PREFACE

Sitting on the edge of the circular hole cut in the floor of the mighty four-engine British Halifax bomber, her legs dangling down as though she were a child perched on an adult's chair, Elżbieta Zawacka – nom-de-guerre 'Zo' – considered her likely fate.

A few weeks earlier she had scraped through parachute training at an airfield outside Manchester; her aching ankles were still tightly bandaged after a series of hard landings. Night drops were the hardest to master as distances were deceptive in the dark, and telegraph wires or even trees were often impossible to see until too late. Now, Zo risked a vertiginous glance down through the open hatch where her legs were taking the full force of the wind that also whipped around the hold space. Absolute darkness. It was almost two in the morning and, although there was a full moon, scudding clouds obscured the light. But if she couldn't see the depth below, Zo could feel it: hundreds of feet of emptiness. Gripping the reassuringly solid lip of the hatch, she felt the chill from the cold metal run up her arms.

Even if she survived the drop, Zo knew that the Gestapo were hunting for her in the towns and cities of occupied Poland below. Her younger sister, clever, sweet-natured Klara, had been arrested over a year earlier, and had not been seen since. Their brother Egon and cousin Leonard had both been transported to Auschwitz. Zo had no idea where her parents were but knew that, if the Gestapo had traced them, they would probably have faced brutal interrogation before imprisonment or execution. Yet having started the war digging anti-tank ditches and making petrol bombs to throw at enemy forces in the face of the Soviet advance, she was not about to give up on her hard-won mission because of Nazi German terror.

Somewhere beneath her, Zo knew, a large and defiant resistance movement was waiting for her return. Her dearest friend, courageous Marianna Zawodzińska, was probably also awake, coughing into the night as she worked out ciphers in her chilly Warsaw attic room. Zofia Franio, a qualified doctor, sometimes tended to Marianna, when not

busy with the all-female demolition units that were making such an impact across the country. Waiting most avidly, however, was Emilia Malessa, head of the foreign communications team with the Polish resistance 'Home Army'. As effortlessly elegant as she was ruthlessly efficient, Emilia had at first intimidated Zo, but years of shared clandestine endeavour had brought them close. Now Zo was bringing back new orders from the Polish prime minister and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, exiled in London, that would have a profound impact on all their lives.

Polish women were among the first to take up arms during the Second World War. While women in Britain volunteered on the home front, as land girls, office clerks, drivers and factory workers, releasing men for military service overseas, in Poland the 'home front' was, immediately, the frontline. Thousands of women rushed to the defence of their country, their homes and families, in response to the twin invasions from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1939. Many, like Zo, had years of military training. Others were defiant teenagers, young mothers, doctors, teachers and farm workers, even grandmothers who felt unable to witness the brutality of the latest occupation of their homeland without taking action.

Around 40,000 women would eventually be sworn in as members of the Polish Home Army, making it the largest resistance force in occupied Europe. Initially, they served in liaison, as messengers and couriers, as paramedics and in logistics; the day-to-day functioning of the early underground resistance would have been impossible without them. Soon it was hard to find any unit that did not include women. Whether gathering intelligence; publishing and circulating clandestine newsletters; smuggling weapons, information and money across borders; laying landmines or undertaking assassinations, women eventually made up one tenth of the Home Army.

The women's motivations, their training, false papers and weapons were largely the same as those of their male counterparts, and the risk they faced was just as fundamental. But female and male experience never entirely overlapped. Mainly volunteers, rather than conscripts, the women had no military status or rank, could not officially join armed units, and found themselves 'perceived as simple, ordinary,

modest, properly unnoticed', Zo noted.[4] Where the chauvinistic occupying forces were concerned, this myopia was an advantage that the women were quick to exploit. The lack of official recognition from their own authorities, however, held the women back. Zo, a born soldier, would have none of that. While serving your country, 'you have to fight,' she argued passionately, 'for women's rights.'[5]

Zo's Halifax banked sharply as it dropped altitude and air speed. Hours earlier, the Special Duties Squadron pilot had taken off from Bedfordshire and brought them over the North Sea, heading out to avoid German airspace. Over Denmark, they had been briefly caught in anti-aircraft artillery fire. With the extra fuel tanks for the return journey stored fore and aft, the Halifax was effectively a flying gasoline bomb. Zo had heard the repeated crack of the shelling over the roar of the engines and felt some of the fire hit the steel of the aircraft's wings, but there had been no significant damage. Turning to evade more flak, they had headed on to Sweden and then, over the Baltic, turned again to catch sight of the River Vistula, a ribbon of reflected light leading them inland to the drop zone, a forest glade some twenty miles from Warsaw.

'Ladies first,' Zo's fellow jumpers had said, courteous but curious about their comrade-in-arms.* Impatient to be back, and determined not to betray her nerves, Zo had not demurred. She had not even smiled at the men, although she felt a deep bond with them. Naturally serious, she simply nodded. Yet after over four hours spent huddled in the freezing fuselage, stiff and weighed down by her drop-suit overalls, heavy kit and the parachute strapped to her back, when it was time to go she had needed a hand to haul her up from her sitting position. Using the ropes and cables fixed inside the body of the aircraft, she had slowly edged forwards, carefully weighing each step as she clambered around the packages destined for the resistance below. The larger containers, metal barrels packed with guns, ammunition, explosives, medicine and radio sets, were waiting to follow from the bomb bay.

* Most accounts say Zo dropped first, but some place her as the second of the three to jump.

The two pistols Zo was so pleased with, a knife, flask, compass and a small tin with two cyanide pills were strapped into her drop-suit pockets, along with a spade with which to bury her suit and chute on landing. The suit belt was filled with dollars and reichsmarks. Underneath, she wore a heavy overcoat – not new, but thick and warm. It was already late September and the Polish nights were cold. Beneath this she had buttoned a woollen cardigan over a simple, navy-blue silk dress. There were cheap stockings stuffed into her coat pocket; she did not want to snag them on her bandages. Such dressings were not unusual, but this was the only time that a member of the Polish special force paratroopers, the *Cichociemni* or 'Silent Unseen', would parachute into occupied Europe wearing a dress, because Zo was the only female member of this elite force.* In Polish, this made her the only *Cichociemna*.

Through the hatch, Zo could suddenly see the light of torches laid out in an arrow on the ground below to mark the drop zone and show wind direction. She shivered. Moments later she was shaking with the cold and her own fear, and adrenaline. Once again she was struck by the apparent madness of plunging from relative safety into the abyss. Then she breathed in something of the Polish fields below; the smell of fallen leaves, earthy and damp, of cut potatoes and the dry stalks of grain already harvested. She smiled. The red light beside the hatch switched to green, the dispatcher shouted, 'Go!' and, automatically straightening her legs, Zo plunged into the night.

For a breathless second she fell like the condemned; abruptly, straight down and with no thought of landing. The sudden acceleration was shocking. Her whole body tensed, a defensive action that seemed to make her smaller, meaner – like a nut, tight and hard, falling from a tree. Like a bomb, released from a British bomb bay, pulled by her own weight, down towards Poland, in a condensed roar of sound, the wind now coming not from ahead, but from beneath her.

Seconds later, a violent jolt shot Zo's thoughts back to the present. Her static line, the umbilical cord attaching the cover of her parachute pack to the aircraft hold, had reached full length and yanked out her chute. Relief flooded through her as she heard the silk unfolding and her mad rush earthwards suddenly halted, as though she had been

* The literal translation of Cichociemni is quiet and shadowy or dark, but Silent Unseen is the usual term.

caught on a celestial peg. The Halifax's engines were already just a distant hum, and she could feel herself swaying gently in her harness. She savoured the moment. How miraculous to be at once still slowly falling through the Polish night, and yet also suspended. Only once would she later confess, to a fellow resistance soldier before an enemy engagement, that despite her previous three years of active service behind enemy lines, 'probably for the first time in her life, she had been afraid' when she had to drop from the Halifax.[6] Usually, she preferred to recall that, 'Nothing fell, you lay in the air', and, 'It is wonderful, to fly.'[7]

Knowing that she probably only had seconds before impact, Zo then set to work manipulating the cords of her chute so that she would face forwards, and trying to turn, as she had been taught, so that her side would hit the ground first and she would not break her legs on landing. Then, with shocking speed, the ground seemed to rise up to meet her.