**Chapter 1 - Violation of Virtue**

My Grandmother Anna was the first person who learned I was molested. She lives with us. I seldom talk with her since I can't speak Polish, her native tongue. I was surprised to learn later in life that Momma, her daughter-in-law, had a loving relationship with her. More about that later, this begins with a brutal attack on an innocent girl.

After getting off the bus, I was walking in the dark and cold. I shivered in my penny loafers. Momma said to wear boots to school, but I refused. My boots were old rubber ones with zippers in the middle. They went over my shoes. The other girls laughed at how bulky they looked when I tried to pry them off my feet before I put them into my locker. Conveniently, I forgot to take them to school that day.

I wished I had them as I took a shortcut through the park. Then I would not have slipped on the icy sidewalk. When I fell, a man wearing a leather jacket appeared. He looked somewhat familiar but in the dark all I felt was fright. One moment there was no one, then, suddenly, he was there. The elm trees near the path loomed tall and ominous beside him. He seemed to sneer when he asked, "Do you need help?"

I raised my eyes. The books I'd been carrying were strewn around me. My hand felt bruised where I'd fallen on it. Much as I wanted to be aided, I didn't want him near me. He wasn't wearing gloves. His hands were red and rough. Yet, I took the hand he offered and rose stiffly. "Thank you, I can manage now."

I bent to pick up my books. Some of my papers had come free from my binder and started to blow across the snow. "Oh no, that's my senior essay. I can't lose it." I started to run for the paper when the man grabbed my arm.

"Hold on a minute. I want to talk with you."

I pulled my arm from him and said, "I don't want to talk to you. I have to go."

A wounded look appeared on his face. "What's wrong? Don't you think I'm good enough for you? I've seen you in your school uniform. You think you're so high and mighty." He stared at my blue serge skirt and plaid stockings. He had a nasty leer on his face.

I looked at him with different eyes and saw that his leather coat was worn at the seams and the cuffs. His pants weren't clean. On his feet were scuffed work shoes. I smelled alcohol. I was afraid and couldn't remember how I knew him. I left my papers and began to move away. Those cursed shoes with the slick soles failed me again. Once more I lost my footing and fell to the ground.

This time, the man didn't help me get up. He knelt next to me and put his hand on my upper arm to hold me down. He was squeezing my arm tightly. "Stop it, that hurts. I'll scream."

He slapped me hard across the face. I felt a warm liquid in my mouth. Oh great, my lip is bleeding now. I'll look terrible at school tomorrow.

While he was holding me, I began to squirm. He put his hand on my throat and pressed. I couldn't breathe. "Lie still! Do you want me to choke you?"

I stopped wriggling as he lifted the pressure of his hand on my throat. As he pressed his body against mine, I repeated in my head over and over, "Go away, go away".

He loosened his pants. Before he put his full weight on me, he lifted my skirt and ripped my underpants. I felt something cold against my thigh. His hand was down there! I'm being raped. I began to decline French nouns in my mind so I wouldn't think about what was happening to me.

He had a difficult time inserting himself into me. "Help me," he said. "Put your hand on it."

"Never. I'm not that kind of girl."

He struck me again, this time my head hit the pavement, hard. I screamed and clawed at his face.

"Good, now you're angry. Maybe you'll remember what it's like for the next time."

My mind was spinning with the idea that there would be a next time. He heaved himself another time and I felt a tearing in my pubic region. I moaned in pain. This time he said nothing.

At last it was over. I heard him grunting, then coughing. Then, he was gone. Had I dreamt it? What was I doing on the ground? I shuddered with the cold and felt the hard concrete beneath my back. My head ached. I had to get up or I would freeze, alone in Saveland Park. When it came to me what had happened, I began to cry.

My skirt was twisted around my waist. I lost one shoe. I was sore and my throat felt dry. My lip was starting to swell. I put my hand to my face and felt the wet. Was it tears or blood?

I found my shoe. As I slipped it on, I felt liquid running down my leg. I tried to smooth my hair. It had gotten wet from the snow and was a tangled mess. As I gathered my books, I realized my French dictionary was lost. That's a very expensive book. What will Momma say? My virginity was just stolen from me and I was worried about a book?

I found my purse near a scrawny tree. When I retrieved it I examined my wallet and saw that the three dollars I carried was gone. My bus pass was still there. At least I could get to school tomorrow.

Go to school? Who was I kidding? How could I face the other kids with a split lip? They'd know by looking at me that something happened. What would I say? I must get home.

Hurrying the few remaining blocks, careful not to slip again, I was glad to see lights. I entered the back door into the welcome warmth of the kitchen. Supper was long done. No one was in the kitchen but my Grandmother, Busia. When she saw me, I could see the alarm on her face. She said in accented English, "*Vhat* happened?"

It took me a second to understand her. As I sank into the kitchen chair, I could feel the slick vinyl seat through my skirt which felt wet. I placed my books on the table and whispered, "Busia, I was attacked in the park. I'm so ashamed. What should I do? Is Momma here? Where's Daddy?"

"A man does this to you?"

I nodded, sniffling and sobbing.

"Your Momma and Papa at Church for the Ash Wednesday. Shh, now." Busia moved toward me and put her hand on my chin raising my face.

"Bleeding. I get a towel."

As she cleaned my face, I heard her making noises underneath her breath. I put my hand to my throat and felt the bruises there. "Will I have a baby?" I asked.

"Talk with your Momma. She help you."

When Momma and Dad came home, Dad didn't look at me. Apparently the two of them had been arguing again. Dad went into their bedroom and slammed the door. Momma sat at the kitchen table and noticed me for the first time. Looking at Busia, she asked, "What's going on here?"

I was still crying, making that huh, huh noise, after no more tears would come.

Busia said in Polish, "*Molestowanie.*"

Momma took me to my bedroom, sat with me on my bed and listened to the whole story. I felt ashamed and embarrassed to talk about it. Even though I'd been the one violated, I asked her, "What did I do wrong? Why me?"

Brushing my hair as she helped me undress and get into my pajamas, Momma said, "You did nothing wrong. It's not your fault. You're not the first girl to have a man attack her."

"Momma, I should have done more to get away. He was drunk. I could've found a way to escape. Also, I think I know who he was."

"Don't talk now. When a man uses his power against a woman, there's little she can do. Go to sleep and we'll talk in the morning. You won't be going to school for a few days. Rest now. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

Busia and Momma talked softly in Polish. That word, *molestowanie* was said over and over. I didn't feel better knowing that other girls had experienced what I had. I'd never be pure again. Exhausted, I fell asleep knowing I never wanted to get up again.

**Chapter 2 - Talking with My Grandmothers**

The next day, I refused to get out of bed. I felt as if a dark cloud had descended over me. The gloom wouldn't leave me.

Momma came into my room and sat on the bed. She took my hand and brushed the hair from my forehead. "You're going to be okay. It doesn't seem like that now, but you will be. Young girls like you are often prey to men without scruples. They need protection; that's why they marry."

"No one will want to marry me. I'm not a virgin." I pointed out to her.

"You don't have to tell everything that's ever happened to you when a man asks. It's best not to think about it."

"What if I have a baby? Then I'll have to talk about it."

"Wait and see. You're so young, nothing may happen."

"That's just it. I'm too young for this to have happened to me. Must I go to Confession and tell the priest?"

"There's nothing to confess. You did nothing wrong. I have to leave for work. Talk to Busia. She's a mother too, you know."

"Momma, Busia was so nice to me last night. It was as if she understood." Busia was the name we called my grandmother. It is a shortened form of "babushka" the scarf that many Russian women wear on their heads. It's meant as a term of endearment.

Momma said, "Busia was a young wife with a baby girl when she came by ship to join your Grandfather in America. She learned a lot about life since then. Ask her, if you have any more questions."

For the first time I thought of Busia as a young woman. That alone was enough to get me out of bed on the first day. To avoid talking about what happened to me, I said to Momma, "I want to know more about Busia's journey. What was her life like in Poland? Did she really bring a baby alone across the sea? Is the baby one of my aunts? How old was Busia when she came to America?"

Momma laughed, "So many questions. Speak with Busia. She won't bite you. It'd be good to take your mind off, you know."

If anything would help me to forget, maybe talking to Busia would do that. I'd always taken her for granted. She was the grandmother who lived with us and took care of us when we were little. I didn't think of her as being young, like me. Even though her English is hard to understand, learning her story might make me forget my own concerns.

"Besides talking to Busia, you should ask your Grandma Irene about her Mother and Father, the Kubiaks, and their journey to America. My mother pretends she was born in America, but she actually was born in Poland. She can tell you about my father's parents, too, the Zbikowski's."

I became more and more curious. Since I refused to go to school, even though my mother agreed I should stay home for awhile, I decided I'd talk with my grandmothers. It was easier to understand my Grandma Irene than Busia. But, Grandma Irene had the attitude of a princess, which could be intimidating. I decided I'd be strong and go to her.

Grandma was a widow who'd remarried. She lived with her second husband in our neighborhood. Busia lived with us because she was a widow and still alone. With eight children in our family, Busia was a great help to my mother.

During the days I remained at home because of the attack, I spoke with Busia and Grandma Irene. Busia told me stories she said she shared with no one else. I felt privileged to have her confidence and learned that her daughter, an aunt I never knew, had been molested.

On the other hand, Grandma Irene wouldn't tell me anything at all. When I first approached her, I was afraid she might ask me how I got a split lip. The wound was healing but my face was still swollen. Before Grandma could say anything about my face, I asked, "Grandma, did your Mother ever tell you anything about Poland before she arrived in America?"

She stopped her cutting at a board. With her knife poised in the air, she said, "I'm an American. I know nothing of Poland. The history of America is what you should study. Me, I know nothing about the Old Country." My Grandmother went back to her cutting board.

I knew this wasn't true. My Momma said that her Kubiak Grandparents left Poland to escape revenue agents. I wanted to get the whole story, but my Grandma refused to speak about it. "What about Grandpa's parents. Didn't he tell you stories about his family? I am interested in both of my Great Grandparents."

Perhaps the memory of her first husband softened her resistance. "Olivia, your Grandfather's parents, the Zbikowskis, had the money, but the Kubiaks had the brains."

She paused and returned to her cutting. "Strange isn't it, that both of your Great Grandparents lived no more than ten miles apart in Poland. Yet, they never knew each other until they emigrated to the United States."

I couldn't control my inquisitiveness. "Please tell me more. What about the revenue agents. Was your Papa involved in doing something illegal?"

Laughing, she said, "My Papa worked at a still with his wife's father. He was brought into the family business when he lost his job as a tutor. If it weren't for that, my parents might never have left Poland at all. I'm glad they did. Otherwise, you'd never been born," she said slyly.

Even though I was feeling maybe it was better if I'd never been born, I asked, "Who can tell me about your Papa and what he did in Poland?" I persisted.

She seemed to tire of the topic. "Talk to my brother's son, your Cousin Irvin. My brother was a small boy when our parents arrived in America, yet he often spoke about the Old Country. His son may remember some of the stories. Better to ask him than me."

She seemed to have another thought and smiled. "If you really want to learn something, go see Great Aunt Agnes. She's your Grandfather's oldest sister and was born in Poland. Even though Agnes doesn't remember what day of the week it is, she can tell stories about the old days. She'd welcome a visit. She lives in the St. Frances Home."

Great Aunt Agnes Zbikowski was my Grandfather's oldest sister. My Grandfather died shortly after Momma got married. I never even heard of Great Aunt Agnes. She must be a hundred. "How old is Great Aunt Agnes?"

Grandma paused and thought. "Great Aunt Agnes was a little girl when her parents came to America. They were called Ursula and Peter Zbyk then. They changed their name to Zbikowski before your Grandfather Luke was born. Great Aunt Agnes would've been a year old in 1883, so that would make her about eighty-eight now. You should speak to her before she dies. She might not live until she's ninety."

Busia was seventy-nine on her last birthday. I thought she was the oldest woman I knew. Grandma Irene was not yet seventy. Now, I would meet an aunt who was even older.

From my Great Aunt Agnes, my Cousin Irvin, and Busia I learned about the different branches of my family. To forget what happened to me, I concentrated on writing down what I heard. I don't recommend rape as an impetus for learning your personal history. But, in my case, it was the just the beginning of how I'd live the remainder of my life.

**Chapter 3: Great Aunt Agnes**

The St. Frances Home is what they call the light brick structure situated on South Lakeshore Drive in Cudahy, a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The cream colored brick is from clay indigenous to the banks of the Menomonee River. One of Milwaukee's nicknames is "The Cream City" because of the prevalent use of the brick in structures throughout Milwaukee.

On a Sunday in late April, I entered the glass doors and asked to visit with Agnes Zbikowski. "How do you know Miss Zbikowski?" the nun behind the counter asked me. She wore the traditional black habit and wimple of a sister of St. Francis.

"She's my Great Aunt. I wish to interview her for her memories of the Old Country," I explained showing the nun my notebook. "It's for a school project, " I added, knowing this to be a white lie.

The sister smiled at me. "Miss Z, as we call her, will welcome a visitor. She doesn't have many. Let me ask Sister Margaret to take you to her."

Sister Margaret stood up from where she had been sitting behind a desk. She was not a full sister, yet. I could tell because her dress came only to mid-calf, not to the floor. Also, she wore a simple black cloth on her head, not the full wimple and white collar.

"Thank you," I said politely.

Sister Margaret led me to a room at the end of the hall. It contained many plants near a wall of windows. Several patients were sleeping in wheel chairs. Two women were speaking in quiet tones, gesturing intensely, as if they were planning an escape, I thought.

One woman, older than the others, rested on an easy chair, her feet, encased in worn felt slippers, were propped on an ottoman. A crocheted afghan laid across her lap. Sister Margaret tapped her lightly on the shoulder, as if to wake her. I noticed her head had been on her chest and that she was probably sleeping.

"Don't disturb her. I can wait until she wakes up," I said motioning to the chair against the wall.

Sister Margaret smiled at me and said to the woman, "Miss Z, you have a visitor."

The woman abruptly opened her eyes and turned her head to my direction. "A visitor? Who would visit an old woman? No one ever does."

I approached the woman, marveling at the number of wrinkles on her face. "My name is Olivia Modjeski. I'm your Great Grandniece. My Grandfather Luke Zbikowski was your brother. Do you remember your brother Luke?"

"Lukasz, Lukasz, my brother is here?" she asked looking around frantically.

"No, I'm sorry, you misunderstand. Your brother passed away many years ago. My sympathy for your loss." I wasn't sure how to proceed and asked, "May I sit and speak to you?"

She looked at Sister Margaret with a question on her face. Sister Margaret said, "It's all right Miss Z. This girl is a relative and wants to visit. Please take a seat," she said as she brought the straight back chair from the wall and placed it next to my Great Aunt's chair. I sat on the chair and put my hands in my lap on top of my notebook.

Great Aunt Agnes saw the book in my lap. "Are you a student? My Grandfather wanted my Papa to go to University. He joined the Army instead."

"Will you tell me about your Father, Aunt Agnes? And your mother, too? What were their names in Poland?"

Slowly, Aunt Agnes warmed to the subject. "I don't remember anything about Poland except the stories Mama and Papa told me. Papa, his name was Peter, said he was not meant to be a farmer, so he came to America. My Mama, Ursula, didn't want to leave Poland, she told me. She came because of Papa."

As Aunt Agnes related the stories about her parents, their lives in Poland became as real to me as if I, too, had been there. For the time being, I preferred living in someone else's world, rather than in my own. Thoughts of the attack kept coming back to me in dreams. Even during the day, when I least expected it, I would start to sweat and become anxious if I saw a man approach me.

We talked for about an hour before Aunt Agnes tired. Her head dropped to her chest and she began to doze. When she awoke, I handed her a glass of water. We spoke for a few more minutes before Sister Margaret said it was time to leave.

"May I return again next week and continue our visit?" I asked my aunt.

Aunt Agnes smiled and said, "Yes, dear. What was your name again? How do I know you?"

I returned each Sunday until the middle of summer. After the third or fourth visit, Aunt Agnes remembered my name. She never understood who I was, but I learned things about my Great Grandparents whom I'd never met. Peter died in 1918 and Ursula in 1924, many years before I was born. Yet, here was their oldest daughter telling me about their lives as if they had just happened.

I was thankful to have taken the time to speak with Great Aunt Agnes that year. During the summer of 1965, Agnes Zbikowski died quietly in her sleep. I mourned her passing and vowed to keep the story of her family alive. I was pleased that something good might come from my experience in the park.

In 1876, while America was celebrating its first centennial, Peter Zbyk was preparing to leave Poland.

**Chapter 4 - Going Away, 1876**

"Da, I'm leaving."

"Peter, you can't. I need you here to work with me."

His response was no surprise to Peter, but he felt betrayed. Since he'd returned from the army, Da told him to dream of a better life. As the youngest son, Peter couldn't hope to inherit the land. Papa's boots were caked with dirt. Farm dirt. One day Peter hoped to remove the farm dirt from beneath his fingernails. "Never will my hands be so soiled in North America," he thought to himself.

"I've saved enough money to book passage for Ursula and myself. We wish to leave soon."

His father stood up straight, putting the rope he was repairing on a hook in the wall of the barn. When he turned to face Peter, his jaw was rigid. "I know you want to get away from the Prussians, from the army. They haven't been harassing you here, in Lubla, have they?"

"No Da. That's over. You saw to it."

Peter thought of the night he ran away from the army. He'd been in Poznan for only six months. He thought joining the Prussian Army would bring him glory; it only brought him shame. Poles were forced to serve in the Prussian army, but weren't given weapons. They performed lowly support duties, while the German recruits took target practice and learned how to operate artillery. Polish was forbidden to be spoken aloud. Peter and the other Poles picked up the German commands quickly. Soon, they could converse in German and even read it.

One of Peter's duties was to drive a cart to the village to fill barrels with water from a common well. One day, he found a discarded newspaper lying on the ground. Nearly two weeks old, it was the Polish *Gazeta*. Something to occupy his time and in his native language. He was overjoyed to have come across it. Peter was homesick and wished he'd never joined the army. The incessant marching, persecution from the officers and the expense of feeding himself was becoming too much to bear.

Returning to his tent, he laid on his cot to examine the paper. A German soldier entered and saw the newspaper. "Is that Polish? You're betraying orders," he stated angrily. Betrayal of his Prussian commanders was far from Peter's mind. But the soldier jumped to conclusions. Peter wasn't given an opportunity to explain.

An officer bound his hands behind him and displayed Peter before a group of assembled men. "Before you stands a Polish spy, a specimen of depravity. This man is accused of infiltrating our ranks to steal information to take to the revolutionary factions. Does he deserve to remain in our company?"

"No," came a great shout from the men.

"What punishment, say you?" the officer inquired.

"Death to traitors," one men shouted.

Peter trembled at the pronouncement. The officer laughed at the comment and said to the men, "Death? That may be a bit too severe. This man will be punished as a lesson to others. Solitary confinement; thirty days," he declared.

Peter was devastated. He'd intended to become a soldier like his childhood hero General Dabrowski. How could things have gone so wrong? Punished for reading Polish, what sentence would be imposed for desertion? Alone for thirty days, he resolved never to submit to the Prussians again.

At the end of his confinement, Peter was released to return to his tent. That night, he walked out of the camp and stumbled home to Lubla. Without a horse, it took many weeks. He was hesitant to hitch a ride with a passing traveler, as he was a deserter.

When Peter arrived home, he was undernourished, his clothes were in tatters, and his boots were falling apart. Peter told his parents, "After giving the oath of loyalty which all recruits are required to speak aloud, I hoped that the officers wouldn't plague me. But, still it became worse. I was often questioned about the Polish societies. They asked me, 'Are you a Polish patriot? Declare your loyalty to the Second Reich, to Imperial Germany!' Now I know it was a mistake to join."

Standing before his father, these years later, Peter couldn't understand why he must remain in Poland.

"Peter, I need your strong arms in the fields. It doesn't matter that you're married. You live with us on my land. Our land. You must help me," his father told him.

Not wanting to defy him openly, Peter merely glared at him. Slapping his cap on his head, Peter turned to leave.

With a raised voice, his father called, "Peter! Come back. Don't walk away from me like you walked away from the army. I took care of things so the army wouldn't come after you. Now you must help me. If you leave, I declare you're not my son."

Peter stopped. To be disowned would be a terrible disgrace exceeding even his humiliation in the army. His body stiffening at being reminded of his father's intervention in bribing the officer who followed him to Lubla. "Da, I'm sorry. Forgive me, but I think you're being stubborn." Peter tried to remain calm. He whispered, "Mama said you wouldn't understand."

Peter took a step forward, his arms outstretched, palms up. "I'll never submit to the Prussians again. I agreed to work the farm until I married. I have a wife. It's time for Ursula and me to go to a free country where we can raise our family." Peter dropped one hand, with the other, he pointed to the outdoors, "Must I submit Ursula to the oppression of men who take away our country, our language, our religion?"

Peter's father sighed and suddenly looked very tired. "I can't afford to let you go. There are no men who will work in the fields, since the sickness. If you go, I won't be able to harvest the wheat alone. Stay with me this season and we'll talk again in the Spring."

Exasperated that his father was speaking of things that had occurred years in the past, Peter turned away and said, "The sickness was ten years ago. Uncle Lukasz is here to help you." As an alternative, Peter said, "You could hire other laborers."

His father took a step and said, "I'll not take the money from the harvest to hire men. I must feed our family, not the families of others. There are many hungry mouths among the Zbyk's. Please stay with me for now. In the Spring, we'll talk again," he pleaded with Peter.

Peter didn't think there were that many Zbyk's to feed. There was Uncle Lukasz, Mama, his sister Sofie, Ursula and himself. Peter let his breath expel slowly to calm his beating heart. "You're my Father, so I'll do as you say." He paused, then added, "I'll not remain here forever." Turning on his heel, he walked out of the barn.

Still angry at his father's demand, Peter almost stumbled into Ursula. She was struggling with a heavy bucket to fill a tub for doing the laundry. At nineteen, Ursula was six years younger than Peter. He took the bucket from her and placed it on the ground. Touching her face, he said, "Ursa, Da won't let us leave."

She wasn't disappointed. Peter didn't seem to notice. As he embraced her, he whispered into her hair, "Da said I must remain another season. After that, our time will come. I dream of going to North America. I must get away from this oppressive land."

Ursula pulled away from him and bent to retrieve the bucket. She stamped her foot and said, "You dream, I work."

Peter could see that she was angry. "Let me help you with the laundry," he said to appease her.

She ignored his offer. Instead, she said, "Why do you refuse to have babies with me? Aren't I attractive to you?"

Again, Peter took the bucket from her and placed it on the ground. As he hugged her once more, he said, "Hush, *milosc*. I want very much to make babies with you. When we get to North America, the babies will come."

Ursula smiled at him. With a wink, she said, "I don't want to wait for North America. "

Without thinking, he kissed her delicate mouth. As the embrace continued, he remembered they were in the courtyard. " If I must take a blanket to the field, away from my parents' eyes and ears, Ursula, tonight, we will be lovers."