

Chapter 1

The Seaside 1938

It was the summer of Munich. The grown-ups were more than usually irritable. There was talk of war. They muttered the word to each other in horror and disbelief. It was all because of Hitler. He had marched into Austria. Now he wanted Czechoslovakia as well. Mr Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, said we shouldn't get upset about Czechoslovakia because nobody really knew anything about it. It was a far-away country of little importance, he said. Well, *I* knew all about it. I collected stamps.

"I know all about Czechoslovakia, Daddy," I said to my father one morning in the lounge of our boarding house.

"What?" he said absently, eyes fixed on his *Daily Express*.

"I said I know all about Czechoslovakia," I repeated.

"I heard what you said. What are you talking about?" He rattled the pages in irritation without glancing at me.

"Well, you said yesterday that you heard Mr Chamberlain say that we shouldn't worry about Czechoslovakia because nobody ever heard of it. Well, I heard of it." I stared at him in triumph while he resentfully lowered the paper to his lap.

"What are you talking about?" he repeated. "What about Czechoslovakia? Why are you driving me *meshuggeh*, saying the same thing over and over?"

"Tell me what you know, *mein yingl*—my young one," broke in a nice old lady sitting in a sunny corner, clearly another Yiddish speaker. She was someone's *bubbeh*—granny—one of the guests that no one talked to, as though she were a child like me.

"Tell me what you know," she said smiling. "Remind me. I know about Czechoslovakia too. I remember when the whole place was called Czecky and Bohemia, Moravia and Slovenska." She seemed to enjoy sharing this with me.

"Well," I began, only half pleased, because it wasn't my father, but a stranger. "I've got all kinds of stamps from there which I stick in my album."

"Yes? And are they rare? Are they worth a lot?" she asked.

I screwed up my face, trying to think. This was a grown-up asking me a serious question. That was rare. "I don't know if they're worth a lot," I said, "but I like looking at them and arranging them. They've got nice colours and lots of interesting pictures on them."

My father snorted. "Catch him knowing what things are worth," he said.

The lady ignored him. "Tell me what pictures they show. Are they scenes of the countryside? I've probably been to them."

This was amazing. A real conversation. *With me!*