

Recollections from the time of the German Occupation

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Preface

The First International Conference to honor those who saved Jews during the Holocaust, under the slogan: “Can indifference kill?” inspired us to write our perils (Janusz and Krystyn Wlodek and 2 year old boy – Jurek (Gerald) Kaiser) during the German occupation. The conference took place in Warsaw during July 5-7. We were invited as “The Righteous among the Nations.” All our expenses were paid by Jerzy Kaiser – the one that was saved by the family.

There, from all the speeches, reports, readings and discussions, we learned much more about the Jewish tragedy and some Polish families during the German occupation. For us, beside the conference, this was an occasion to see Jurek again. Our first meeting was in 1985, an unforgettable experience.

Our recollections go back to 1939, when we spent a wonderful vacation with our mother. July was exceptional hot that year. Together with mother we went to visit our grandparents (mother’s parents) who lived in Trembowla, not far from Lwow. Though the trip was tiresome there were many attractions on the way. The reception, after a few years of separation, was very warm. Some even shed tears of happiness. Our stay in Trembowla was spent on different excursions, we were pampered. We were disappointed when our vacation was cut short. The reason was the political atmosphere, about which grandfather and mother often spoke. The departure was sad, there were tears and fear that we will never see each other again. As it later turned out our fears were valid. That was the last time our mother saw her parents, and we our grandfather.

For us children (9 and 7) the big excitement was the trip back not just by a plain train but on a “lux-torpedo.” At the beautiful station in Lwow, our uncle Miczynski was waiting for us in his white auto “Skoda.” In those days only well to do people had a car. The Miczynskis lived in a very comfortable house. Aunt Zosia Miczynska was my mother’s sister. Uncle Stefan was an architect in Lwow. They had two daughters: Ewa (12 years) and Danusia (10 years). Our cousins were very friendly and were trying to make our visit pleasant. Mother was familiar with Lwow, she used to study there. Therefore she wanted

for us to see everything in that beautiful city. What we remember best about that visit is the cemetery “Orlat Lwowskich” and “Panorama Raclawicka.” Part of the panorama was my uncle’s project. Despite the pleasantly spent days one could feel the tension and anxiety. In the conversations you could often hear: Danzig, Germany, war. That was in part a reason for our early departure. After warm farewells we left Lwow. In the middle of August we were back home where our father was awaiting us. As a director of the school he had to remain there during the renovation and could not take a vacation.

We resided in quite a large village, in the Kielce area, by the name of Wegleszyn in the Jedrzejow region. Wegleszyn is located between a small town Malogoszcz at the north and Maglowice and Jedrzejow at the south. On a clear day you can see the mountains and forests. During the war many partisans gathered in the forest. We resided in the school building in a 3 room and kitchen apartment. Two other families of teachers resided there as well. This was a 7 grade elementary school. My father was the director and my mother was a teacher.

After our return we had plenty to share with our classmates. Our dog Reks was the happiest of all that we returned. Father told us that he missed us while we were gone. Reks was a large hunting dog; he went hunting with father and other hunters. With us he could play for hours and he followed us around everywhere.

Though the atmosphere was tense and something “was hanging in the air” the invasion on September 1 was a surprise and a tragedy. There was panic; people did not know what to do, how to think, how to react. The more sensible, including my father, advised to remain in the homes and wait till the situation will become normal. Some, however, influenced by fear or rumors about murder and deportations, started to pack up their belongings and leave to a safer place. The biggest fear was that the Germans will deport the “intelligentsia” and shoot them. Despite all this father decided to stay and protect the school. Mother, however, was to hide with us in some dense forest, named Dzieraznia.

The situation was almost tragic; we had no way of transportation. Father begged the local priest, Kapuscinski, to let us use his horses and wagon. We traveled during the night using the side roads, and we heard the roar of planes , not knowing if they are German or Polish. From the main highway between Jedrzejow and Kielce came the roar of heavy trucks and motorcycles which made the situation even more threatening. We finally reached our destination. The scene seemed grotesque. To every tree was tied up a cow, goat, horse or even a pig. And stray dogs were running around. The people stayed on their wagons or were hiding under trees or bushes. People did not realize that they were creating a perfect point to be hit by the German planes. Luckily the weather was warm and after a few days together the people became united. The children were given fresh milk and the people were sharing their food. One day we lived through a frightening moment. One of the German planes circled low above the trees, we all fell to the ground.

After circling a few times he left, he was probably looking for military gatherings, but we still remained on the ground.

One day father sent a messenger that it was time to return. That there is no sense to remain in the woods. The Germans have occupied the area, but it is quiet. But to return during the night in small groups; not to be noticed by the Germans. When we returned we found out that there were people who were stealing from the families in hiding. Life somewhat returned to normal. By the end of October studies resumed at schools, but were under the supervision of the occupying authority.

Christmas in 1939 was not the same. Many families were awaiting their dear ones who were mobilized to fight in the war. There were families who were notified that their dear ones had died fighting the war.

The Germans imposed stricter rules of deliveries of food to them which made life much harder. Food staples like bread, sugar, flour, meat was getting more expensive, but the teachers' salary was reduced. Later ration cards were issued. One could not survive just from the cards. Everyone hoped that England and France will declare war on Germany and by the spring the war would be over. Our neighbors came over and strongly believed so. Unfortunately they were wrong.

The Germans kept taking over more territories. The terror in Poland kept spreading. All kind of orders went out. Everyone had to turn in their radios. Those who would not turn in the radio were faced with deportation to a concentration camp or death. Orders went out to darken the windows.

The most restrictions were against the Jews. They had to wear a white arm band embroidered with the Star of David. They were not to leave the house between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Any minor thing was a matter of life or death. Despite all those rigorous orders, our father, who was a mathematics and physics teacher, together with a friend, Aleksander Kurowski, also a teacher, assembled a radio from old parts to which several earphones could be attached so several people could listen. In the evening a few of trusted friends got together in the school attic and listened to broadcasts from London in Polish. My mother was very much concerned, but this was the only way to get news about Poland and the world. We got news from the neighboring area about deportation and killing for any minor things. People arrived from the neighboring cities bringing valuable items in exchange for some food. We received a goat from a neighbor and soon she had two baby goats. Mother bought two rabbits and few chickens and soon we had a household. For the two of us this was an additional chore. We had to provide food for the animals, but the biggest burden was on mother. Beside work in school she had to take care of the household. She was not used to such work, because before the war she had a housekeeper.

Despite all this she often found time in the evening to read to us about historical events, which at the time was not allowed. Terror raged, especially directed at Jews. In 1941-1942 ghettos were established. Jews were deported to concentration camps. This created resistance. Groups of partisans formed. In our village there were several Jewish families. Our family was in close contact with them, especially with Ester and Abe Oglegorski, merchants.

Realizing that all Jews will be put in a ghetto or deported, Oglegorski often carried on confidential talks with our parents. After a while we realized that the talks had to do with hiding a 2 year old Jewish boy. The reasoning was that the child was small, good looking and did not have any Semitic features. In addition all in our family were brunettes. But the biggest fear was that the boy was circumcised.

We remember well the late spring evening in 1942, when we were visited by a young couple, elegantly dressed, holding a little boy. They seemed sad and nervous. The boy's name was Jurek, and his parents told him that they are going to his aunt, uncle and cousins Janusz and Krystyn. Jurek was a good-looking child. He had curly black hair, and spoke very well for his age. His parents taught him the prayers and how to cross himself. Also that this name was Jurek Staszewski.

His parents, with tears in their eyes, left while we were eating supper, trying to avoid an emotional parting. Jurek was convinced that his parents are leaving for a short time and will soon be back. After supper the child was put to bed and soon fell asleep. Though we were only 10 and 12 years old, our parents did not hide anything from us. We were told if someone asks about Jurek, to tell them that he is a cousin's son who is in camp and the father was taken by the Bolsheviks. Under no circumstances are we to reveal that Jurek was a Jew. Our job was to watch him all the time so he should not urinate in the presence of others.

During the first few days Jurek missed his parents and kept asking when they will return. We tried to keep him busy and after a while he stopped asking for them. Father arranged that somebody was always with him. And if he was left for an hour alone he always found something to play with. He never complained, always with a smile and was accepted by the local population as a member of our family. During our school vacation we took him with us to the forest to collect blueberries, mushrooms and nuts.

Life went on without any special disturbances, till one day we heard that they are going to deport all the Jews. The gendarmes were everywhere. There was now a larger population of Jews in this area. Relatives came in hope that it would be easier to survive the war here. The head of the hamlet got an order to get ready his horses and wagons. Entire families were loaded onto the trucks; they could only take a limited number of things. People were desperate, sad, not knowing what the future will bring. The hamlet's

population was also very sad. They were sorry for the Jews, some even with tears in their eyes.

The winter approached, snow fell. The best play was to slide down the hill. Jurek participated in all the games; also with the other children. Soon Christmas 1942 came. We spent the evenings making decorations for the tree. Jurek was also helping. It was hard for our parents to prepare for Christmas. In many houses there was no food, people were starving. The Germans confiscated everything they could lay their hands on. At night the partisans arrived, they also were hungry. The holidays were very meager, but the few presents under the tree made us happy.

Early in 1943 father somehow found out that his younger brother, Kazik, who in 1939 was in the military and was taken to a German prison, is free and is hiding at their sister's in Przelek. At the time this was the only good news. Father and two other teachers arranged to secretly teach students. For security they met each time in someone else's house. It was a great risk for the teachers and students. In addition the leader of the Peoples Army with Lieutenant Jaskolski decided to enlighten the opposition in the attic of the school. Mother was so worried. She did not sleep at night. Winter was almost over, and with the approach of spring everybody hoped that the situation would improve. Nothing changed, only the days were warmer. The news that reached us were not good. We heard about the arrest of the intelligentsia and mainly teachers. Father often did not sleep at home.

In the early spring 1943, after midnight someone lightly tapped on the window. It was father's brother: Uncle Kazik. Entered a slim, handsome man with black hair. After a heartfelt greeting he told us about his experience in the military. Uncle was second lieutenant in the artillery. Our family increased and so did the danger, and also the possibility of feeding everybody. Uncle came up with the idea of going fishing. He made tow fishing rods and almost daily he went fishing in the Nida River. Often when we had a day off he would take one of us. The fish helped in feeding the family. Uncle stayed with us for two weeks.

One day father was informed by a reliable person that the Germans will search our house that night. They were looking for Mr. Kurowski. He advised that all the men should not be present (father, uncle and Mr. Kurowski). That night, indeed, the gendarmes arrived. They banged at the door. Mother opened. They asked about Aleksander Kurowski (local school teacher and lieutenant) who also resided in our school. They searched his room, and since he was not there they asked about father. Mother wanting to avoid the search of our apartment made up an excuse that the children are sick, they have typhus, and father went to look for some medication. The Germans were afraid of that sickness. They were ready to leave in a hurry. Everything would have ended well, but uncle appeared in the doorway.

The Germans at once pointed their guns at him, ordered him to raise his arms, and searched him. They only found a false key and a document. They handcuffed him and put him in their car. None of mother's or his explanations helped. Mother told then that he is father's brother and is only visiting here. All this took place because uncle entered from the back of the house and did not notice the car up front. His hearing was also impaired, after the explosion of a bomb on the front; otherwise he would have heard the German loud voices. After some time we found out that he was deported to Auschwitz. That name had for many only one meaning – death. We sent packages to uncle several times to camp. After his arrest father and Mr. Kurowski avoided returning home for a long time. The Germans and the police kept asking about them.

In the second half of May, Wincenty Lysek came running to the school saying that several trucks loaded with Germans entered the village and are rounding up people. There was a panic among the teachers and students. Many ran out the side doors. Mother came for us and took us home. We were very scared. It affected even Jurek, he started to cry and shaking from fear he hid under the table. Mother hugged him and kissed him. He stopped crying and fell asleep in mother's arms. As it turned out that was the last time Mother and Jurek were together. We were still shaking from fear, but mother left us with sleeping Jurek and went out to our neighbor Lysek to find out if father managed to escape. Soon after she left the Germans came in yelling. Then they searched the entire apartment and as they were leaving mother entered. She explained that she is a teacher and the wife of the director of the school. The Germans again yelling something took our resisting mother to the car and drove off. That was the last time we saw our mother.

We later found out from Lysek what led to mother's arrest. During the round-up the Germans arrested a firefighter (as a rule the firefighters were not sent to Germany) he said that the commandant of the firefighters, Siekanski, can verify this. Siekanski was the husband of a school teacher. The Germans at once went to his house. They noticed that Siekanski and his son (our age) is running toward the nearest forest. They shot after them but did not hit them. The wife remained in the apartment. During the search of the apartment they found the hidden radio. Enraged, they arrested her at once. Then they entered the school looking for father. They were convinced that the director of the school must have known about the radio. That took place when mother left us alone; Lysek told us that he wanted to detain her knowing that the Germans were in our home. But she worried about us and would not listen to Lysek and returned to us where she was arrested.

The next victims were a Jewish couple and their 4 year old son. They were hiding in the basement of the Siekanski's. When they heard the yelling in German and the shots they thought that the Germans have discovered their hiding place and they wanted to run away in a hurry. The Germans noticed them and shot them all. The head of the village was ordered to bury them in the forest, and the Germans left the village.

All this created a shock and panic in the village. Not mentioning that we were left all alone in the entire school building with little Jurek. We were advised to run away because the policeman said that the Chief of the Gestapo from Jedrzejow was coming to the village – the entire area was in fear. No one knew that Jurek was a Jew. We were told that we could be shot because the Germans will not believe that our parents did not know about the radio and about hiding Jews. We, together with Jurek were either praying or just waiting to see what will happen. No one from the village dared to come to our home. At dusk a black car entered the school yard with three gendarmes and a policeman. They came to us. The policeman served as a translator, he asked where father was. We told them that mother and father were taken by the Germans. They knew well that they only arrested mother and father got away. When they entered the room they found Jurek crying under father's desk. He said to them in Polish, "I will shoot you." The Gestapo asked what he said. I do not know what the policeman told him, but he burst our laughing. They searched every corner, opened every drawer. They left, taking all valuables.

For a long time we could not believe that it is over. Only when the roar of the engine died did we realize that we survived. At some time a neighbor and his daughter appeared, they looked at us like we were ghosts. The entire village believed that they would not leave us alive. After we calmed down, Jurek recalled that we had not eaten since the previous day. Lysek's daughter brought a piece of bread, roll, milk and butter. We consumed everything in a hurry. We were tired and exhausted and soon fell asleep.

The next morning we were awakened by knock on the window. It was a friend of ours, a few years older, Leszek. He was Mr. Jaskolski's son. His mother sent over some food, there was even some kielbasa. After all this the school was closed, there was no one to teach. We heard some rumors that our mother and her friend are in prison in Kielce. We still hoped that maybe they will release her. But the fact that beside the radio they were also hiding Jews resulted in their transfer to Auschwitz.

The news reached us in the second half of June 1943. It was very sad news for us because everyone knew that not many people return from that camp. At the same time father did not show up at home, afraid of being arrested. So we were left all alone. The situation kept getting worse. Slowly our provisions were exhausted. From our inventory only one goat was left which soon died. The peoples' interest in us dwindled. They were afraid to visit us. We were 10 and 12 years old. All the household responsibilities were on us; also to obtain some food. We were hiring ourselves out either to feed the cows or help in the fields. It hurt Jurek the most because he had to be locked in the house. For our work we did not get much, some bread and butter, milk, and sometimes some eggs. Seldom was there enough food. We went often to sleep early, not to think about hunger.

Once father appeared; we were overjoyed. He came at night (because of safety and did not want that Jurek should see him, we kept telling him that father was taken with mother by the Germans). Father gave us some food and money; that was when he found out that

the Germans took all our family valuables. He then said something which to this day I have not forgotten, "CHILDREN, WE BECAME BEGGARS."

During our lengthy conversation he tried to comfort us, give us courage and hope. After about two hours he said goodbye and left while it was still dark. Beside father the Lysek family was helping us from time to time: Jozef and Wincenty, and twice members from the opposition party. But the situation was hard. We had to work for the landowners, and also watch Jurek, do the washing and cooking. The worst was that we started having stomach problems. We had to walk 4 km to the nearest pharmacy where we got some drugs that saved us.

Despite watching Jurek all the time he sometimes managed to get out and play with other children. The summer has passed, and in the beginning of fall happened what we and father were afraid of. At the end, it was recognized that Jurek was a Jew. A trusted person let us know about it. Father was also informed.

Father came at night, very upset and told that he will decide in the next few days what to do about Jurek. He told us to watch him and not to leave him alone. We avoided contact with people and play with our friends. Jozef Lysek came to warn us that more people are aware that Jurek is a Jew and are talking about it. He convinced us that we must take some steps to avoid disaster for us and other people. He offered to help. He and father came at night with a wagon to take Jurek. We packed all his things and woke him up, and dressed him. We were hiding from him our tears. We told him that he is going to another of his aunts. Wrapped in a blanket we put him in the wagon. We were not informed where they were taking him. Father told us that he will be in good hands and well cared for. After some time father revealed the secret, that Jurek was with our aunt, his sister, in the village Przylek.

We were left alone. We were crying for several days. We told everyone that because of our situation, Jurek was taken by his father's family. Jurek left just in time. The Germans nominated a new school director, Schabowski. He and his family were to take over our apartment. We had three days to move out. We were left without a roof over our heads. Jozef Lysek took us to his small apartment. We took only the most necessary things. The furniture and many other things we left in the apartment because there was no place where to put them. In addition we received news that Uncle Kazik died in Auschwitz of typhus. The news was dreadful, knowing that mother was also there.

We started a new life with the Lysek family who consisted of Mr. Lysek, his wife and their seventeen year old daughter. They treated us like family. But like all the boys in the village, we had to get up very early, do our chores in the fields, feed the cows and help out with the household. Though the school was reopened, we did not attend. With father's and some neighbors' help we managed to send every other week a package to mother in

Auschwitz. Often we had to carry the package to the post office which was about 4 km away.

From time to time a letter arrived at the Lyseks from mother. For security, she did not ask about father, but asked about our health and told us not to worry, that some day we will be together again. She asked to send her onions and garlic. With father we met now more often, we even spent Christmas together at the Lyseks.

The year was 1944. The situation for the Germans worsened on each front. Our hope was that the war will soon end and mother will return. But it was not to be. By the end of March we received the horrible news that mother died of typhus, (all the announcements from Auschwitz sound the same: "died of typhus."). Father and we went through a terrible time. Even the people in the village were crying, because she was liked by everyone. It took us a long time to recover from the shock.

In the second part of 1944 the Germans started to build fortifications in Brzegi about 30 km from here. They built antitank trenches. To do the work they took one person from each house. From our house they took the 17 year old daughter. The parents were devastated.

When they came to get her (Janusz was in the field) noticing the parents' anxiety, I volunteered to go instead of Hania. The father knowing German convinced the German that a 12 year old boy knowing how to handle horses will be more useful than a girl. The German agreed and I went off with him. The work was very hard and the food meager: bread with jam and black coffee, for dinner mostly soup from turnips. I worked there about 2 months. By the end of 1944 the partisans often committed acts of sabotage, even encounters with the Germans. Therefore the Germans rather came to the village during the day. It was known that the Red Army is advancing from the East. We spent Christmas feeling that the front is coming closer. We could hear the roar of the planes and the distant explosion of bombs. On the roads were columns of cars and German trucks.

Everyone was waiting for the Russians to take over without much fighting, to spare the villagers. And that happened. In the beginning of January in the early morning the Germans left in haste. And in the evening the Russian tanks entered. They spread out all through the village. They were everywhere. They took over apartments and some buildings. They were poorly dressed and hungry, and tired. They slept on the floor spread out with straw. Constantly motorized columns and marching soldiers were heading west. The winter was almost over. Everyone was delighted with the freedom, and the hope that the dear ones will soon return. We had mixed feelings, since we did not know what our future will be.

It was already spring 1945, when Jurek's mother, Mrs. Kaiser, arrived. She first went to the school where we used to live. She was told there that we live now with the Lyseks,

that our mother died in Auschwitz, and that our father is no longer the director of the school. She did not find out about her child's fate. Despondent, she found our address. We were not at home at the time. When we returned we found her asking Lysek all kind of questions, what took place during the last year? After our heartfelt greetings we realized that she already knew about our situation. For her, the most important news was that Jurek is alive, he is well, and that he is in a safe place (with our aunt in Przylek). She expressed her deep sympathy because we lost our mother. We also heard about her loss. Her husband was shot in camp. But she was very happy that at least her only child survived the harrows of the war. After a modest treat she said goodbye and left in a hurry anxious to get to Przylek and meet her son.

For some time we still lived with the Lysek family. At the start of the school year, September 1945, father returned as director of the school in Wegleszyn. At last we also returned to school. Unfortunately, it was not meant for us to live in peace. Before the organized referendum regarding the situation in Poland, father was arrested by the Security Agency. But this is another part of our lives!