Papa was captivated by the idea of building a house, and convinced my reluctant mother that having our own villa on the large property would be exactly what we all needed: a gregarious clan residence, combined with privacy for each family branch. Our house was going to be built of wood for healthy dry air, and covered with a copper roof. The brick foundations would be high to protect it from possible spring floods from the nearby meadows. It would have windows on three sides, a large veranda, and steps leading to an extensive garden that would link the individual family houses.

One of my early memories is the wooden framework of the house, as if it were the skeleton of a huge animal, which I would never see again, and could never accept that the silent wooden creature did not go away, but rather hid in the walls of the house. I remember workers compacting dry moss insulation into the outer walls, as if they were force feeding the skeletal beast, by then invisible. But the memory of a horrific event comes from the remote depths of my three-year old mind where descriptive speech had not quite formed:

I sit on a blanket in the front yard and stare at the setting sun on the horizon. Slowly a feeling of amazement comes over me, a growing sense of panic which has to find an outlet, so I start crying, sobbing and reaching out with emotion, while everybody -- starting with my nurse an ending with papa – runs around and tries to do what grownups do to appear sensible. Somebody decides that surely I have been bitten by ants, and the fact that there are no ants visible means that the ants must have crawled into my ears, and are biting and driving me into madness. Warm oil is quickly procured and poured into my ears while I go into orbit when they try to turn my head sideways.

How could I explain to my tormentors that I am watching the red disc of the sun as it is slowly sinking on the horizon, and none of those grownups has the sense to stop it in its unrelenting descent! Papa picks me up, hugs and cajoles me, and slowly I feel safe. Even today, when I see a sunset over the Pacific Ocean, I feel the need to protest against the sinking of the sun.

Our house was the world. A thick silvery foil with a diapered pattern covered the ceilings. A huge tile oven in the living room had a niche with bronze doors where the tea kettle hissed and whistled, another small door with a mica window revealed the dancing flames and the grey veil of ash of the burning logs. The wooden walls protested the temperature changes with creaks and groans. The intensely blue walls of my bedroom had the power to still thoughts and emotions, to quiet the heartbeat and induce sleep. The dining room walls were walnut-brown, as tradition demanded. All those colors, textures and sounds were like a nautilus shell – protecting and caressing me, surrounding me and everything else that I would later recall with love.

Outside the windows was the endless Mazovian plain covered with meadows, crisscrossed by drainage ditches, overgrown with tall grass and glistening buttercups in the spring, giant dandelions and sorrel in summer. In winter the snowy silence stretched comatose to the end of time marked by the distant purring forest. Closer to the house, clumps of willows swung in rhythm with the wind, almost airborne, beneath the flocks of wild geese and ducks soaring across the sky in perfect formation.

In the spring this winged fleet would descend noisily on the ditches and canals to gorge themselves on the fish, snails, frogs and other delicacies that inhabited these waters. In summer my older cousins and uncles from our compound would disappear after breakfast into the wilderness all around us and return in the evening with a catch of crayfish and tales of bobcats hunting for pikes. In the evening a procession of us children, banging on our enamel milk cans would march with the nanny to the nearby dairy farm and await the return of the cows from the pasture. We inhaled the scent of fresh hay and the earthy smell of manure in the murky barn. We would observe the languid manner of the animals and absorb the milking process with a mix of disgust and longing.

One day in winter, when I was four years old, the drainage ditch froze and the snow covered it with a smooth blanket that looked like the white lamb fur coat I was wearing. The snowy plain was shimmering in the sun as far as the eye could see. As I was waiting for my nanny to take me for a walk, I descended from the bridge over the drainage ditch to touch the snow and compare it with my fluffy fur coat. Suddenly the new ice gave in and I found myself in the icy water up to my chin. Surprised rather than scared, I stood there, stunned. It did not occur to me to call for help. I remember the heaviness of my garments and the effort to stay on my tippie-toes on the slick slime at the bottom. Luckily, my uncle Tadek noticed me and pulled me out. He probably saved my life.