senior members in the heavy accents of their European lands of origin—and who felt that, at least for them, the immigrant's dream had been realized, they had been right to abandon the blight of Europe and gamble on golden America. Somewhere in the city things were different for immigrants, they lived in a black nightmare of tenements and a miasma of squalor and degradation; but the immigrants on our Bronx street had succeeded: they were all naturalized citizens, proud of their new country, their new wealth, and their children who romped on the sidewalk, played happily, and chattered in an English that seemed to immigrant ears accent-free.

Those should have been sweet years for me, those first years of my life. But they were not. I did things and things happened to me that brought dread into our lives. All through those early years and on into my teens, accidents trailed in my wake like foul-breathing specters. Often my accidents were very narrow escapes; but sometimes they resulted in serious physical injury to myself or to others—and this despite the fact that I lived and played with caution because I was slight of build, always short for my age, and often ill from the injury our family doctor said had not been done to me when my mother tripped and fell with me in her arms.

The injury that had not been done to me by that fall is called a

deviated septum, the breaking of the cartilaginous tissue that partitions the nose and aids the delicate and vital filtering processes of the nostrils. Once it was broken, I became fair game for the viral and bacterial pirates of our world. The break widened as I grew older, and the septum began to block my right nostril; but the damage was not discovered until I was almost six. By that time the break was reparable only by potentially serious surgery, which could not be performed until after I had stopped growing.

I spent my early life growing a little and being ill a lot. I thought and dreamed a great deal. I lay in my bed and watched and listened. I turned my long lonely days and nights into nets with which I caught the whispers and sighs and glances and the often barely discernible gestures that are the real message carriers in our noisy world. But it was years before I could shape what I saw and heard into a pattern that made some sense of the lives of my aunt and uncle and cousin, the alternately withdrawn and volatile natures of my parents, and the mysterious comings and goings of the now ubiquitous, now vanishing Mr. Shmuel Bader.

There was the cracked and yellowing photograph I found one afternoon on the desk in Mr. Bader's study when I was almost six years old.

About forty men had posed for the photograph somewhere in a forest. The men were in three rows. Those in the first row were seated with their legs crossed; those in the second row were kneeling; those in the last row were on their feet. The earth in the foreground was covered with snow; in the background there were thick-trunked trees and a dense brocade of snow-covered branches from which hung stilettos of ice. The men wore dark coats or parkas, and boots. Some had on hats, others wore Russian-style fur caps. All were clean-shaven; two in the last row held flags. Partially concealing the chin of one man and the head of another was a sign with the Hebrew words *Am Kedoshim* printed on it, together with some additional Hebrew letters and the numbers 1919.

No one in the photograph was smiling. Most of the men held in their bare hands either a revolver or a knife; some held both. The hands and the knives seemed starkly white against the blackness of

their coats. On one of the flags I thought I could make out Hebrew letters, but I was not certain. The flag must have stirred in the winter wind of the forest at the very moment the photograph was taken, and the letters had blurred.

I first saw that photograph on a Shabbat afternoon in the spring of 1929. My parents and I had walked through a heavy rain to the Baders' apartment a few blocks from where we lived. Mr. Bader was leaving for Canada that night and from there to Europe on Tuesday morning and my father needed to speak to him. A neighbor's teenage daughter had come in to sit with my baby brother. I remember that my mother had not wanted me to walk in the rain but I had refused to stay home without them. I was very frightened of remaining in the apartment without my parents. I lay on the living room floor and cried. In angry desperation, my father had finally permitted my mother to take an umbrella, an infraction of the Jewish law that forbids the carrying of objects on public property during Shabbat. But someone's life was involved in that visit to Mr. Bader, and Jewish law not only may but must be broken if it stands in the way of saving a life; and so we walked in the rain to Mr. Bader's apartment, my mother keeping me close to her beneath the umbrella.

Mr. Bader himself opened the door to his apartment. He seemed surprised to see us but said nothing. He helped my parents off with their coats, raised his eyebrows at the sight of the dripping umbrella, glanced at me, and nodded faintly. He was a tall, thin gentleman in his early forties, courteous, soft-spoken, and with the graceful air of an individual who is at home in many worlds. He had thick brown hair, which he combed fastidiously and parted in the middle; his features were craggy and deeply tanned; his eyebrows were lighter than the brown hair on his head, and very thick; they formed a dense, straight, and almost uninterrupted line above his sharp, direct, penetrating dark eyes. He wore a maroon silk smoking jacket over a dark red cravat and dark trousers. On his head was a small dark skullcap. He nodded graciously to my mother, greeted my father as an old friend, and led them into his living room, where Mrs. Bader, a tall, well-dressed, kind-mannered woman, greeted us warmly and began putting out little cakes and cookies and cups and saucers on the ornately carved coffee table near the sofa. My parents sat on the sofa, looking small and uncomfortable. My mother's normally

drawn features and shifting eyes, which never focused directly on the face of the person to whom she spoke, seemed particularly tense and darting that afternoon. The rain drummed with a dull, wearying sound on the large windows of the room. I saw it falling on the tall trees outside, the dark bare early April trees of the neighborhood which my mother had promised me would soon be green with leaves. I could not remember them ever having had leaves before.

"It will be a dreary trip to Canada if this rain doesn't stop," I heard Mr. Bader say.

"You are traveling by train?" asked my father.

"Yes. And part of the way by car. I must stop off in Boston for half a day."

"And you leave on Tuesday?"

"Tuesday," said Mr. Bader, nodding.

"That will be a very big job," said my father, nodding his head briefly.

For some reason my father's expression of approval, reticent as it was, seemed to fill Mr. Bader with enormous pleasure. He lowered his eyes in a gesture of modesty.

There was a silence.

"Please have some tea," said Mrs. Bader. "Ruth, let me pour it for you. And I have cookies for David."

My father raised his cup of tea to his nostrils and sniffed at it briefly. Then he put it to his lips and said, "Then you will be in Lemberg."

"Of course," said Mr. Bader.

My father put his cup down on the coffee table and leaned forward slightly on the sofa. A wedge appeared above the bridge of his nose between his small eyes. He was a little shorter than medium height with very broad shoulders and short, muscular arms and legs and a trim, narrow waist. He had brown wavy hair and gray eyes and a square face with a protruding lower jaw. He cleared his throat.

"There is illness in Ruth's family," he said very quietly, looking down at the coffee table. "There is difficulty obtaining proper medication." He paused. "It is complicated, very complicated. Matters have to be explained carefully to Ruth's mother and father." He paused again. "And to her brothers," he added.

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Mr. Bader nodded. "Of course," he said. "I understand perfectly. You brought the medication?"

"Yes."

No one seemed disturbed by this further infraction of Jewish religious law.

"You will tell me what to do and I will do it," Mr. Bader said. "But, first, please have another cup of tea. David, take another cookie. I am glad to see you are over your bad cold. Take some more tea please, Ruth. Please."

They chatted amiably. My father had spoken with clear discomfort and hesitation to Mr. Bader, as if he were distressed to be asking help from so important a person; yet Mr. Bader had responded promptly and with deference, as if the important person in the room was really my father. It seemed mildly confusing to me.

"Yes, I will be in Lemberg and Warsaw and Lodz," I heard Mr. Bader say. "It will be no problem to go from Lemberg to Bobrek. Believe me, I am happy to do it for you."

I remembered those names: Lemberg, Bobrek, Warsaw, Lodz. My parents used them often when they spoke together in the nights. Often when I lay ill, my mother would tell me stories of her years on a farm near Bobrek, a town of about five thousand people, almost half of whom were Jews. The town was situated four miles southeast of Lemberg, which was the major city of the Polish province of Eastern Galicia. Her parents owned the farm. It was located on the outskirts of Bobrek. She would tell me stories of the games she had played in the forest that adjoined the farm, of winter ice skating on the river that was the western boundary of the farm, of sleigh rides in the snow, of the way the forest and the rolling hills beyond turned slowly green in the spring, of the birds in the trees and the fish in the river. In her stories birds would have sweet human voices, dogs would be loyal to their masters, lead children out of deep forests, and never paw holes in the earth or dirty the paths used by people, and the wind would be the bodies of angels moving invisibly within our world. She would tell me only happy stories. She never told me stories about accidents or illness or death.

"Tell me the details," Mr. Bader was saying. "Is there any more hot water left, Miriam? Thank you. Tell me carefully all the details."

I finished my cookie and grew bored and slipped from the room, casting a swift, sidelong glance at my mother, whose eyes were fixed on her short thin hands clasped tightly together on her lap. She looked tense and forlorn, her gaunt features very pale against the darkness of her severely-combed-back, lusterless hair. My father was talking quietly in rapid Yiddish, and I could no longer understand what he was saying. I went into the hallway of the apartment, wandered through the kitchen and a large bedroom, and came into Mr. Bader's study.

It was a large room with glass-enclosed bookcases, a thick Persian rug, an easy chair, a huge dark-wood desk with a tall dark-wood chair behind it, and two tall windows behind the desk. On both sides of the windows stood wooden filing cabinets. Dark velvet drapes lay across the windows; one of them had not been fully drawn and through it I saw the rain falling steadily on the trees and the cobblestone street and the traffic below. It seemed a bleak and dirty rain. The afternoon was slowly growing dark. Dim light came through the window from the wet world outside and fell weakly upon the one partly visible windowsill, upon the dark-wood chair, and upon the neat piles of papers and books and pamphlets on Mr. Bader's desk.

It was then that I saw the photograph. It lay on top of one of the carefully arranged piles of paper. I glanced at it; then I stood on my toes and looked at it. Then I reached up, took it from the desk, and peered at it closely in the dim light of the study. I brought it over to the window and looked at it intently, at the faces of the men, at the guns and knives in their hands, at the forest, at the snow on the ground and the ice on the branches of the trees. When I looked up, the afternoon had darkened perceptibly, there was a vague pain behind my eyes, and Mr. Bader was standing in the doorway of the study.

The room lay wreathed in shadows. His features were indistinct in the darkness that had drifted across the section of the study that was farthest from the windows. I watched him move in a sudden swift glide across the room, as if his feet were not touching the floor; suddenly he was beside me, towering over me and looking down at the photograph I held in my hand.

"Well," he said gently in his soft voice. "We wondered where

you had taken yourself off to, David. Isn't it awful the way big people will sometimes talk and talk and forget that there is a little boy around who can't understand them?" He had placed a thumb and forefinger on the photograph and was removing it from my hand. "That isn't nice of big people, and I apologize. But they were important, the things we talked about." I watched the photograph disappear into a pile of papers. "There is a little pamphlet here I wanted to show your father. Here it is. Come, let's go out. It's so dark in here I can barely see you. Would you like a glass of milk and another cookie?" He had his arm on my shoulder as he spoke and I felt myself moving and when he was done talking we were outside in the hallway. Behind me the door to the study closed with a soft click. I looked up at him. He was so tall I had to bend my head far back to see his eyes. His thin craggy features smiled down at me benignly. "We may even have a game for you somewhere. I'll ask my wife. I'm very sorry we ignored you, David. Come."

He brought me back to the living room where I found my parents talking earnestly together on the sofa. They stopped talking when I came in.

I spent the rest of the visit in the kitchen with a game of dominoes Mrs. Bader found in a drawer somewhere, and thinking of the photograph in Mr. Bader's study.

We stood at the doorway. Mr. Bader helped my mother on with her coat. He seemed strangely reverential now in the presence of my father, as if he was parting from him with great reluctance.

"I will take care of everything, Max," he said reassuringly.

"You have left your umbrella," Mrs. Bader said.

"It has stopped raining," my father told her. "I will come back for it tomorrow. Have a safe trip, Shmuel. Be careful of the crazy Bolsheviks and the bastard Chekists."

"I am always careful, Max. It's a reflex by now." He turned to my mother and bowed slightly. "Goodbye, Ruth. Don't worry about anything. But of course you will worry anyway, won't you, until you hear from them?" He smiled down at me. "Goodbye, David. Stay well. Do you hear me, David? Stay well."

We went slowly down the stone stairway and through the ornately decorated and furnished entrance hall into the pale early

evening street. The rain lay in dark, dirty puddles on the sidewalk and along the curb. A cool wind blew remnants of rain from the trees.

My mother helped me button my coat. Her fingers were cold; I felt them cold and trembling on my neck as she raised and buttoned my coat collar.

A car drove by on the cobblestone street, sending rain onto the sidewalk. My father stepped agilely between us and the oncoming car and took most of the cascading rain onto his coat and trousers.

"Are you wet?" he asked me quickly.

"No, Papa."

"Bastard," my father said. His short, thickset form and squarish features had hardened in a sudden flash of rage at the rain-splashing automobile that continued along the street, heedlessly sending waves of water onto the sidewalk.

"Max, please," my mother murmured.

He took her arm. They were both short, but my father's thick shoulders and muscular frame reduced my mother's height even further. He patted her hand. "Everything will be all right, Ruth. Let's go home."

But we did not go directly home. We had walked one block when, on an impulse, my father decided that he wanted to see his brother. "I feel a need to see him," he responded to my mother's feeble protest. We detoured two very long blocks to a wide cobblestone boulevard lined with wet trees and dense with traffic. The sky, leaden with clouds, had brought early darkness to the day. We walked quickly, keeping close to the elegant apartment houses on the boulevard and away from the traffic near the curb. A trolley car jammed with passengers went by in a clattering rush. Abruptly all up and down the street the lamppost lights came on. Gauzy yellowish halos formed themselves out of the evening and hung like ghostly balloons over the wet pavements and bare trees. We turned into an apartment house and climbed two flights of stairs. As my father knocked on the door to his brother's apartment, my mother bent and unbuttoned my coat. The vague pain behind my eyes, which had left me when we had come out onto the street from Mr.

Bader's apartment, now returned. I felt it throbbing softly. It was a familiar pain and I dreaded it.

My cousin, a tall, shy boy four years older than I, opened the door and smiled in startled surprise when he saw us.

"Who is it, Saul?" I heard my aunt's voice from somewhere within the apartment.

"Uncle Max and Aunt Ruth," my cousin called back over his shoulder. He gave me a warm smile and a pat on my arm. "Hello, Davey." He was always solicitous of my needs. He helped me off with my coat. "Is it very cold outside?" he asked me quietly.

"Yes."

He looked at me. "Are you okay, Davey?"

I nodded.

He gazed at me intently and I saw he did not believe me.

My aunt and uncle came into the hallway and there were greetings.

"I need a glass of tea," my father said.

We went into the living room and sat on sofas and easy chairs by the soft light of a tasseled floor lamp, for the Shabbat was not yet over, and the other lights in the apartment would not be turned on until after the Havdalah Service. There was more tea and cake for my parents, and more milk and cookies for me, and, served in little dishes, a jamlike concoction of strawberries and sugar for all of us, and more subdued conversation, which I did not bother to listen to this time. Then I heard my uncle say, "You couldn't have gone yesterday?" His faintly nasal voice registered mild reproach. "The letter came this morning," my father said. My uncle nodded. I felt bewildered: my father had torn open a letter on Shabbat and no one seemed shocked. I recalled that my father had quickly left the house when we had returned from the synagogue and had been away a long time. We had eaten Shabbat dinner late.

Now they were talking about my mother's mother. Their voices became very low. I looked away and noticed Saul. He had paid no attention to the conversation between our parents but had sat quietly all the time, watching me from across the room with a look of concern. I avoided his eyes and gazed at the intricate design on the rug and at the rococo whorls and gyrations in the wooden arms of my