PART ONE

FORMATION

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I

THE SEVENTH CHILD

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 1938, WHILE ADOLPH HITLER, with a fiery speech to the Party Congress in a vast hall in Nuremberg, was giving birth to his dream of National Socialism, Margaret Wilkes, already the mother of six, was stoically gritting her teeth in a cramped hospital delivery room at St. Luke's Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. She was laboring to bear her seventh child, hardly, for her, a dream. Of course, the two events had no linkage, nor were they in any sense of equal importance.

Only that I was the child born on that fateful day.

Margaret had passed between the tall, elegant pillars of St. Luke's entrance and presented herself to the admissions desk at about 10:30 PM the night before. This in itself was extraordinary; she had never been in a hospital before. All her other children had been delivered at home by good Dr. Brown, by the light of a kerosene lamp, in a humble house in the anthracite coalfields of Pennsylvania, where the family had lived until recently. When Margaret learned that she would be required to pay the customary daily rate of $1.29 for the remains of that day—such were the inflexible rules for mothers on welfare, which, embarrassingly enough, she was at the time—she took her small canvas bag and returned to the waiting room. Every penny counted, especially with this new baby coming. She sat quietly and alone, watching the clock, trying not to call attention to herself as the contractions increased in rapidity and strength. At midnight, she once again presented herself at the admissions desk and was immediately whisked into the brightly lit delivery room.

She had awoken with a start shortly after going to bed that night. The pains low in her belly were both familiar and rhythmic. She whispered to her husband, Paul, "It's time." He rose sleepily from the bed, but she told him that no, he did not have to go with her. Although Paul was still

among the some 3.3 million men then formally unemployed, his work at forty cents an hour with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided at least some semblance of dignity and served as the gateway for collecting free food and clothing for his family at the local center up on Buckeye Road. His work as a WPA carpenter required him to be on the job promptly at seven the next morning. Margaret took her small bag, packed with clean underwear, her best flannel nightgown, toothbrush, and a small jar of salt and baking soda—her dentifrice of choice and necessity—and walked the two miles to the hospital.

My mother, Margaret, then thirty-eight years old, was a stocky, compact woman of about five foot two. She had the square, solid shoulders of the Slovak peasant stock from which she was descended, reddish, rough hands from washing the family's clothes on a scrubbing board with homemade soap. She wore no makeup, not even lipstick. She was not a woman prone to smiling; her milky blue eyes seemed to hold only the assurance of the inevitable as the birth drew near.

This pregnancy, somehow negotiated in the windowless attic of her mother-in-law's tiny house on East 111th Street in the company of the other six children, was hardly looked upon as a fortunate occurrence. Having to live in an attic, treated no better than dusty trunks and out-of-season clothes, crowded together with her children, who slept crossways, three to a sagging bed, was bad enough. But it was better than being homeless, which had been a distinct possibility when the family, penniless and in a borrowed Model T Ford, were forced to leave a house in Pennsylvania that had been built by her husband but reclaimed by the state for taxes owed.

In fact, this pregnancy could not have come at a worse time. Her husband had almost saved the $100 required to join Local 11 of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. Soon, Margaret had already carefully planned, they would be off "the dole" and would no longer have to borrow the neighbor's rusty wagon to bring home the bug-infested bags of wheat and the uniformly green dresses and brown shoes that placed the Wilkes girls, then 14, 12, 10, and 4, on the truly needy side of the thin line dividing simple Depression-era want from poverty.

Paul and Margaret's relatives were scandalized by Paul's seemingly gluttonous sexual insistence and her impractical fecundity. When Margaret told her sister Rose—who was then living in her own shame back in Pennsylvania with a young son born out of wedlock—Rose's eyes widened. "Take something strong," she advised, as if the child should be flushed away with some strong chemical, like those used to clear clogged drains. But Margaret would have none of the abortifacients then available from the hollow-eyed gypsy women who lived in shacks

bordering the trolley car barns down on Woodhill Road. "God will provide," she bravely said, even as she wondered how she and her husband could feed still another mouth.

The birth, some eight hours later, was uneventful. And when her husband arrived after work that day, he found a seven-pound boy sleeping peacefully in his wife's arms.

Unlike his wife, Paul had no trouble smiling. His wool cap cocked at a jaunty angle, the faint whiff of bottom-shelf whiskey and draft beer on his breath, a faint brown dribble of Havana Blossom chewing tobacco at the corner of his mouth, Paul Wilkes Sr. seemed to view the world at once bemusedly and benignly. Everything would work out. It was this attitude that drove his wife mad. No, everything would not necessarily work out. Right now, nothing was right. And besides, if she couldn't afford lipstick, he shouldn't afford a double shot of Corby's and a bottle of Erin Brew. For Margaret, disaster awaited the unwary. For Paul, life unfolded as it would, so what was there to worry about?

Deep in the Great Depression, Paul and Margaret Wilkes could hardly have known that even more catastrophic world events were afoot. The armies of the furious man in Nuremberg were poised to swallow up their first bites of Europe, eventually including the Slovak land from which their own parents had escaped over forty years before. It was then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which would have been news to them. They did not even know the village their parents had come from, only that wherever it was, there was not enough of its poor soil to be divided once again among family members. Rather than starve, they had come to the place they called *Amerike*.

Survival had been the focus for the Vlk, as they were called before the name was Americanized, and the Salanskys, Margaret's people. For that was all that they knew, serfs that they were, trying as best they could to live under feudal kings and princes, greedy landowners in their native land, and then under capricious mine owners in their new homeland. Now they owed allegiance to a more benevolent leader, far distant from their daily lives—Franklin Delano Roosevelt. At least he had kept them from starving.

But it would be wrong to sum up their lives—and their humble heritage up to this point—only in terms of possessions or status. For there was a side to their lives that transcended the vagaries of this earth. There may have been no widely known Slovak kings or books or inventors or artists—such as the French or British or German or Italian or Irish immigrants could claim. But Paul and Margaret Wilkes were members of the most important royal family the world had ever known, something that no depth

of poverty could erase. They were Catholic—and their new son would be soon baptized into this one true faith. Others might succeed in *this* world, but they were sure they would prevail in the next. Their Catholic Church in America was itself a magnificent, sprawling, and unified empire. While non-Catholic America still regarded their growth warily, working-class Catholics built schools and churches in great number. Devotions to the Blessed Mother were sung and uttered by churches full of the faithful, nuns wore distinctive garb, priests were never seen in public without a Roman collar. On the altar, the Mass was intoned in an unchanging Latin. Little had changed since the Council of Trent, the sixteenth-century response to Luther's heresies.

When asked what name should be written on the birth certificate of this, the latest member, Paul and Margaret looked at one another. They already had a Thomas and an Edward. The girls were Pauline, Marian, Francis, and Margaret. Without much further discussion, they simply named the child Paul, with no middle name, after his father.

And so my life began.

Before bedtime, my six sisters and brothers and I would kneel, in order, oldest to youngest, before my mother at the edge of our breakfast nook table to say our nightly prayers. It was here that my early relationship—as narrow and perhaps misguided as it then was—with God began. My father had covered the table's worn, wooden, cracked surface with yellow Formica, the newest modern rage, and we secretly imagined that its use surely marked us as true Americans. But of course, in almost every way, our outward lives were, like that Formica, very much a veneer on a much thicker piece of American life, of which we knew very little.

There were benches on either side of the table, and my mother, droopy-eyed from her work as a housekeeper up in Shaker Heights for the Chadwick family—they, the wealthy makers of the Chadwick automobile that had faded into history, but whose money remained quite plentiful and readily accessible—as well as from all the washing, cooking, baking, sewing, and mending that a large family required, would sit there to hear our various cries to heaven. My brothers and sisters knelt on the glistening linoleum floor, scrubbed bare and polished each Saturday afternoon. This was an accepted portion of self-inflicted pain, penance for sins; after all, prayer was magnified in direct proportion to the time spent and pain endured. God surely listened better if you were at least uncomfortable, preferably in agony. I, however, knelt on a grate that brought heat from

our coal furnace into the kitchen. Such a penitential act in one so young might be misunderstood by those who were not members of an immigrant Catholic family in the 1940s. But ours was a Church that believed in the purifying effects of suffering. Our pope, Pius XII, already looked like a cadaver. Our churches were populated with statues that did not shy away from depicting glistening blood, gaping wounds, and pain-filled, mournful, heaven-cast eyes.

The grate's checkered pattern of forged steel offered me the opportunity to come close to God in the surest way I then knew—through suffering. For this was a distant God, large and all-enveloping, whose Son I saw hanging from the cross at the front of our church. His followers readily suffered. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. . . . Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed . . ." As the prayers I had been learning from the Notre Dame sisters at St. Benedict's grade school passed my lips, my mind was often elsewhere, with the martyrs of my faith. In a courtyard next to St. Sebastian, my hands behind my back, just like his; arrows piercing my chest, just like his. By a river's edge with Jesuit missionaries, a wild-eyed Iroquois ripping out my fingernails with his teeth. In a Roman amphitheatre among my young, brave friends, with lions tearing at our flesh as we calmly said our Hail Marys together. In an Italian village like eleven-year-old Maria Goretti, protecting my virginity—whatever that was—from some brutish thug.

Catholicism of this time is so easy to parody, but to a child like me it made perfect mythic sense. Especially when so much of the world was out of reach. Here was a sure path to greatness, open to the modest of birth and sinew, open to those brave enough to trudge step-by-step in the footprints of the ages. This temporal world was passing; what else was there to do but pile up treasure in heaven? Each painful moment on that grate mattered and counted. It was a simple world, with ironclad, nonnegotiable rules and guarantees. What else to aspire to, except sainthood?

On the Formica-like surface of my life, I was an overly talkative, distracted, and often disobedient child. Actually, there was nothing more I wanted than to be a saint. As I knelt on that grate, the numbing sensations radiating up my legs and into my hips were at once excruciating painful and wonderfully comforting. I was on the path to becoming that saint. No one knew that, but I was. What were a few piddling years of difficulty when compared to an eternity of divine pleasure? As I look back on those days, there is no anger, only affection. There was a simplicity and honesty about such an approach to God.

In parishes like mine, St. Benedict's, priests provided one of the few comforts of this alien land by speaking the native Slovak tongue for the

half million who had immigrated around the turn of the century. In crowded parish school classrooms we were kept apart from non-Catholic influences so that we might preserve our faith, under assault by a Protestant-dominated American culture. For we were a perfect society, the Church complete in itself, neither having nor needing nor seeking much of a relationship to the world. The Baltimore Catechism answered any question we might have, let us know exactly where we stood with God, when we were going astray, and how far. We were taught to "mortify" our senses, avoid temptation or even the "near occasion" of sin. It was incomprehensible that if we would marry—a state decidedly inferior to becoming a nun or priest, which only the holiest among us aspired to—we would not marry anyone other than another Catholic, preferably a Slovak one.

Although I was a member of this huge family, I always had the sense of being alone in the world. Perhaps I felt this way because my older siblings and parents seemed "the family" and then there was me, separated by four years and a chasm that only widened with time. It was not that I was unloved or uncared for. The one picture of me from my early years—taken by a professional at Woolworth's Five and Dime up on Buckeye Road—shows luxuriant, chin-length curls, held neatly back by a barrette, framing a chubby, smiling face. An obviously indulged, slightly petulant . . . little girl. Was it that my mother knew that girls were more malleable and hoped to reprogram my maleness as much or for as long as she could? Or had she already sensed in me—as mothers can do just by the tone of a child's cry or the way a breast is taken or the position while sleeping—that I would not be a cooperative crew member on this fragile family bark sailing stormy and uncharted American waters?

Because my siblings were older and my parents were working, I was something of a feral creature, raising myself, cautiously ranging out into the neighborhood that surrounded our one-and-a-half-story shingled house at 11412 Forest Avenue. I would follow the horse-drawn wagon with a man calling out "Paperricks, paperricks" (which only much later I would decode as a Yiddish plea for scrap "paper" and "rags") as it rattled over Forest Avenue's red bricks. I peered at women in babushkas as they hurried back from the crossroads of 116th and Buckeye Road, having stopped at fruit and vegetable markets, the butcher shop, the bakery, each its own province. Ours was more a medieval village than the result of modern city planning. The men were plumbers and lathe operators,

electricians, tin smiths, masons; each of their homes could have just as easily had a guild crest out in front. They were hard-working men, blessed with the dignity of a job after the scourge of the Depression. Cleveland's mills and factories were happy to have them, an intact, stable workforce, willing to toil in whatever conditions they found so that they could provide for their large families.

Any house that I went into had clean floors, an icebox with drip pan beneath, a garden in the rear, an older-model car in the driveway, and usually the familiar smell of cabbage, onion, or bread. Jews, blacks? At the time, I didn't even know the Hungarians, who lived in St. Margaret's, a neighboring parish and autonomous fiefdom not much further away than our own St. Benedict's, but in the opposite direction, across 116th Street.

Our house, with its two downstairs bedrooms, a dining room used only on holidays, and a living room not used at all, had a largely unfinished attic into which my father crafted two more bedrooms to provide more room for the seven of us and my mother's mother, Anna Salansky, who had come to live with us after her husband died. A full basement contained the furnace; a huge coal bin; and a small, two-burner stove on which my mother heated washing water, boiled the white clothes in huge copper tubs, and rendered homemade soap. There was a loom, where clothing and sheets past patching or mending commingled, to be reincarnated as colorful rag rugs. Clotheslines ran the length of the basement, for drying clothes throughout the long Cleveland winter. A cool fruit cellar held jars of tomatoes, plums, peppers, and pickles my mother had preserved. There was a single bathroom with the luxury of store-bought Ivory soap for our weekly bath. The payments were $41 a month, and with my father and mother working and my older brothers and sisters selling newspapers, clerking, or working at the parish house, the idea was to "double up" on the payment so that the house would soon be ours. No one wanted to relive the horror of those years in the in-laws' dusty attic just a few blocks away. My father would have done anything never to have to repeat the humiliation of facing that perspiring, smooth-skinned man in the rumpled suit who, one hot day in 1936, told him that a bank and not Paul Wilkes now owned the house he and his children were illegally occupying. Each day as he mounted the steps to our tiny porch, my father hesitated before opening the back door. It was a sign of reverence. And thanksgiving.

My mother and father's mentality was a post-Depression ode to scarcity interwoven with the reality of a country at war. The tissue-thin foil wrapping from the occasional stick of Juicy Fruit chewing gum was carefully

separated from its inner layer and annealed onto an ever-expanding ball in the pantry. No length of string was ever thrown away, no can not flattened, no glass jar ever discarded—for everything there was another season, another use. The war effort was really no effort at all for families like mine. Waste was unheard of, sinful in fact. Food was precious, a gift from the God who both provided and demanded careful accounting of its proper use. Even the cornmeal mush with browned butter that was our standard Friday night dinner was treasured down to the last congealed dollop. During the war, my mother always had extra ration stamps to give to other families. We would not consume more than our fair share. We would walk lightly on this earth, barely leaving a footprint. There was an ominous, unspoken sense that our life hung by a thread and that any false move could be disastrous.

And yet to walk as a visitor through the back door on Forest Avenue, onto the scrubbed, waxed linoleum, was to be treated royally. Whatever food that was already prepared was yours, and if a serving bowl was emptied, it was an embarrassment, for you may have wanted a bit more. Our humble icebox became a cornucopia of delights, our stove forever burning bright. Stuffed cabbage, chicken soup with my mother's homemade noodles, perogi, garlic sausage, huge loaves of Martinovic's Bakery rye bread with caraway seeds. If family members knew not to ask for another slice of bread or not to tarry during mealtime lest that errant piece of meatloaf or pork chop be snapped up by someone else, ours was a house in which the visitor never felt any want.

Strangely enough, I never felt poor—there always was enough to go around, enough for anyone who would walk through our doors. Even a pathetic pots-and-pans salesman would get a sale if he looked as though he needed it.

Those who came to our house were neighbors and relatives mostly. Sit, have a "biffer," as my father called it—the boilermaker, the Slovak's cocktail, aphrodisiac, anesthetic. Corby's was the whiskey, preferably a double shot. P.O.C. (Pride of Cleveland) or Erin Brew was the beer, and that was the order in which you drank, the whiskey warm and the beer at the temperature of our fruit cellar in the basement, the icebox considered far too aggressively chilly for something as savory as this.

The men's talk—which I listened to as I took their empty glasses away with the drop or two remaining as my reward—was of hard work, unfair bosses, and low pay. The shots and beers made the men stronger and wiser on those Sundays, which began with Mass and ended, by early afternoon, in an alcoholic haze. But instead of planning the revolution that would free them from these bonds, taking on roles in their unions or otherwise plotting a way out of the indentured servitude their own grandfathers

knew firsthand, they inevitably turned on themselves. After all, what were they but "dumb hunkies." Somehow, they deserved it.

They were living in a land of supposed unbounded possibility, and although being an American was a point of enormous pride, it was far too large a concept to have much of an impact on their lives. Voting was an almost arrogant act. Accomplishment was a cursed word; to be a foreman or supervisor was to take a lesser—not greater—place in the world, one of privilege and not dignified by labor. It was unholy, a form of prostitution of a man's most sacred parts—his back, his hands. To think of higher education as a road out was not even considered. Keep your head down; don't ask for or, worse yet, expect too much.

My father never talked about religion or politics or world events, or made grand pronouncements, even deep into a Sunday's drinking with family or friends. But every so often, sometimes spurred by my laziness—the windows I was supposed to paint, porch glider assemble, grass cut—he would say, obliquely, yet with great seriousness, as if he were imparting the very essence of his being, "When a man pays you for eight hours' work, you give him nine." For him it was a sacred oath. Only later in life would I realize it was little different from the scriptural admonishment to walk an extra mile if asked for only one. Work, even unrequited and unrewarded hard work, not only had dignity; it was the source of holiness. This way of facing the world was always within one's control, even when little else was. And so it was that Catholicism, combined with the suffering of a long-oppressed people, contained the perfect construct for us. Suffering was true nobility, and certainly within our grasp.

Whereas my mother and father may have agonized over their country's survival and their own, for a young boy like me, the war effort was more of a great adventure. I could pray fervently for the safety of our troops, and wish the agonizing death of Zero pilots and Panzer tank crews. As I memorized the Our Father and Hail Mary, I memorized the names and numbers of our airplanes and can recite them to this day: P-51 Mustang, P-48 Flying Tiger, B-24 Liberator. Jackie Kerner and I took turns with the one plastic .45 pistol and single helmet we had between us, climbing trees and jumping off low garages, killing and being killed, alternately Tojo and GI Joe. In our front window, next to the sign that told Johnny, the ice deliveryman, to leave 25, 50, 75, or 100 pounds of ice (depending on the season), was a single blue star representing my brother Tom, who was in the Navy. Other houses had two and three blue stars. A few had a gold star. When we passed, we knew to make the sign of the cross.

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Although America was involved in this war, and such places as Europe and Japan actually must have existed, it was the squarish red brick building of St. Benedict's four blocks away on the corner of Lamontier and East Boulevard that was truly the focal point of our lives. From an early age, I understood that God was the proper center of our lives, all life, in good times and bad. If you asked Cleveland ethnics where they lived, it was always their parish, not their street address, they gave. St. Benedict's was administered by Benedictine monks, every one of them a Slovak and—so it was hoped—role models for us, this cowlicked horde of boys at the parish grade school. There, class by class, we lined up for daily Mass, with a Notre Dame sister in her distinctive horseshoe-shaped headpiece to synchronize our choreographed genuflections with a clicker folded into her smooth hand.

Some of those nuns were no more than children themselves, having ardently joined directly from grade school and, because of the burgeoning numbers of children in Catholic schools, quickly returned to the classroom after but a year or two of college. Nonetheless, they were superb teachers in their fifty-student classrooms, explaining how letters were formed; sentences diagrammed; numbers added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided. How little I knew of their secret, quiet life, shoehorned as they were, fifteen of them, into a tiny convent adjoining the school. They were so restrained, so regimented. They never perspired, even on the hottest day. Their skin was a uniform pale color. They would wipe a table, tuck their handkerchief into their billowing sleeve, enter a room, or sit down in precisely the same way. Their novitiate was a holy uniformity, instilling in them a mentality of seeking perfection, being part of something far bigger than themselves. The best girls from each eighth-grade class would be honored when they were asked to follow in these soft footsteps.

Our four priests presided as lords of the Slovak manor, still at the time when the parish priest was educated far better than anyone in the flock and his authority was unquestioned. Empty liquor cases (not cheap Corby's, to be sure) on their back porch (built by my father, who was rewarded with two holy pictures for his work) told of a far different life than that of the sisters. On those rare occasions when I went to the priests' spacious house with my mother to obtain *oplatki,* the Christmas wafer, and give our offering, it smelled of cigar smoke. Our pastor, Father Leo, was not a man to smile, and his priests took the cue that a stern face and stern penances in the confessional booth were needed to keep these uneducated masses in check.

The best boys from each eighth-grade class were encouraged to be priests, the highest calling. Not me. My report cards read a steady stream of A's and B's in academic subjects and consistent D's in "cooperation," "dependability," "industriousness," and that seminal virtue of virtues, "guidance of action by reason." "I am very disappointed in Paul's work and in his attitude. He makes no effort to improve" were the damning words on the bottom of one report card.

Each morning in our parish church, a place suffused with an otherworldly ochre light, the holy smell of incense and burning beeswax candles enveloping us, I peered up to a priest (certainly not the likes of us!) reverently facing the altar, his stiff fiddleback chasuble properly keeping us from the mysteries that he alone could negotiate. He whispered in Latin to a God that surely was not the same God to whom I directed my prayers each night. I wanted to know this other God, this bigger, grander God, but for now I had to settle for my own. My God was a smaller God, gimlet-eyed, scrutinizing my every move.

"Please help me to sit still."

"Please don't let Jeanette Smolko write my name on the board when sister leaves."

"Please forgive me for kissing my cousin Nancy when we hid in that pile of coats on the bed last Thanksgiving."

"Give me something great to die for. Please!"

Our hymns were sung in the divine Latin, the Slovak of our native villages, and the English of America.

Stabat mater dolorosa
iuxta Crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat Filius.

S'nami Boh, s'nami Boh!
Razumejte jazyci
I pokarjajtesja, i pokarjajtesja
Jako s'nami Boh,
Jako s'nami Boh

Holy God, we praise thy name;
Lord of all, we bow before Thee.
All on earth thy scepter claim,
All in heav'n above adore Thee.
Infinite, thy vast domain,
Everlasting is thy reign;
Infinite, thy vast domain,
Everlasting is thy reign.

There were novenas, stations of the cross, Christmas pageants as we moved through the mandala of the church year. There was but a narrow gate to heaven. Because of our many hours of prayer and ritual each week, we would be granted entrance, while the weak-willed so-called Christians—what a sadly anemic word, I thought—and especially those stiff-necked Jews, would be turned aside to burn forever.

"Let us pray for heretics and schismatics . . . to call them back to our holy Mother the Catholic and Apostolic Church. . . . Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord our God tear the veil from their hearts. . . . Let us pray also for the pagans . . . May they give up their idols and be converted."