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Pieces of a Tea Set

ALL CHILDREN LOVE to hear about when they were babies. “Your eyes were so blue,” her parents would tell her, “and so intelligent.”

Six-year-old Zosia’s colouring came from her father. He, too, had dark, curly hair — as well as the full beard of orthodox Jewish men — and his blue eyes were so clear that they were almost hypnotic.

Soon she would be too old for it, but Zosia still slept with her parents, Symcha and Estera Hoffenberg. Every night Symcha plied her with kisses, and then she nested in the contours of his body. When he took her shopping, she could cajole him into buying anything she wanted. They played cards together. And they walked. Even now, in the winter, the pair bundled up and walked through parks, along bustling streets, and over to the cinema to watch American movies made by Charlie Chaplin. In one, the

poor little tramp was so hungry that he had to eat the nails from his shoes. Zosia loved the movies, but Symcha would always fall asleep, snoring and embarrassing his daughter. "It was worth every penny," he'd say as they made their way home. "I had my best sleep ever!"

The whole family attended services in the synagogue. Men and women sat apart, but sometimes Zosia was able to sneak over to the men's side and sit by her father. Symcha always seemed happy to see her, but he was too engrossed in prayers to give her much attention. His body swayed to the rhythm of the words as he chanted and prayed, and Zosia watched tears drip from his eyes.

Zosia's relationship with her mother was less easy. When Zosia was born on September 1, 1920, in Warsaw, Poland, Estera was thirty-nine years old and she already had three children: thirteen-year-old Ruta, ten-year-old Regina and nine-year-old Heniek, the only boy. Estera had been enjoying increased freedom as her children grew older, and she hadn't relished looking after a new baby.

Unlike her youngest daughter's bold, bright-eyed looks, Estera's features were dark and delicate. She was proud of her good figure and disapproved of women whom she felt did not look after themselves. Estera wore her long, dark hair in a neat, fashionable bun, and not a morning passed that she didn't put on her corset. Her days were often filled with appointments at the hairdresser, manicurist and dressmaker.

Symcha and Estera had been introduced by a matchmaker and, financially, it had proved to be a good match for the bride. Prior to the First World War, Poland was occupied by the Russians, and Zosia's maternal grandfather had run a thriving business selling medals and ornaments to the Russian soldiers. After the war, however, Poland regained its independence and, with the Russians'

departure, Grandfather Monder lost the market for his medals. The store closed and he was left with boxes of useless merchandise.

Zosia loved her *dziadek*. Her grandfather still lived in the same large, gracious apartment that he had occupied when his business was lucrative, and every Saturday afternoon Zosia and her family would visit him. They always went on foot because devout Jews were prohibited from riding buses on the Sabbath. The walk seemed to take forever, and Zosia complained bitterly all the way, but her mood changed as soon as her smiling grandfather opened the door and wrapped her in his arms. She would play all afternoon with a box of his old medals — no toy could be more lovely or glamorous — and, when they were about to leave, he always selected a piece from a gold-plated tea set for her to take home and add to her collection.

Because Estera was the only one of Dziadek Moder's children to have married well, she and her husband were obliged to assist her family financially. Symcha did not assume this responsibility happily and Zosia hated to hear him complaining, "They always want money, money, and more money!" he would say. One day, when Zosia could stand it no longer, she took her small savings and handed them to her mother. "Please give these coins to Dziadek," she pleaded.

Symcha was very close to his brothers, with whom he ran a business called Bracia Hoffenberg, or Brothers Hoffenberg. It was a men's clothing store that sold garments produced by Jewish tailors who lived in Jewish villages, *shtetls*. Throughout Warsaw, the Hoffenberg name was associated with men's clothing, and the business was so profitable that Bracia Hoffenberg had acquired a significant portfolio of real estate. They were also in the fur business and had a contract with the Polish government to supply fur coats to railroad employees.

Symcha had the charm necessary to cajole the government officials. On Sundays, Zosia sometimes saw her father take strange men into his study. This was his private domain, with a big mahogany desk and an elaborate cabinet stocked with wine and hard liquor. The maid would take in a fresh bottle of vodka and close the door on her way out.

Symcha was one of nine children. Because the family was so large, there was a wide range in age between siblings, and Symcha's eldest sister Hinda had been married off to their father's youngest brother, their uncle. The youngest of Hinda's four sons was mentally challenged, and everyone attributed this to the inbreeding.

Zosia and her family lived on Swietokrzyska Street, half a block away from the elegant apartment building that housed Bracia Hoffenberg on its main floor. Symcha's father, Gershon Hoffenberg, lived in the building, and so did Symcha's brothers and their families. All told, Zosia's father and her uncles had fourteen children, who spent so much time together they seemed like siblings.

Because Zosia and her sisters were the only girl cousins, they received much attention from the boys. The male cousins were all obliged to work downstairs at the store, although none of them took the business very seriously, and they spent much of their time playing cards. Zosia loved to join the big boys because the store would always be full of laughter when they were working. They loved to tease and pinch their cute little cousin until her cheeks were burning, shouting "Zosia, Zosia, Zosia!" and tossing her from one to the other.

Within the happiness of Zosia's childhood, there had already been challenges and adjustments. Zosia had been three years old when Estera had taken her by the hand and introduced her to a very short, plain-looking woman.

“Zosia,” Estera had said, “Panna Pola will be looking after you now.”

Panna Pola — or Miss Pola — seemed kind enough, but Zosia had been confused. Wasn’t her mother looking after her?

Since then, Zosia had never been allowed to play out of Panna Pola’s sight, but she had quickly grown to love her caregiver. Before Zosia was old enough to go to school, Panna Pola took her every morning to Saski Park, where she ran along the winding paths through the trees and joined the other children at play.

Now that Zosia was a schoolgirl, Symcha escorted her to school in the morning. He walked her through their big gate, onto the bustling street where students rushed in and out of bookstores, and past the horse-drawn carriages called *dorozki* that waited for fares in front of the apartment block. Because it was December, the drivers flailed their arms and stamped their feet to keep warm. Sometimes, when Zosia was really lucky, the *dorozka* owned by Bracia Hoffenberg was waiting to drive her to her classes!

In the winter of her seventh year, little sister Zosia wanted to be just like her eldest sister Ruta, whose greenish eyes looked so dramatic set against her dark, wavy hair, and who studied fine arts at university. Sometimes Zosia sat beside Ruta as she painted bright, intricate images on fabrics and wooden objects. “Here, you try,” Ruta said one evening. Ruta handed Zosia a piece of paper and she tried to copy a rose her sister had painted. When Ruta praised her, Zosia felt as if she were bursting with pride.

While they painted, Regina practised piano in the salon, serenading them with Mozart. Gina was an excellent pianist, but Zosia had little interest in music, so when Gina came to collect her for her lesson, she jumped out of her chair, ran to the elevator and went downstairs to play with her cousin.

Dark, handsome, and the only son, Heniek was the most spoiled of all the children. He was not an enthusiastic student but he was

an excellent athlete — something his father didn't always appreciate. When Heniek arrived home from boxing practice with a bleeding nose, Symcha would ask, "Can't you find something more respectable to occupy your time?" Symcha would have preferred his son to be a scholar.

Every holiday, the entire Hoffenberg clan gathered in the fourteen-room apartment that Dziadek Gershon kept in the building that housed Bracia Hoffenberg. To Zosia, her father's father always seemed dissatisfied. He was stingy, too, despite his wealth, and rarely paid her any attention. Even when he did, she would shy away.

On Chanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, it was traditional to give gifts of money called Chanukah *gelt* to the children. But Gershon made no such provision. This Chanukah, as always, one of Zosia's uncles spun her around her grandfather until her head buzzed, and then another uncle, standing very close beside her grandfather, slipped five zlotys into her hand. As Zosia showed everyone her money, all her uncles smiled and nodded appreciatively at Gershon, but Zosia was not fooled.

Every Sunday afternoon, Estera's brother came to visit Zosia's family with his French wife. They had no children and they adored Zosia. Her uncle always brought her little presents. He would say, "Zosia, come, come!" and the two of them would go off in a corner and play cards.

Life was so easy for Zosia that it broke her heart to see her aunt and uncle working outside during the bitter Polish winter, selling coal from a shack that Symcha had built in the courtyard of one of the family businesses. Even in the shack, they froze because it was not heated. Symcha grumbled that they made so little money that he had to support them over the summer.

When winter passed and the warm months finally arrived, Zosia's parents left for the spa town of Marienbad in Czechoslovakia to holiday with friends, as they did every year — although sometimes they chose Karlsbad. They never took the children. Instead, Zosia and her siblings went with Panna Pola to Swider, one of the Polish resort areas popular with Jewish families.

In Swider, the Hoffenberg children, Panna Pola and a maid stayed in one half of a duplex. This year, the other half was occupied by the Bluman family. The Blumans also had four children: Lolek, Hela, Zygmunt and Natek.

When they returned from Marienbad, Symcha and Estera visited their offspring on weekends and brought them all sorts of treats: watermelons, candies and Zosia's favourite cakes.

Those summer days when her parents visited were the happiest times for six-year-old Zosia. Not only did she have her whole family with her, she received all sorts of attention from the older children next door. The boys gave her piggyback rides. She particularly liked Lolek who, at twenty-five, was the oldest son. Lolek was six foot four and, perched on his big, broad shoulders, she loved to tower over everyone.

There was one son Zosia didn't like: the youngest boy, Natek. He was the closest to her in age but, because he resented all the attention Zosia received, he taunted her and pulled her pigtails. She quickly learned to stay out of Natek's way.