The oldest son of a Polish shoemaker, Victor had always been told that Jews were the source of problems in his hometown. But the real threat to his family would come from a boy who hated Poles almost as much as he hated Jews.

Few lives turn out as planned, but what boy, walking home with his friends after school, imagines he will spend the five years in a concentration camps?

What memories I now offer of my boyhood in Czempin, Poland, may be no more accurate, finally, than were our dreams of successful lives in a free homeland. In my memory, a harmonious light fills the town square near Father’s shoe shop across from the Catholic Church on Koscielna Street. In my dreams, I walk arm and arm with Kajetan Skrzypczynski, or Marys Adamski, the butcher’s son, or Zygmund Korbik, the baker’s boy. We all belonged to the Stefan Batory Boys’ Club, named after a former Polish king. If we walk south along Poznanskie Street, we would pass a small Jewish cemetery, then a larger German cemetery, and finally the Polish cemetery. While this separation of the people of Czempin did not begin at death, it would end in the deaths of millions of us.

If my friends and I were to walk west beneath the shadow of the Catholic Church’s tall steeple, we would pass the Kadler’s, a German family who owned a clothing store. Past the Protestant parish house a smaller triangular square had houses on two sides. On the third side was the small German Protestant church and next to that was a palace surrounded by a large park. The palace and the village behind it, Borowko, belonged to the Von Delas family, enormously wealthy German farmers who had lived there throughout the 159 years that Poznan Province was German territory.

When the Treaty of Versailles recreated the Polish state in 1918, Von Delas and perhaps 120 other ethnic Germans, the Kadlers among them, chose to remain in Czempin. Von Delas, a pompous man, nevertheless distributed meat from his farm to needy Poles during the severe winter of 1929 – 30, saving many. Even if we overlooked the disparity in wealth between Poles and Germans, we were aware of the derisive comments German farmers made about their less successful Polish neighbors. Many Germans believed conditions in Poland were evidence of an “Arian master race.” These theories were broadcast on the radio from Germany. But Czempin had deeper divisions that are now painful to recall. The boys of my memory only had to travel northeast from the main square along Dluga Street to the German primary school or northwest along Szeroka Street past the post office, past the Jewish synagogue to the Polish primary school to remember that we were not a people united. Indeed, I do not want to remember how my friends and I taunted the Jewish boy who attended this school with us.

My parents, Joseph and Jadwiga Kielich, were born in the 1890s, in Polish territory still under German occupation, so both spoke fluent German. Like many Polish men, Father had served in the German army during the World War I with such distinction he was awarded the Iron Cross. As the eldest boy, born on March 12, 1920, I worked in the shop after school selling the shoes we made by hand on Sundays. I often heard Mother or Father speaking German to customers and thought nothing of it. I never dreamed the divisions between German and Polish Christians would bring about my family’s ruin. For one thing, we were taught that Jews were the problem, that they were usurers and members of a secret organization. I don’t remember any organized violence against Jews before the war, although gangs of boys would harass them, and this sometimes ended violently. We taunted a Mr. Leberman, a Jewish merchant who lived near us on the square. I know the harm against Jews in pre-war Poland was greater than people will admit. While slogans against Jews intensified after Hitler come to power in Germany in 1933, by the end of 1938 the last Jewish family fled Czempin for central Poland, seeking safety from their Polish neighbors.
But times remained hard in Czempin even after the Jews were gone. That winter, men stood in the square all day long, hoping for work. The local road authority hired the unemployed to wield sledge hammers, breaking into gravel the stones farmers had dragged from the fields to the sides of country lanes the previous spring. Although they were paid by the cubic foot, the men would gather around small coke fires, warming their hands, their fingers exposed from their gloves to help them grip the stones. Their wives and mothers walked long distances to bring hot soup to them at midday. Germans ridiculed these work habits, calling the Polish Authority “polnische Wirtschaft,” referring to the overall Polish economy with a term also used to scold children for not cleaning up after themselves. Some Poles, impressed with the buoyant German economy, claimed they would welcome the Nazis, most distrusted of the Germans as much as they did us.

In Western Poland, with so many German speakers, we especially heard as threats Hitler’s demands for “Lebensraum,” or the “living space” the German people were said to need and to deserve. Indeed, Nazi Germany annexed German-speaking Austria in March 1938. None of the large western powers took action, clinging instead to the false hope Britain’s Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, offered in his agreement with Hitler. Chamberlain declared that there would be no war as long as the German-speaking area of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, was peacefully "returned" to Germany. We wondered if France and Britain would honor their agreement to go to war with Germany if we were invaded. Germany took the Sudetenland in September, 1938, and, as agreed, Western Europe did nothing, hoping Hitler would be satisfied. But no sooner was Czechoslovakia occupied than Hitler demanded a corridor through Poland to East Prussia. Young men my age knew that Europe would not remain peaceful long. Hitler boasted Germany could walk into Poznan without firing a shot. He claimed the Wehrmacht would be welcomed into “der Wartegau” or this “Eastern Province of the German Reich” by the “Auslandsdeutsche,” thereby bringing our German speaking neighbors “home,” although in this case the “home” would be fetched to them.

I never imagined the real threat to my family, not to mention my community, would be Czempin’s Hitler Youth leader, a German boy a few years older than I by the name of Kurt Kadler. I used to watch from the window of my father’s shop as this misfit would march around the square in his uniform. Even though he was alone, he acted superior to all he met. My friends and I tolerated Kadler, thinking him a nutcase. We didn’t realize that he saw our Boy Scout uniforms, which we had cherished from the age of eight, to be in opposition to his beloved Hitler Jugend.

Kadler had a particular reason to dislike me. In those days of scant money, many people bought goods on time. In Polish we called this "Kupic na krede.” People made promises, but some would not pay for weeks. At the time, it didn’t seem important that Hitler Jugend Kurt Kadler was one of many who had not paid his debt to my father. Several times as I bicycled around Czempin and the surrounding villages, I had stopped at Kadler’s home only to be told they did not have the money to pay. Kadler was deeply embarrassed by my knowledge of his family’s poverty. After the invasion, he would use his new found “Arian” status to have me arrested for failing to “surrender” my scout uniform.

1. Write three things from this reading that you think are important to know.

2. What divisions in Polish society are revealed in text? What different groups of people are there and how to they act and feel about one another?

3. Research the province of Poznan, Poland. What information can you find about its geopolitical history: how did politics change the national borders of the region? Before World War II, when was it part of Germany? When did it become part of Poland again? What country is it in now? How and when did it become part of that country?