

## Chapter 1

Across centuries of seasons, there have been willows greening for the Polish Spring on the Baltic shore at Gdynia. Invaders and occupiers have come and in time they have gone. The glowing beach has sometimes ebbed with a shift of wave or current, or swelled with a new deposit of sand. Even the dunes have grown or waned in their time.

But there have always been the willows, clinging to life through summer storm and winter freeze. It is as though they have studied the ways of the fishing people, who have learned how to pass through storms and how to judge the bending required when invader or occupier appears.

There have always been the willows, and always the fishing people.

And always the young ones – the children of those who fish – innocent, wide-eyed sprites who are unpretentiously delighted by the simple things.

It is today as it was then, on a sunny Spring day in 1869, when in the greengrowth separating the Baltic beach from the shore road, the children impatiently awaited the new Head Father of St. Teresa's church. They could ignore the thither and yon of fishing schooners in mere daily routine, but not the first appearance of a new priest. Boys climbed into trees to peer into the distance, then swung on the branches. Little girls picked flowers, assembling bouquets of veneration for the newcomer.

Among them was Jadwiga, third child of Edmund Wdowiak. She was out of place – too old for this group. This past winter, almost unseen, she had encountered a magic: The directionless energy of childhood had become a special something deep in her eyes. Seeing it in Jadwiga by the fresh light of Spring, the fishermen called it *witalność* – a special vitality.

She was all the more out of place because she wore her second-best dress, which was all the more blue for being near her eyes.

She was pretty. Some said her face was a striking recollection of her mother's smile. Others countered that all the Wdowiaks were born with a half-smile already on their faces, anyway, and it was nothing for them to come aglow for the slightest cause. But all agreed that Jadwiga, daughter of Edmund Wdowiak, was an incitement to the eye.

When the holy one appeared, the gray mass of his long garment cresting a gentle slope, the younger children called out and ran to meet him.

Jadwiga's features were quickly alive with anticipation, as well, but she didn't run. Nor did she follow her impulse to bolt to the beach, for he had already noticed her. He had noticed, and later this day he would see her again, and he would remember.

Alerted by the cries of the children, older people now joined them to surround the new priest in greeting and to guide him to the ceremonial matters awaiting him at the pier. He slowed his determined walk in accommodation of

their pace.

“I hear much of sinning and irregularities here,” the priest said. He glanced at Jadwiga and she could feel a scolding in his eyes. In her *witalność*, she had outgrown the blue dress, and it was too snug. Gradually, she moved to the edge of the group and to its rear.

“What’s this I smell?” The salt breeze was profane with the odor of roasting pork.

An old man explained: “On Fridays no fish are left so we eat a pig we have taken in trade for fish. It is as though the pig is a fish, is it not? We eat fish all the rest of the days, anyway.”

Seeing that this did not satisfy the new Head Father, an old woman added, “We know we must do better, Father.”

It always happened this way. The old men taunted a new priest with their pretense of innocent trespass upon the Lord’s rules. Later, in the fishhouse, someone would give an exaggerated performance in an imitation of his reactions, and make the others laugh. The old women, who knew it was best not to explain too much of the ways of fishing people on a new priest’s first visit, always said the things necessary to pacify. Today, they would make an even greater effort, at least until the holy one put in the good word to God for Old Lady Slomiany, may she rest in peace.

“Only when there is a wedding, when you are all drunk, do you come to church.”

“But we come at Easter and put enough in the basket for all the Sundays,” a man said. Other men nodded in affirmation of this claim.

An old woman added quickly, “But we know we must strive to do better, Father.”

While the priest sowed disapproval and reaped his harvest of contrition, Jadwiga slowed her pace, dropping behind. When it would no longer be noticed, she dashed between willows down to the beach. Pausing only to remove her sandals, she sprinted on the firm sand at the waterline, her dark hair and blue dress billowing.

From the pier, Skipper Edmund Wdowiak watched his daughter as she outdistanced breaking waves and a swooping seagull. And in his daughter, he could see his wife. So like her mother at eighteen, he thought. So quick, innocently graceful, so vivacious. How very much like his Helena on the day they ran together on this same beach, and he caught her and asked her to become his wife. How ready his Jadwiga now, in her own fullness of *witalność*, for marriage.

And yet, how impetuous, running through wet sand in her second-best dress. Half-way down the pier, she even sang out: “He’s coming. The priest is coming!”

The Skipper planted a foot aboard his fishing schooner, grabbed one of the taut stays running from mast to gunwale, and swung his big frame aboard. When Jadwiga was close enough to hear, he spoke to her.

“Jadwiga, wear your dress in your mind, too, not just upon your body.

Remember, this is a day of funeral.”

“Yes, papa. The priest is coming, papa.”

Stirred by her shout, a party of mourners emerged from the fishhouse. They carried the body of an old woman on a wide plank, a large stone tied at her feet. She wore the traditional clothes of her wedding day. In her hands, a crucifix was wrapped tightly with a rosary. A daughter followed, now old herself, then a grandson and his wife, who carried a great grandchild in her arms.

Jadwiga stepped into her sandals. In deliberate solemnity, she walked across a makeshift gangplank provided for the priest and mourners. Despite the dress, she could easily have stepped directly from pier to boat. Her two brothers smiled at this excessive solemnity in response to their father’s reprimand, and they glanced at him to urge his indulgence. But the Skipper would say nothing more. Like his sons, he understood that for Jadwiga, this day was more than a day of funeral.

The bearers followed Jadwiga aboard, carefully positioning the deceased on the deckhouse. Other mourners placed flowers around the body, then made way for close relatives, who drew close to shield their matriarch in her last journey.

Now the priest arrived, helped by the old people in his first uneasy steps onto the gangplank, then by the Skipper, who took care to make his extended hand appear more greeting than assistance. Jadwiga took her place at the schooner’s helm, while her two brothers stood ready to raise sails. Two helpers on the pier, eyes fastened on Jadwiga but alert to the Skipper’s signaling nod, loosed the lines mooring the schooner fore and aft, boarded quickly, then pulled the gangplank after them. As her brothers raised the schooner’s sails to receive the breeze, Jadwiga wheeled the boat away into a reach for open Baltic.

“Oh God have mercy upon us and deliver us from evil.”

Even with her head bowed, Jadwiga cut the breeze cleanly to take the best tack to the burial waters. But after a while listening to the priest’s prayer, tears came to her eyes, and Edmund Wdowiak knew his daughter’s thoughts had gone to another such trip, seven years past, when the body on the hardwood plank had been her mother, finally taken into the Lord’s Special Peace after a hard and grasping illness.

In taking Helena Wdowiak, treasured wife of Skipper Edmund Wdowiak, death had also claimed their plans, so carefully made, to leave partitioned Poland – to leave the Germans – even to forsake the valued contract for the Baron’s schooner. They had wanted to take their family to America, the new land where men were free to fish or farm for themselves.

But in the Year of Our Lord 1863, just as word came of the insurrection in the Russian partition, the sickness had struck, lingering to claim life a small bit at a time. At her mother’s bedside in the last months, Jadwiga heard the stories of America again and again. But she gradually came to understand that her own dreams of a mother recovered, and of a family strong once more for such travel, were lost in a patient wait for death.

For Edmund Wdowiak, his wife gone, it had not been difficult to make the

decision to stay in familiar surroundings. The crushing of the dream of America was the smallest of hurts, seen beside the loss of his wife. And in his fishing community on the beach at Gdynia his twelve-year-old daughter could grow to womanhood among people of the right priorities.

Watching Jadwiga at the helm, he knew it had been right to stay. She had become a fine young woman. She was radiant with a glow from within; personable, even more than her mother. As her mother had foreseen, she could have her pick of the young men.

She was smart, too. At the school, against the Prussian rules, she had even learned to read while teachers pretended instruction in sewing. She made him proud. It had been right, staying and making the best of it. His sons, Konrad and Konstanty, had become fine men. They were not so full as Jadwiga of the dream of America, but they were strong young men who could fish with the best.

This year, the fishing was the best in Gdynia memory. And this year, Edmund Wdowiak intended that his neighbors should come together in a wedding celebration.

Beyond the invisible line separating the bay from the greater expanse of Baltic, the burial waters were known to the fishermen by the overlapping of two peaks in the distant Oksywie Hills. At her father's glance Jadwiga eased into a closer angle upon the wind, and all aboard adjusted their footing as sails luffed and the schooner gave up its challenge of the waves. When the priest paused and nodded, Skipper Wdowiak quietly snapped the count of three and the young fishermen slid Old Lady Slomiany to her grave with hardly a ripple.

"God have mercy upon her soul."

Then came the silence for the priest to mumble and communicate with God in altogether a different language. It was an uneasy silence. On a boat it was a good time to change the tack and lean to the other foot.

"I want you to come to my house for wine and fish so that we can talk about a wedding," the Skipper said softly into the ear of the priest.

The Father snapped back. "I intend coming to your house and every house on the beach today. And before we talk about weddings we will talk about funerals and you will tell me how many bodies are sent to the bottom of the sea without permission of God and Church."

"Father, I have never had a funeral on my boat without a priest," the Skipper said, raising his hand in testimony to God.

Then the priest turned to the elders who had come to pray for Old Lady Slomiany. "Already this year you people have had three weddings and five christenings." He raised his hands to point at his fingers to show that God and Church had been counting. "Eight drunken celebrations, yet only one funeral."

Even the young fishermen opened their eyes a bit wider with these numbers held up in evidence of sin against the ways of the Church.

"You spend for vodka for the weddings and you spend for wine for the

christenings. But you will not spend for wood for coffins. Why can't you bring your dead to the church and bury them in God's ground like other people?"

"It is not so much the spending," an old man said. "It is because we know the fires of hell cannot get us with all that water down there."

But the priest was neither satisfied nor amused and among those who stood together on the boat, there was an awkwardness of eyes cast downward.

Jadwiga's brothers chose this moment to draw sails still tighter. The breeze was steady and strong and it was a good day for sailing the Bay of Gdansk. But for them this was now a holiday and the trip back was a bit faster.

The Wdowiak family shack was on the beach, back among the willows that marked the beginning of good soil where the things of dry land might grow. From years unremembered, it had been passed along from one strong-bodied fishing man to another to be home for the blended generations of old and young. It was made of things yielded to the beach by a generous sea – materials too good for a thrifty man to cast away. It had been rebuilt after storms, expanded in good times, patched in bad.

But Edmund Wdowiak knew that a good home was more than jetsam fit together as shelter for bone and flesh. A good home was shelter for the soul. Thus he felt no shame in making the priest comfortable under a low willow branch in a sling chair of sturdy fishnet.

Jadwiga served the fish and wine. It was understood: she would serve, listen, and keep the helpers away so her father would have no interruptions in his talk with the man of the Church.

"I will pay in money to a woman of your choosing to come here and arrange a wedding for my daughter," Skipper Wdowiak said. "It has not been the same since the mother died and I want a dependable woman to see to it that everything will be as it should be. I want to meet this woman and arrange for pay and whatever time she will be needed. I will give generously to the church for this wedding and I will pay this woman well if she will do well by my daughter."

But with this new priest it was not to be so easy. His mind was troubled with other matters. As though the Skipper's words had gone unheard, he spoke softly to no one in particular. "If only the church had a team of horses, a wagon and sled so that I could come here often, summer and winter." Then he spoke more directly, his eyes finding those of Edmund Wdowiak. "I was told – you people are getting away from God, farther and farther."

But the Skipper's deep-set blue eyes met the challenge of the priest's. "Holy Father, we don't come to church every Sunday because most of them we are out on the Baltic. We fish from March to November. Then comes the snow. And then we have only enough time to mend our nets so we can start fishing again."

"It is not only the coming to church. There are these other matters. Every Sunday morning there is a bashed mouth or a broken rib, a torn ear, a cracked head. All this happens on this side of the road to the young men from the other side of the road. Why? Can you tell me why?"

“I have heard of no such things, Father.” He looked at Jadwiga, who shook her head. Neither had she heard of such things. “Władek and Zdenek – my helpers – they fight, Father, between themselves. But it leaves them no time for fighting with others. We are a peaceful people.”

“It is said this is likely to happen to the young men from town, or from the farms, after the dances at Gostomski’s Hall.”

“Sometimes they walk Jadwiga home from the dances, but always she is also accompanied by the helpers, and there is never talk of trouble. My daughter is a virtuous young woman, Father.”

“Yes, yes. Perhaps now that she will be married there will be less of this mayhem on Saturday nights.”

“It is not possible that she is the cause, Father. But the wedding is the important thing. I’m glad you have brought us back to this matter. Soon the other fishermen will come to take you for a celebration to welcome you as the new Head Father, and there is only a little time for us to talk.”

The Skipper put a shiny new coin in the priest’s pocket. “This is for the church, but it is also to remind you tomorrow or perhaps on Monday to send a woman here, to the shack of Wdowiak the fisherman – a smart woman who knows about weddings.”

The priest sighed and nodded, resigned that he would get nowhere in this discussion of the injuries brought to church on Sunday mornings. He even smiled. And now, for the first time, he spoke to Edmund Wdowiak’s daughter.

“Jadwiga, may God bless you with a good man, a happy marriage, and many children.”

Now happiness crested like a wave across Jadwiga’s features. She bowed her head toward the priest in acceptance of his good wishes. In her smile and in his mind, he could see the cause of the fighting among young men at the dances. Were he a younger man, and not a priest, he too might fight for the favor of such a smile.

Among the fishermen of Gdynia, it was well-known that Edmund Wdowiak and sons had struck good fishing grounds this early Spring season of 1869. The numbers marked on the calendar in the fish house showed the Skipper well out in front of his contract with the Baron. And hadn’t his nets yielded at least one fist-sized clump of amber? Some even whispered in speculation that he was getting it into his head to marry again. There was evidence – the private talk with the priest. Certainly there had been no talk of a husband chosen for his daughter.

And now there was more evidence – the fastidious couple from the church, asking for him at the fish house. The woman with her hair in a bun, and with embroidery around her wrists and neck like a pouter pigeon. She held a kerchief to her nose to fend off the thick odor. And the man who played the organ – a long, fine mustache, a sparkling white shirt, a necktie, even, and matching pants and coat.

The man’s eyes darted nervously among the fishing people, who stared

from everywhere. At first he was reluctant to speak. He even took the woman's elbow and looked up the road away from the pier.

But the woman edged closer to the Wdowiaks – smiling at father, two sons, and daughter. And the Wdowiaks smiled back.

“I am Alfons Posienko and this is my wife, Lilianna,” the man was heard to say. “The priest sent us.”

There was this evidence. The fishermen of Gdynia knew Edmund Wdowiak was up to something.

Outside the Wdowiak shack, Jadwiga sat on a hammock, looking with big eyes at the distinguished *gospodarz* and *gospodyni* who were to supervise her wedding. The Skipper offered the Posienkos those chairs he judged would best fit their posteriors. His sons, Konstanty and Konrad, took seats, ears tuned to their father's words.

“God called my wife seven years ago and now I find I need someone to arrange my daughter's wedding,” he said.

The helpers, Władek and Zdenek, peeked from among the willows, then inched closer. When they were close enough to hear, Jadwiga turned to them. “Get my sandals from the boat,” she commanded, and both ran to please her.

“One man we know made a good profit for himself on weddings,” Alfons Posienko said. “Of course, he had four daughters.” He sat in a barrel chair with his arms spread as if having his portrait painted, looking even more distinguished than when standing.

“A wedding is only as big as the people make it,” the woman said. “The more people, the bigger the wedding. And the bigger the wedding the better it will pay for itself.”

When the helpers returned, each with one sandal, there was an awkward pause in the talking. Konstanty whispered to her, “Take them for a walk. Go with them. Come back when they're occupied.” For only a moment, she set her jaw in defiance. Then she obeyed her brother. Władek and Zdenek followed her down the beach.

“I am not looking for profit from my Jadwiga's wedding,” Skipper Wdowiak said to Alfons Posienko. “I want only to see her in her beautiful wedding dress, and for the children to sing for her like angels, and after that I want everybody to go to Gostomski's Hall where there will be food and music and dancing.”

“But what kind of a wedding will it be if the bride does not sit in the middle of the hall with new, white, lacy apron extended while the bridesmaids dance around her with every man they can catch to put money in the apron?” Alfons Posienko asked.

“I don't want my Jadwiga sitting in the middle of Gostomski's Hall on her wedding day. I want her to dance in the middle with her husband. And I want the bridesmaids dancing around her with the groom's men. It will be like in heaven.”

Lilianna Posienko leaned slightly in her chair to watch Jadwiga and the helpers. Down the beach, they were joined by two brothers and a sister from one

shack, and two sisters from another. They walked together, but Jadwiga was the center of attention from the young men. The helpers maneuvered and played tricks to keep the others from walking beside her.

“Will there be money to pay for the dressmaking, counting for the little girls to carry the veil?” Lilianna asked.

“There will be money to pay for the finest dresses you can make. There will be money for everything.”

“Counting the food on the table, the pay of musicians, our pay, the rent of the hall?” asked Alfons.

“Counting even that we will hire the Sadowski brothers,” Skipper Wdowiak said. “They are the strongest and the meanest two on the beach. And for some money they will stay sober and they will bash the head of anyone who starts a fight or the smallest commotion on my Jadwiga’s wedding day.”

Alfons looked at Lilianna, but she seemed not to have heard this suggestion. She knew how to write and she was making marks in a small book. “And when is this wedding to be?” she asked.

“That part, the part about when, I don’t yet know. And you must keep the secret,” Skipper Wdowiak said. “The wedding may be the month after next. Or it may be the next or still the next. And it may not be until next year. But I will come to you and let you know ahead of time.”

He spread his hands in reassurance. “I speak to you now so that you will have ample time. But from now until I let you know, you must forget. This is a matter for us alone, and you must not speak of it.”

And with a nod of the head and another toast of wine, Alfons Posienko assured the Skipper Wdowiak that he would certainly forget. Especially now, he thought, that he could go home with one more coin in his pocket than he had come with.

“It is as I have always said about these fishermen,” Alfons said to Lilianna on their way home. “They bounce on the waves. Their heads become loose on their shoulders. It is fortunate that as long as we had to have a day with them, at least we were paid. For drinking wine yet, and eating fish, and for forgetting.” He glanced backward disdainfully. “Not even a young man yet!”

“Oh, there will be a wedding,” Lilianna Posienko said. “I can’t wait to dress that girl. She is the prettiest thing. It is only that she has not yet made up her mind.”

Alfons nodded at this confirmation of his conclusion. “And that brings us right back to what I said about fishing people. Heads loose on their shoulders.”

As time went on, Jadwiga’s brothers teased her more and more. They plagued her about this one and that one – that one and this one. About Augustin Nowicki from downtown Gdynia and Rysiu Racek from near the church. Both were good dancers who really twirled her Saturday nights at Gostomski’s Hall.

“To dance with, yes, but not for husbands. Neither one is tall enough,” Jadwiga said back to her brothers.

“Jan is tall,” Konrad would say.

“But Feliks is taller,” Konstanty would follow.

“Katarzyna can have Jan. He’s not in my dream,” Jadwiga said. “And Feliks is too fearful. He’s afraid of Władek and Zdenek, even one at a time.”

“Then perhaps you should marry Władek?”

“Or Zdenek.”

“Teresa can have Władek and Klara can have Zdenek. They are in love with them but those stupid ones don’t know it. Anyway, none of them has the money to go to America. None of them are in my dream.”

With Jadwiga, it was always the one in her dream. A tall one, she said, handsome, with broad shoulders and small ears and eyes the color of the sea. A man of patience and good humor. A man like her father. He would be brave, kind to her, and good.

He would take her to America.

“From the time you leave home until you come back, do not trust anyone you don’t already know,” Edmund Wdowiak said to his daughter over and over as Easter approached. “Poznań is a big city with all kinds of people, good and bad. Make certain that you have enough money to bring you back, wherever you go. And don’t carry it all in one place. You must have some in your purse, some in your stocking, and most of it sewn in your underwear. You must always have a place to reach if someone steals your purse.

“When you get to Poznań, go to Stawicki’s farm,” father said to daughter. “It is far from where the Germans will let the soldiers out of their army. It’s two hours, walking – a good place for girls to stay. For men with bad thinking, too far to walk.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“And daughter, do not be saddened if you don’t find the one in your dream.”

“No, Papa.”

“Jadwiga, I mean this. Listen. Dreams are good, but God dreams better for us than we do for ourselves. He may have a surprise for you.”

“For a woman it is to follow her man,” Jadwiga’s father always told her when they talked out on the water.

“But sometimes a woman has to point for her man, so he will see the way to go,” he would add with a wink. Jadwiga knew these winks. She knew her father didn’t mean she should point with her finger.

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