

ZDZISŁAW GROT, WINCENY OSTROWSKI

DOCUMENTA OCCUPATIONIS TEUTONICAE

THE MEMORIES
OF YOUTHS FROM
WIELKOPOLSKA OF THE
GERMAN OCCUPATION
1939 – 1945

VOL. III



Instytut Zachodni
im. Zygmunta Wojciechowskiego

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**NATIONAL PROGRAMME
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANITIES**

Due to their tragic experience and impact, the years 1939-1945 became a clear watershed in the history of many nations. Therefore, despite the elapse of more than seven decades, memory about the war, the cold-blooded mass genocide, extermination and discriminatory treatment of millions of people is still very much alive. Equally vivid are the memories of the heroism of many people, their life-saving assistance, human solidarity and simple acts of kindness. Many tragic events have been recorded and described in a wide range of sources. Such sources include predominantly archive documents, collected and published memories and witness accounts acquired mainly in writing contest for the general public.

World War II literature abounds with memories and accounts of all kinds. The large number of memoirs appearing in Poland is not unusual, as similar writings can be found in other countries of Europe occupied in 1939-1945, albeit on a smaller scale. That difference in scale can be explained by Poland's strong tradition of diary keeping, as well as the unique nature of the experience that many people had during those cruel years, whose impact will always be felt and can never be forgotten. Often utterly tragic, the experience was powerfully expressed by committing it to paper.

The intention of those who inspired such writing, and the collection of memories and accounts, was to provide previously unknown insights and paint a more complete picture of Nazi Germany's policies and its human extermination and discrimination system, based on more than merely official documents.

Immediately upon the end of World War II, a campaign of collecting and partially publishing memories and accounts that reflected the experience and fates of Poles in 1939-1945 began in Poznań. In the years that followed, further efforts were made to the extent of the capacities available in the People's Republic of Poland. The outcome is certainly worthy of examination as, gathered over many years, the memories are of a documentary value that can hardly be overestimated.

Immediately after the Institute for Western Affairs was established, its staff mounted a massive effort to gather and publish accounts and journals, for which they deserve credit. As early as 1946, 90 accounts of school children of various lengths of wartime experience were included in Volume III of the *Documenta Occupationis Teutonicae* series published by the Institute.

In their *Introduction*, the editors wrote:

“The highly valuable initiative of recording accounts by school children was undertaken in the summer of 1945 by Karol Strzałkowski, Head of the Poznań School District. His project was well timed. The occupation had only just ended, giving students their first opportunity to express their feelings. It had been very rare to record one’s memories during the war, due to the grave danger involved. Generally, it was not until the German yoke was thrown off that one could freely express one’s pent up emotions. The students’ testimonies show clearly how deep some of those emotions ran.”

The published memories were preceded by two important, interesting and extensive introductions. One of them, entitled *Memories as documents* discussed and analysed the students’ experiences and the events they witnessed. The other used such memories to conduct a psychological and sociological analysis of the experience and spiritual transformations of children and youths during the war.

Further numerous, and precious initiatives to collect memories and diaries were launched in the second half of 1946 by the Institute for Western Affairs, acting jointly with the Poznań Society of the Friends of Sciences, the Polish Sociological Institute and later with the Wielkopolska Cultural Society, the Poznań Publishing House, the editorial teams of the *Głos Wielkopolski* broadsheet and the *Nurt* weekly, and the Poznań Station of Polish Radio, with the support of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes Against the Polish Nation. The organisation of writing contests, and the publishing of the contest submissions over the years did not proceed without difficulties. Inevitably, censors intervened. Funding for the publication of the materials gathered often ran dry.

The aim behind these writing contests was to collect documentation on the wartime fates of individuals, and on the events they

witnessed or in which they participated. The resulting materials additionally formed the core of Section II (Memories and Journals) of the World War II Archive of the Institute for Western Affairs established in 1947. The achievements have since been seen as a major milestone in the effort to collect, if not publish, “real-time” accounts and unique documents concerning such events. Those involved in collecting, writing down and publishing the first post-war memories and accounts recognised the urgency of their endeavours.

In 1946, before the post-war campaigns commenced, the Institute for Western Affairs prepared and published special “Guidelines for the writers of reports on German occupation”. The journals compiled on the basis of such guidelines were to be submitted to the Institute. As it turned out, one could not count on having a large number of people spontaneously write such reports. What helped produce unexpectedly good outcomes was the drawing up, in 1946-1947, by the Institute’s staff, of a number of thematic questionnaires for contest participants. These concerned mainly:

- the situation of Polish workers during the German occupation;
- the history of Poznań during World War II and of the Główna camp for people to be expelled from Poznań and Wielkopolska;
- German ethnic policies in the Polish territories incorporated into the Third Reich;
- clandestine schooling and cultural and artistic activities in Wielkopolska during the occupation.

On the first of the above topics, a valuable initiative was proposed by prof. dr Władysław Rusiński, then Adjunct at the Faculty of Economic History of the University of Poznań. His contest for journals on the experience of Polish workers during the occupation received a massive response from the University’s students. Encouragement for participating in the contest came from professors Jan Rutkowski, Janusz Deresiewicz and Karol Marian Pospieszalski (Pospieszalski was the architect of the World War II Archive of the Institute for Western Affairs). This helped acquire many journals, which Prof. W. Rusiński then used in his book *Położenie robotników polskich w czasie wojny 1939-1945 na terenie Rzeszy i „obszarów wcielonych”*, (*The situation of Polish workers during the war*

of 1939-1945 in the Reich and the “incorporated territories”), Part I, published by the Institute for Western Affairs in 1950. The writing contests held from 1945 to 1948 added an estimated total of 400 memories, diaries and accounts to the collections of the Institute’s Archive. Only a few of them have ever been published.

The significance of this source for research into the German occupation was later appreciated by the above-mentioned research institutes, other institutions and editorial boards across Wielkopolska, which found it advisable to hold writing contests and gather further reports from school students, thereby shedding light on the dramatic experience of individuals and the martyrology of the entire Polish nation. From the methodological point of view, historical research can be helped greatly by relying on human memory as a historical source. Such reports can be invaluable for documenting events and civic attitudes in the realities of life during the occupation.

It is therefore worthwhile recalling some of the other contests held in Poznań starting in the late 1960s, after a break of many years, in an effort to obtain further reports and journals. The first of these was the 1969 writing contest for recollections of Wielkopolska residents from the years 1939-1945 under the general title: *Okupacyjne losy* [Occupation time fates]. The organisers also requested the authors to submit any documents they might have had together with their texts, the intention being to publish them once the contest winners were announced.

A particularly vivid and enduring mark in the memories of Wielkopolska inhabitants had been left by the mass expulsions to the General Government. Therefore, a year later, another writing contest was held for the memories, diaries, journals or accounts by either victims or witnesses, regarding, as it was phrased: “the operation of expelling the Polish population during the Nazi occupation from the Polish towns and villages administratively incorporated into the Third Reich”. The organisers requested “descriptions of the subsequent fates of the expellees”. The response exceeded all expectations. More than 240 submissions came in, predominantly from Wielkopolska, but also in relatively large numbers from other parts of Poland. The majority of the resulting material was published in

the 1976 book *Wysiedlenie i poniewierka 1939-1945. Wspomnienia Polaków wysiedlonych przez okupanta hitlerowskiego z ziem polskich „wcielonych” do Rzeszy* (*The expulsion and mistreatment in 1939-1945. Memories of Poles displaced by the Nazi occupier from the Polish territories “incorporated” into the Reich*).

Another contest, announced in 1972, was designed to obtain the diaries, memories, accounts and journals of Poles expelled by the German authorities and compelled to work in the Third Reich or other occupied countries. The material was expected to describe the fates of such individuals during and immediately after the war until their return to Poland. Note that the number of workers forced to work in the Reich during World War II was enormous. It involved more than 2,826,000 Polish residents (i.e. people who lived within its borders as of 1938), 700,000 of whom were transported to the incorporated territories. As one could expect, the contest provided many accounts, highly interesting and significant factual material, which was published in part in the 1976 book: *Z literą „P”, Polacy na robotach przymusowych w hitlerowskiej Rzeszy 1939-1945. Wspomnienia*. (*Marked with the letter “P”, Poles performing forced labour in Nazi Germany in 1939-1945. Memories*). As international negotiations began regarding damages for forced labourers in the Third Reich during World War II, their fates generated much interest in Polish society at large.

Four years later, in 1976, a call was issued for the submission of journals on “Daily life in occupied Wielkopolska”. The main aim of the organisers was to receive detailed descriptions of everyday life as experienced by Poles during the occupation.

As was rightfully noted in the Introduction: “The organisers had two aims. One was to obtain as many descriptions of the day-to-day horror of living under the occupation while the memories were fresh and before the passage of time would turn that reality into a blurry legend. The other was to modify and broaden the concept of heroism, extending its scope to include the lasting suffering of Wielkopolska residents, every day and every hour, with a determination inherited from their ancestors, who had earlier long resisted Germanic pressures; and granting Wielkopolska inhabitants a chance to vividly

express the other face of heroism, one that is less spectacular and evident but no less significant”.

The contest produced 95 large documented accounts, nearly half of which were published in the voluminous book *Z lat okupacji. Wspomnienia Wielkopolan o życiu codziennym 1939-1945 (From the time of the occupation. Memories of Wielkopolska residents on daily life in 1939-1945)*, selected and produced by Wojciech Jamroziak and Kazimierz Młynarz; Poznań 1983. Unfortunately, all track was lost of the contest submissions held by the Poznań Publishing House. It is regrettable that they were not forwarded to the Institute's Archive.

After Poland's political transformations in 1991, veterans' rights and damages were awarded to those children aged 15 or younger who, before their displacement from the territories incorporated into the General Government between the autumn of 1939 and March 1941, ended up placed in expellee camps with their parents. For political reasons, and due to the censorship in place until 1989, Poland did not address the deportations of Poles under the Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941, whose scale and timing were similar to the German expulsions. Only after 1989 did it become possible to speak and write of the particular torment suffered by Poles under the Soviet occupation. As the facts surfaced, increased interest was seen in the displacement of Poles during World War II. Further publicity of these issues came with the announcement of plans to form the Centre Against Expulsions by the Chairwoman of the Federation of Expellees in Germany.

The debates on the World War II expulsions, which continued into the 1990s, prompted the Institute for Western Affairs and the editorial office of *Gazeta Poznańska* to hold, in 2004, a contest for the memories of people expelled from Poznań to the General Government in 1939-1941. The contest produced 67 new memories and accounts, many accompanied with documents (photocopies) and photographs. None of them have ever been published due to a lack of funds. Nevertheless, they significantly enriched the archive holdings of the Institute for Western Affairs, whose memories, diaries and accounts section currently contains 734 separate items.

The value of memories, diaries and accounts as a historical source lies mainly in the great number of facts they contain that were not recorded in any other documents. As can easily be noticed, the sources of highest value are those written by the participants in the events described “while the memory was fresh”. Those collected years afterwards, and authored by people who were small children during the occupation need to be verified as, for obvious reasons, it is very difficult to assess their accuracy. These, however, are the difficulties always encountered in interpreting diary material. Nevertheless, the information they contain is always helpful in expanding the knowledge of Poland’s most recent history, which could otherwise be lost for ever. Such information comprises a significant record of a very important part of the history of the German occupation of Poland.

Maria Rutowska

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FOREWORD

What distinguishes Volume 3 of “*Documenta Occupationis Teutonicae*” from the preceding parts of the collection is the wide range of topics it tackles. Whereas Volumes 1 and 2 each address specific issues, such as the impoverishment of Polish workers or the crimes committed by the Germans in Warsaw, Volume 3 covers all aspects of life under the German occupation. It describes the events of September 1939, the deportations, forced labour in Germany, concentrations camps and more. The residents of Warsaw, Kraków, Lviv and Lublin were dispersed around the world. Wherever one travelled, there would always be people who had originated from every part of Poland. And that includes Wielkopolska.

The highly valuable initiative of recording accounts by school children was undertaken in the summer of 1945 by Karol Strzałkowski, Head of the Poznań School District. His project was well timed. The occupation had only just ended, giving the students their first opportunity to express their feelings. It was very rare to record one’s memories during the war, due to the grave danger involved. Generally, it was not until the German yoke was thrown off that one could freely express one’s pent up emotions. The students’ testimonies show clearly how deep some of those emotions ran.

It is up to the reader to assess the value of the documents gathered through the efforts of the Head of the School District. The outcomes have demonstrated that preserving the past by writing down memories is a worthy effort. This is precisely what the Institute for Western Affairs and the Poznań Society of the Friends of Sciences are doing by disseminating the memoir writing guidelines written by Prof. Jan Rutkowski and by gathering materials. One can only hope that “*The Memories of Wielkopolska Youths*” will provide encouragement in such endeavours.

Editors

MEMORIES AS DOCUMENTS

YOUTH MEMORIES AS A HISTORIC SOURCE

WRITTEN BY ZDZISŁAW GROT

The eventful and fateful years of the past war inevitably left its mark in a great number of records. These include official documents left behind by the fleeing enemy, or deposited in German archives, as well as personal writings comprised of correspondence, various accounts and diaries. The latter were authored not only by pre-eminent citizens or high-ranking politicians and military men, as was common in previous periods, but also by regular people of all positions, levels of education and age, who lived through significant events during the recent bloody war and who have a meaningful message to share.

For the first time in history, one can hear from children and adolescents speaking out on matters of public interest. Although there certainly have been memoirs featuring the experience of young people in previous periods, those were always penned by mature individuals and invariably reflected a mature way of thinking. Memoirs written by youngsters were very specific and only interested educators and psychologists but never historians as they were not considered to be a strictly historic source. It was not until the most recent events, whose sheer monstrosity was unprecedented in modern history, that adolescents and even children were drawn into public life and propelled to act. The events put an abrupt end to their childhoods, forcing them into adult life and driving them to mature early. "Being twelve", says Agnieszka Marciniakówna, one of the young memoir writers, a second-year student at Dąbrówka High School no. 2 in Poznań, "was a ticket to

becoming a first-rate labourer. Why should a Pole need to continue education? Educated or not, one would invariably end up being a labouring automaton whose opinions were never sought. I have seen twelve-year-old children who cracked stones on a ring road, hurrying towards a factory to start work at six in the morning or lugging heavy loads as child couriers. It was work from dawn to dusk, work for all. Schools and cultural entertainment were entirely beyond their grasp.” Young people took part in horrific personal and national tragedies alongside members of the older generations and suffered just as much.

The war experience of adolescents, which gave rise to a wealth of content and observations, would certainly have been forgotten had it not been recorded swiftly through the efforts of Polish schools undertaken as soon as the fighting was over. Students in all types of schools, regardless of age and background, were told to write down their wartime experience as a homework assignment. Their writings amounted to a massive body of material which, in the Poznań School District alone, added up to thousands of accounts, each with a powerful message. What makes the student memoirs even more valuable as a historic record is that they were not written with the intention of having them published, but rather as a confession of sorts and an expression of the pain that had long tormented the souls of their authors. The students responded to the task in different ways. Some were eager to share, stressing they needed an opportunity to express themselves in this manner. Others were more reluctant to disclose their pain and reveal their wounds.

The wartime accounts of young people are not uniform in either form or content. Some, especially those written by younger students, are short, many limited to a dozen or more lines, and strictly factual. Others, authored by older pupils, are more copious, running to twenty pages or longer, frequently written in more sophisticated style. The writings also differ in language, style and especially spelling mistakes. One can distinctly see the impact of being barred from education for an extended time. The works of the students who managed to continue their studies, especially in the General Government, are more correct. The writings by those who remained in

the Wielkopolska Region throughout the occupation period tend to be more deficient in form.

In terms of content, things are quite the opposite. One should note that in their stories the majority of the students focused on the most deeply felt moments which left permanent scars on their memories. These can be described as culminating points, the most dramatic moments. They include their own mental and physical anguish, the moments of capture and death of either a parent or a sibling, the loss of property, the wanderings and the deprivation.

Descriptions of such moments varied, depending on students' age and talent. Nevertheless, the predominant style is highly fragmented and focused entirely on the most moving experiences. Only on rare occasions were more complete accounts of the war years provided. This is quite understandable, considering the young age of the journal writers and the fairly limited format of the school composition. It is nevertheless fortunate that the diaries are not long-winded, but rather concise and pithy, which adds to their value as a historic source. In reference to the brevity of the writings, it should also be noted that the most concise of the texts came from students from the western parts of the Wielkopolska Region. The writings of young people from such eastern counties as Kalisz, Turek, Koło and Konin were significantly more elaborate and eloquent.

Further differences can be seen in the extent to which the writings became personal. Many of the younger students, whose wartime experience was not that excruciating, wrote general objective accounts. The more intense their experience, the more subjective their writings became. Such writings are more significant, suggestive, lively and vivid. This does not mean that the subjective tone was limited to personal and private issues. Some of the students were able to move beyond their personal tribulations and both grasp and sympathise with the distress of the nation. Some went even further and explored metaphysical matters. One can see the strengthening of religiousness and faith in God's omniscience. As if a modern version of messianism was born, which associated Poland with divine justice. One of the students (Marian Przykucki of St. Mary Magdalene Grammar School of Poznań) wondered about

this somewhat strange belief in Poland's ultimate victory at a time when the German violence was at its strongest. He had this to say about the issue: "My profound faith in the victory of the Allies was based mainly on God himself. I have always been confident that those who declare war on God are bound to fail. I have found evidence for this in history and this has strengthened my faith. We all know about the failures of the notions promoted by Nero, Decius and Diocletian. Christ always emerged as the ultimate winner. This time too, humanity was experiencing nothing other than history repeating itself." Although the writers have succeeded in capturing a substantial proportion of human desires and yearnings, their form remains rather unsophisticated.

In temporal terms, the students' diaries are limited to the years of the war, i.e. none of them refer to events that preceded or followed World War II. The first event that moved these young people and stuck in their memories was the breakout of the war and its immediate impact during that fateful September. This was a breakthrough event for the youngsters and one with which all of the accounts began. Some selected it as a starting point for their stories without giving it much thought or trying to fathom its significance. And no wonder. An event as momentous and complex as this could not possibly be explained even by contemporary adult authors of memoirs (perhaps with the exception of the best-informed heads of state and military men), certainly not by youngsters. What is more, the events were only the initial phase of the wartime drama and were not the most tragic. They were followed by far more sinister and gruesome days, which naturally pushed the actual start of the war into the background. As powerful as it was, the September experience was then subjugated to the events that followed, and which were far more horrendous. Thus, the depictions of these initial days are fairly pale in comparison, with their empty language, ostentation and criticism, all of which tend to be superficial and often pretentious. Very few valuable descriptions can be found among them. Some of them, however, which speak of the many trials of deportation and the heroic defence of Warsaw, are truly precious.

As one moves further in time, the memories become more profound and complete. The sight of Germans and their initial monstrosities made a lasting impression, especially the numerous arrests and executions witnessed by the young people and children who lost their fathers. A strong imprint in students' memories was also left by the vicious crackdown on Polishness, symbolised in Poznań by the tearing down of the Gratitude Monument, the removal of the Polish Eagle from the Town Hall tower and by the demolition of the Bolesław the Brave monument in Gniezno. Nazi flags flying over Poland's towns, large or small, the Germans' arrogance and the first signs of persecution of the Polish population all sparked protest, even if some such behaviour could be explained by the inherent harshness of war. A symptomatic example of young people's reaction to German violence, observed in the town of Słupca, was provided by Aleksandra M. of the Ursuline High School in Poznań. She wrote: "Suddenly, the door swung open with a bang and a seething German barged in with a picture of the Polish eagle in hand. "This is Poland!", he yelled and, shouting terrible insults, began to tear apart and trample down the eagle. Everyone was silent. Some gazed helplessly with tears in their eyes. Suddenly, a little boy of twelve or so cried out: "This is our class Eagle!" And before anyone could respond, he threw a stone at the German. I was appalled to watch the German catch the boy and shoot him dead before everyone's eyes, screaming: "This is what you get for insulting the German nation". This is how a heroic boy died for defending his class eagle."

Others, although more restrained, responded just as emotionally. "At the sight of a Nazi flag flying in the wind and Germans marching haughtily down a street – says Włodzimierz Kasprovicz, a student of Mary Magdalene High School – tears welled up in our eyes, we were overwhelmed with helpless rage and despair. We became bitter and eager for revenge." Zbigniew Posieczek, who attended the same Poznań high school, noted: "In this city, now said to have always been German, I am confronted with Nazi flags arrogantly filling every historic sight, which had always been our pride, which we held sacred. Oh! How despondent we are! I nevertheless

console myself that all this will pass. The Germans will be gone even faster than they appeared”.

This unwavering faith kept them going when times became a hundred times more gruesome.

November marked the launch of the deportation campaign. The removals were violent and vicious, unprecedented in their baseness. As such, they naturally attracted popular attention and left a permanent mark in human memory, especially as many of the witnesses were only just entering into the more mature stages of their lives. The deportations are mentioned in all of the narratives. Being local in scope, they were relatively easier to grasp than the complex national developments of war. This local impact made them more tangible. The memories were detailed and factual. They described the various manners of deportation and the response by the Polish community. The writers agreed that this initial phase of the war, which had a psychological impact, was a mere prelude to the more elaborate fiendish activities that were to follow! Nevertheless, the scenes that unfolded were truly Dantean in their horror. The accounts depict grim, frightful nights of anxious waiting, violent evictions of entire families with little children, babies, the elderly and the sick, miserable squalid barracks, systematic plundering, transports by cattle carriages to the General Government in the agonising cold, the leaving of the expelled to fend for themselves and the consequent widespread loss of life among the children and the elderly. No wonder that, before even more unspeakable methods of the enemy became known, the deported were made the martyrs for the national cause. They were pitied and helped generously. Those spared deportation considered themselves immensely fortunate. As many of the journals indicated, the ordeals that followed made many regret in hindsight that they too had not been expelled. After all, as monstrous as it was, the deportation was mainly a loss of property and livelihood, which is always easier to bear than physical or moral torment, which would soon be brought to bear upon every Pole, no matter where they lived, on a scale previously unknown to humanity.

There was another grave consequence to the deportation campaign that was of great significance to young people. What used

to be a single area was split into the two separate worlds of the Warthegau and the General Government. This development, which was crucial for the formation of the youngsters' world views, and for their wartime experience, was stated emphatically in their memories.

The deported young people stressed the distressing hardships they experienced in the days immediately following their arrival in unknown territory. Not all of them were welcomed, and not all found ways to sustain themselves, even though the local communities would for the most part show a great deal of kindness and generosity. At least they would help them to survive the unusually harsh winter and find ways to satisfy their basic needs. Without a doubt, the deported benefited from their command of German, which helped many of them find employment. Even during those early days of deportation, the young people began to attend clandestine schools, which were efficiently organised by Polish teachers at great personal sacrifice. The secret schooling became widespread and was commonly mentioned in student diaries by the younger and older writers alike. Their accounts of the fairly dangerous school meetings are understandably nostalgic. Some add a great deal of interesting details of high documentary value. Much attention in the school diaries was also given to German maltreatment of the Poles, such as the notorious manhunts and roundups designed to capture young people and commit them to forced labour in German factories and farms, if not concentration camps. Such maltreatment included detentions, prisoner torture, active involvement in underground resistance, and especially in the Warsaw Uprising, in which Polish youths gloriously made their names. Needless to say, just as with the September developments, the Warsaw events, of greater historic significance, could only be presented narrowly to the extent of the narrator's personal experience. Such narratives are, in fact, of greater value than attempts to judge matters of broader scope. As a matter of fact, the deported youngsters proved to be more involved in contemporary events, they experienced more and were more idealistic than their non-deported peers who ended up being more oppressed, who experienced the war in a more mundane fashion, and

who could only manifest their Polishness with passive disobedience or inner defiance.

Whatever is said, it should be made clear that the young people who remained in Wielkopolska had a much harder life during the occupation than those who ended up in the General Government. In Wielkopolska, the German footprint was stronger and life organised more strictly than in the wild realm of Hans Frank. There was no chance for education. The youngsters obliged to attend German schools all agreed that school was merely an additional place to abuse Poles, that it dulled the pupils' minds, forcing them to perform physical labour that was far too punishing for their age. The torment took many forms, many fell sick. And with little care at home from their parents, who worked 10 to 12 hours a day, the youngest Poles grew up to become real "simpletons".

The situation was accurately described by one of the authors, Stanisława Adamiakówna of the Dąbrówka High School in Poznań. She wrote: "Children under 12 lived like savages. Their parents had no time to take care of them. While their fathers and mothers were at work, the kids were raised in the streets. Many took charge of cleaning, cooking and shopping at home. They would occasionally attend schools to learn to read and write in German, and pick up some arithmetic. This was supposed to suffice. I was very sorry to see some of my friends' children who would show off their reading and writing skills in German, and who could not read a single sentence correctly in Polish. If I only had the strength and the time, there would not be such children among my acquaintances. But this was precisely what the occupier strived for – to ensure that no one had the time to raise and educate children."

Even the children themselves complained bitterly about their neglect and the anguish of school. Zbigniew Rogalski of Grammar School 16 in Poznań, wrote this at the age of 9: "As mummy worked all day, I did the shopping. Once in the streets, I was bullied by German boys who would throw stones at me, hit me and call me a Polish pig". His schoolmate Arkadiusz Richter, also 9, recollected: "I had to remain in the garden at all times. Whenever I stepped out into the street, I would be beaten and called a Polish bandit." A 9-year-

old girl by the name of Lucyna Berger, also from that school, adds: "I remember being tired once and sitting down on a bench. They beat me up for that, as the use of benches was supposed to be restricted to Germans only." "No one played in the street any more – says Bronisław Kromulski, a student of Grammar School 10 in Poznań, because the Germans would take away our bikes and balls. They wouldn't even leave us alone on the ice. We weren't even supposed to watch the Germans play, as they would jump on us and beat us up right "away". Kazimierz Józwiak, from the same school, recounts: "When I went swimming, members of the Hitler Youth tried to drown me, splattered mud on my clothes and enjoyed doing it, too." Children at school were called "Polish bandits" and beaten and abused regularly.

A brief but typical description of wartime schools was provided by Róża Ankowiakówna of All Saints' Grammar School in Poznań, who wrote: "Classes would usually last 1.5 hours. We were not allowed to speak Polish during our brief recesses. The German teachers often punished us with detentions and beatings for failing to pronounce German words or sentences correctly. We were hit with canes on our hands, heads and backs. One of the teachers beat us with a metal rod covered with leather. She said that using her hands on such wretched brats would be a waste."

A reasonable conclusion was made by Danuta Sobiejewska, a 5th year student of the Kobylin Grammar School: "Our recollections from the German schools were all bitter. We lost years of our lives without learning anything."

Relatively few children attended clandestine Polish instruction, which was very limited in scope. Such courses were also mentioned in the records, which are both precious and moving. At times, references were made to specific incidents. Other descriptions are more general. They concern psychological reactions, hunger for knowledge, and the difficulties and dangers that lurked every step of the way. They all stress that their time in such schools was unforgettable and most profound. Franciszka Sempńska, a student of Gen. Zamojska Grammar School, Poznań, wrote: "Myself and a few other girls would gather weekly to attend classes in Polish literature and

later in history. I will never forget how we fell in love with literature and all things Polish. I will never forget the thoughts this evoked, the yearnings, the exhilaration, the silver lining threaded through our otherwise tedious existence.”

Another student, Helena Matłoczanka of E. Sczaniecka Grammar School in Ostrów Wielkopolski, spoke of the difficulties they had to overcome in their studies: “Not to attract the Germans’ attention, we would gather less frequently and hold every class in a different building. We carried our most essential books and notepads in special bags, milk jugs or purses.”

The atmosphere during such classes was usually solemn. While a whole range of subjects were taught, the ones we were most anxious to learn were Polish history and literature. Some of the narratives mention reading the works of great Polish poets, which their authors found to be both relevant and moving. They read Norwid, Sienkiewicz and Kisielewski’s excellent book *Ziemia gromadzi prochy* (*The Earth Accumulates the Ashes*). They even studied old Polish chronicles and the document *Dagome Iudex* which, previously boring, then elevated their spirits.

Literature and music nights, sightseeing tours, secret holy masses and common prayers were also held, albeit on a small scale. They all left a lasting impression. Older attendees of the clandestine classes took care of the younger ones, who were just as eager to learn. Semplińska recollects how the children “gave up taking walks, swimming or playing on ice” to be able to benefit from the classes. “They showed great wisdom in their outlook on life. Although their Polish compositions were crawling with gross spelling mistakes, they struck one with their eerily sober approach.” By and large, the schooling saved the young people from becoming intellectually barren and emotionally savage, from desperation and even psychological breakdown. It directed their minds to a remote future showing them the true sense of life:

*As long as a drop of Polish blood flows in our veins,
As long as a fiery sabre shines in our hands,
Our whole country, this Piast town, will stand proud
The white eagle, the Polish nation, will prevail!*

Such words aroused lofty reflections and elation, as if taken from Joseph Conrad's novels.

Hard physical labour was yet another, even more intense way of wearing down and tormenting Polish youngsters. Although experienced by school children who worked hard during the summer break and the school year, it most acutely affected young people over 12. These were driven to work on farms and to perform even more arduous work in factories. Girls were subjected to extremely nasty and humiliating home service. Their descriptions of inhuman abuse, physical as well as mental, are woeful and downright shocking. They reveal the most monstrous oppression, probably not seen since the times of the Egyptian Thutmose and Ramesses, as well as the Assyrian Ashurnasirpal and Sargon. Transferred straight into the wartime was the incredible sadism and violence of the German landowners, village managers and factory supervisors. Mental and physical degenerates, often deformed dwarves resembling Quasimodo or Alberich, were sent on a special mission to torment Poles, and carried it out with utmost eagerness.

“The unit to which I was assigned – says Henryk Neldner, a fifth-year pupil at Bolesław the Brave Grammar School in Gniezno – was a Sudeten German, who hated Wielkopolska Poles with particular vengeance. This diminutive, scrawny man, a caricature of a person, had a particular penchant for punching and kicking others with his heavy iron-tipped soldier's boot. “One of the most abhorrent [foremen] – wrote Maria Jankowska, student of the first year of the Sacre Coeur Junior High School in Polska Wieś – was a hunch-backed cripple. His face was so unsightly that if anyone smiled in his presence, he thought he was being laughed at and hit that person cruelly on the head with a metal rod ... He was very vengeful.” This “damned creature” who repeated “du verfluchter polnischer Hund” as well as hundreds of other insults at every opportunity, derided everything Polish and mocked the “Polish God”, recollects Ireneusz Kamiński, from a Gniezno Junior High School, who worked at a Berlin factory. Under the supervision of such half-people, hard physical labour became even more taxing. Worked beyond endurance, famished and assaulted physically, the Poles turned into working automatons,

mere robots. Such experiences were emphatically reported by all the young authors who personally experienced such agony. The above-mentioned Henryk Neldner of Gniezno said: "Through trial and error, the Nazis pushed the Polish workers to the limits of efficiency... Every motion was mathematically calculated in keeping with the overriding principle that time is money... No mercy was shown to those unable to keep up with the standard. They were first sent to a local bunker and, if they still showed signs of resistance, graduated to another level of martyrdom, the notorious camp for Poles, the atrocious death factory of Żabikowo."

As the war continued, there was no end to the labour. If anything, it became even more unbearable towards the end of the war, when the workers were required to dig defensive, shooting and anti-tank ditches. This was the so called "Einsatz" or engagement. It brought with it new forms of maltreatment and abuse. These were no longer experienced with such hopelessness, as there was finally freedom in sight, a light at the end of a long tunnel. The *Einsatz* era has its own literature. Despite the hardship people endured, and the spiritual breakdowns they continued to suffer, being able to work outdoors, and the prospect of an imminent end to the war, inspired zest, humour, optimism and gallantry. The Polish spirit was reawakening.

Those who worked on Polish soil, no matter how hard, were consoled by the atmosphere of their country. They were lucky enough to be able to return to their homes and families after work. Those removed to foreign lands and reduced to a miserly life in labour camps were considerably worse off. They were gnawed at by nostalgia. Those who survived the camps and returned to tell the stories of their anguish, often say expressly: "We were not awakened by the sweet voice of our mother, but rather rudely shaken to our feet by guttural voices speaking a foreign language," says Alfons Mikołajczak of Bolesław the Brave Junior High School in Gniezno. Then, similarly to the Polish expellees in Siberia and America, grief and yearning was assuaged most effectively with Polish songs. Their almost miraculous power became manifest once again. The singing continued despite prohibitions, with carols and folk songs

being everyone's favourites. People would also dig up old, long forgotten emotional songs from the previous century, or write new ones that best fitted the circumstances. For instance, a nostalgic song intoned on the banks of the Rhine on the ruins of ancient Cologne is recounted in the memoirs of Alfons Mikołajczak. In it, sorrow was entrusted to a lakeside willow, with the words:

*I can't see my father and mother
I can't see my sister's smile,
I can't often smile myself
As I can't see my land.*

*Work here is tough,
And the food is so scarce;
Although little strength is left,
We are forced to work.*

There were more songs like this. Perhaps, compiled together, they will one day form a songbook, just like the songs of the Siberia exiles, with the most popular of them all being "I don't care what punishment may come."

Those days of sadness and nostalgia also inspired poetry. The rhymes were not sophisticated, or artistically refined but were certainly filled with suffering and genuine feeling. In a way, therefore, the poems are of documentary value, and should be seen as such. One such example is the poem by Zofia Stachowiakówna from Poznań's Klaudyna Potocka High School, created "at a machine, at a time of deepest sorrow." I felt there was a person standing next to me, says the author, consoling me with these words:

*You are weeping, child, you are weeping
You believe your star has set.
And tears, such sad tears roll down your cheeks,
Each as heavy as a pearl.*

This unearthly voice whispers on to the girl, exhausted from work, telling her to ease her pain, because although her star is shattered for now, a time will come when it shines bright again:

*I will soon go into the sky
To collect the pieces of your star
And may still make it whole
If you only keep your hope!*

This exile poetry, expressing truly painful emotions, should be preserved. After all, it not only healed the pain, but also saved young souls from destruction, helping them to serve Poland. Along with the songs, although perhaps not as commonly, this poetry played a key role.

There is not a single family in Poland that has not lost a loved one to the war. This loss of life was as hurtful to people's souls as their own suffering. The diaries mention it quite often. They describe in gruelling detail the violent scenes of arrest, followed by the yearning, the waiting for their return or for some news, in fear for their lives. The responses of children here differed distinctly from that of older youngsters. The children recollected the loss of their fathers or mothers in tears. Their grief is dismal. A girl from a Poznań grammar school wrote:

“It was 4:30 in the morning. Two pot-bellied Gestapo officers walked into our flat. They came to take daddy, told him to get dressed and walk with them. I will never forget the good byes! Our crying, that of my own, my two siblings, the oldest of whom is now 13, and my mum's did not impress the scoundrels. My dad left crying but confident, showing the pride of a Pole. We walked outside and saw a car in the street with two other Poles in it already. Dad was third. Mummy and the rest of us spent the whole day praying for daddy to come back.”

This tearful grieving of children can be contrasted with the powerful response from the older youths. In their case, tears were replaced with hatred and a desire for revenge.

This sinister chapter of the collective diary literature written by young people culminated in torment in prisons and interrogation chambers and the experience of concentration camps, to which young Poles were subjected regardless of their location. The infamous sites included Aleja Szucha and Pawiak in Warsaw, Monte-

lupich in Kraków, Soldier's House and Fort VII and Żabikowo in Poznań, as well as Majdanek, Treblinka, Auschwitz, Stutthof, Mauthausen, Gusen, Lübenau, Dachau, Ravensbrück, Linz, Oranienburg, Buchenwald, Belsen, Grossrosen. All these sites will for ever be remembered, not only in the history of Poland but also that of the world. The death camp accounts are the most gruesome chapter written by humanity – these agonising recollections are also the most distressing parts of the Polish journals. The student authors certainly did not shy away from this topic more than others. As realistic as they are, their descriptions are nevertheless restrained, as any reader can see. They did not resort to shallow generalisations or premature summaries, which older memoirs often do. The matter-of-fact portrayals of their own experience coming from the youngsters are now believed to be the most accurate accounts of camp life. How, after all, can one paint an overall picture after time spent on the brink of death, confined to a single block, or perhaps occasionally venturing into neighbouring ones?

Just like all other periods of anguish suffered by the nation, this one, too, ended in victory, which in this case was the victory of the Allied Forces. The time of liberation was experienced in a state of utter suspense. Feelings of joy were accompanied by the fear of being “finished off” by the Germans. The anxiety also concerned the results of the fighting. All these contradictions were expressed in the young people's accounts. The majority of them did not delve into deeper emotions. The most common accounts, such as those of September 1939, were very general and clichéd descriptions. Very rarely do they offer a specific scene that truly reflects reality, such as those of the fighting for the liberation of Poznań and for the Citadel there.

As in a kaleidoscope, the diaries of the young people capture all of the key events of the past war. The multitude of details they contain will without doubt one day help reconstruct the events from a proper historical perspective. Today, such recollections mainly form a stirring testament to the toughness of spirit, selflessness, sacrifice, patriotism, great moral strength, inner maturity, benevolence and even heroism of the young generation, as well as a painful

denunciation of an inhuman oppressor. This makes them somewhat one-sided. For these reasons, the accounts tend to stress the ominousness of their own circumstances and the overall situation, nearly always speaking of suffering and survival, and rarely of constructive work, which was also common, not only in the underground but also in education. Indeed, efforts were made in enterprise, as well as culture that deserve to be reflected in the diaries (especially those written by the older generation). Otherwise, posterity will think of us as weaklings.

Not surprisingly, any current assessments of the Germans may be found less than acceptable due to their being partial, perhaps even hysterical. One might note that, as is by all means theoretically correct, it is not possible to judge a whole nation with broad strokes, pegging everyone as an executioner without noticing the human side of the Germans. Perhaps, therefore, a clarification is in order. On the other hand, it may still be too early to pass any definitive judgements. It is certainly true that not all Germans were criminals. Many of them retained their humanity and refused to embrace the mad Nazi slogans and theories. Without going into the exact proportions of good and bad Germans, it is clear that the “good” Germans that remained were all silenced. They were terrorised and, just like the Poles, lived in fear of Nazi gendarmes and the Gestapo. As such, they were as good as absent. Besides, the majority of them remained in their homeland, where the tormentors of Poles received their special training. Only on rare occasions would a German ever display higher sentiments which, for all practical reasons, made little difference. Among a generation that suffered so much, the young people especially were deprived of their right to live, allowing for a distinct, albeit somewhat simplified image of the German executioner to be imprinted into their minds to the point where it could no longer be altered. A very accurate and thorough description of the Germans came from Leszek Cholewa, a fifth-year pupil from the Mary Magdalene Junior High School of Poznań, who said: “I have seen very few humane Germans during the war. The majority of them were executioners, abusers or pushovers who obediently followed orders. Even the Germans who acted humanely and

treated us as equals rarely spoke of lawlessness, or the harm that we suffered. Rather, they tried talking us into becoming Germans as well. I must admit that the most humane treatment I received from the Germans came from the retreating front-line soldiers. One could not find any fault in their behaviour. This, however, was only a rare exception from the general rule.”

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The large volume of the material supplied by schools of various levels and types in the Poznań School District and the space constraints in this publication have forced the editors to be highly selective. Their general intention was to account for the broadest possible scope of young people’s experiences. Therefore, it was with the utmost regret that they had to leave out accounts which repeated a specific type of experience or a specific event. The coverage of any specific phenomenon had to be limited to a single description. Only the most critical of experiences were allowed two or more reports for added emphasis.

Student memories are both a historic and a psychological resource. Both of these aspects were reflected in the selection. This notwithstanding, the ultimate structure of the book was governed by historical considerations, which were applied to group individual accounts. Hence, the coverage is incomplete and fragmentary at times, as the sections which do not contribute anything of substance have been deleted. Such deletions were made all the more liberally, to ensure that the collection comprised works by the greatest possible number of authors and was as representative as possible. The material was subdivided into 8 chapters with the following titles:

- September and early occupation (III)
- The deportations (IV)
- The General Government (V)
- Wartheland (VI)
- Foreign lands (VII)
- Prisons and camps (VIII)
- The liberation (IX)
- All events (X)

Within each chapter, every account has been assigned a unique number followed by the author's full name, town of origin and school. The assignments to schools and classes were made as of the school year 1945 (March to July). The same applies to the addresses^{*)}. For the most part, no notes were necessary in the text itself. Where required, especially with respect to geographical names, additional information was provided in footnotes. "The Memories" were left in their original wordings with editing limited to corrections of spelling and punctuation.

^{*)} Together with Dr. Grot and Dr. Ostrowski, the editors tried to supplement the details provided by the students with additional information obtained from school administrators, the students and their parents.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S RECOLLECTIONS
AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL DOCUMENT
BY WINCENY OSTROWSKI

The memories of Wielkopolska children and adolescents from the recent war form more than a mere record of facts and external events that unfolded in and around Wielkopolska during the period in question. They are also of psychological and sociological value, offering a glimpse into the souls of the present generation of Wielkopolska youth. They portray their perspectives, thoughts, judgments, feelings and acts at this time of great historical trial.

The large number of memories which made it possible to produce this publication, only a small fraction of which could be fitted into the prescribed format of the book, is sufficient to make some generalisations.

A clear account amidst the factual descriptions has been provided of the wartime experience and spiritual transformations of children and young people. Many of them share their own reflections.

There is hardly a trace of militarism in the moods expressed before the war and in the early weeks of the conflict.

Little children were caught completely unprepared for an enormous psychological challenge. Torn violently from their idyllic childhoods, they watched in wide-eyed amazement as the initial scenes of the war drama unfolded, astounded, failing to grasp the situation, fearfully demanding an explanation.

Teenagers had heard a thing or two about the possibility of a war breaking out. In fact, many welcomed it, some, who imagined it in their own peculiar manner, had secretly wanted it to happen. They must have realised that revealing that wish would brand them

as foolish in the eyes of their elders. However, for these people, the prospect of an extended holiday from school was sufficient reason to wish for a war. They expected it to bring incredible adventure and satisfy their curiosity. They thought they would witness romanticised heroic combat by Polish soldiers, or the quiet sacrifice of Samaritan women which would somehow get rewarded in the end...

The youngsters misunderstood the enormous threat faced by the nation.

The blows dealt to Poland by the armed invader, the bitter defeat of the armed forces whose fighting spirit was the source of so many hopes, the bombardment of towns and villages, the shooting of defenceless civilians, the murders of the country's best citizens, the deportations, the transports to camps, the corporal punishment and torture, the maltreatment and oppression, all made a powerful impression and profoundly affected the young people who were not only observers but, just like the adults, the target of the German wartime strategy.

Soon, forced to become cogs in the Third Reich's manufacturing machine, the youngsters had no choice but to go against their adolescent nature and turn into adults.

Young people looked at the invaders in bewilderment. The German way of thinking, emotions and actions were incomprehensible, diametrically different from the way they themselves were raised to think, feel and act. The notions of honour and respect for human dignity, freedom and the homeland, the love of their fellow man and truthfulness were no longer boring ideals taught in pre-war classrooms. During the war, against the bleak background of Germany spiritual nihilism, they took on a new significance, taking precedence over sports, social diversions, stamp collecting and the myriad other pursuits which preoccupied young people before the war. The blood of their murdered fathers and brothers added colour to these concepts, filling them with lively heart-felt meaning.

Therefore, for the young people, the victorious enemy was no longer the political one who defeated Poland militarily, taking away its sovereignty, which is how the youngsters imagined it at the start. They could have respected such an enemy, despite hating it.

However, this adversary was the enemy of mankind, the whole of humanity, an enemy of all that was beautiful, good and true. Its soldiers and clerks did not deserve to be referred to as soldiers and clerks but rather would more fittingly be called thugs, bullies, bandits, executioners, robbers, wrongdoers and scoundrels. They not only inspired hate (which is striking) but also fear, contempt and repulsion.

Having been chased, tracked down, enslaved, removed from home, famished, tortured in freezing temperatures, debilitated with back-breaking work, and locked in prisons and camps, the youth of Wielkopolska developed a strong faith in the supreme value of their own culture and its superiority over the German way of life, which they viewed and felt to be barbarian and often terrifyingly insane. In such tragic circumstances, they turned to and found psychological support in God as an eternal foundation for their ideals of goodness, beauty and truth. Such truth found its followers among young worshippers and martyrs who endured their sufferings, physical and moral, with dignity. The faith in the rightness of their cause was most commonly associated with a belief in ultimate victory and a triumph that would result from God's eternal justice. There is no conflict here with the hopes they pinned on the wisdom and power of the allies, whose airborne squadrons, bringing mayhem to hotbeds of evil and crime, were welcomed rapturously, often at the risk of their lives.

Despite the unforgiving conditions, young people engaged in a cultural battle against the barbarism of the Germans. They resorted to education, hoping it would bring help and comfort. Their dedication to their studies came from a desire not only to secure a better future in a liberated country, but also to escape intellectual stupor. Their key purpose was to strengthen their faith, and the faith of a downtrodden nation, by studying its history, poetry and philosophy. They looked for evidence that they were entitled to live and uphold the beliefs for which some would soon pay with their lives. Therefore, they began sifting through the history and literature of their homeland to confirm that their own feelings and actions fitted into the thinking, emotions and history of their nation.

No wonder that pride and a sense of personal dignity intertwined so harmoniously with national dignity and pride.

Those prevented from, or unable to draw consolation and reassurance from history, great poetry and philosophy, found inspiration in simple patriotic or folk songs which lifted up their hearts and straightened their backs. Souls filled with pain, yearning and hope, sang these songs in their own amateur ways.

The majority of the antagonisms that naturally result from differences of interests between the younger and more mature generations, disappeared. Youngsters were told to act in adult ways and forced to perform hard labour. Under such circumstances, young people tended to mature faster. The blows dealt to families harmonised the feelings of young and old, their hearts beating to a single rhythm in the face of doubt, sorrow, pain, despair and hope. Parents and older youngsters cared for young children. Even more frequently, the young saved adults from doom in murderous marches or crippling work. Youngsters comforted grownups, bringing consolation and hope for a brighter future to those weighed down by misery and misfortune.

It was not only family bonds that grew stronger. Young people showed their attachment, respect and admiration for the teachers who served the nation. The teachers, on whom they used to play pranks before the war, appeared to them in a whole new light. Never in the recollections of young people did we encounter criticism of the outlooks, judgements and actions of the older generation, be it parents or teachers. All youngsters viewed the actions of the old generation to be justified, despite the misfortune that befell the nation and themselves, robbing them of their youth. In fact, they would frequently display pride in the actions of their fathers and the heroism of their mothers during these trying times. The executed fathers, mothers and other heroes were considered to be role models whom the youngsters wished to emulate.

To the best of their ability, the young people made an effort to pursue their clandestine studies and educate their younger colleagues. To honour the heroes who were about to be executed, a terrified trembling girl mustered all of her willpower to overcome her

instinct to run from the heart-rending spectacle and forced herself to watch the ghastly execution. She believed that to run would be an act of desertion and to renounce her duty to pay homage to the heroes.

The young people's writings included in this publication were selected not so much by literary criteria but rather for their historic value. By and large, the memories are written in a dispassionate tone of level-headed narrative, with only feeble subjective notes coming through in the descriptions of their own experiences. Girls tended to be more expressive and emotional than boys, although even they remained strikingly calm and restrained. The authors appear to have used their words very sparingly. By keeping a large proportion of the events and experiences to themselves, they employed the sheer power of bare facts. Their composure and self-restraint could, in my view, have resulted from two factors. One of them is a certain psychological uniqueness of Wielkopolska's youngsters, which was noted by the teachers and confirmed by researchers. The other was their early maturity, which further reinforced their natural predispositions. This explains why the memories of young people from the eastern fringes of Wielkopolska are more "literary," and perhaps perceived by historians as less reliable compared to those written in western Wielkopolska, which only became subjective on relatively rare occasions.

A great deal more could be said but it is perhaps better to stop at this. One thing is certain: the reader will not be disappointed by the accounts. They will surely satisfy historians, educators, psychologists and politicians as well as literary scholars. It will be a rare person who will be able to read through the entire collection without shedding a tear, or feeling respect.

SEPTEMBER
AND EARLY OCCUPATION

*Zygmunt Dreżewski**born 23 January 1928 in Poznań**During the occupation, he was deported
from ul. Za Bramką in Poznań.**Currently: ul. Śniadeckich 19, Poznań**Student of St. Mary Magdalene High School of Poznań
Year 1c, accelerated track*

As I was securing the windows to comply with the air defence decree, my brother walked in and announced that the Germans had crossed the border and launched their offensive on Poland. I immediately turned on the radio and found that operations had begun at 3am and that the Polish military had been driven out of Częstochowa. Fierce fighting was reported in Silesia. This was no longer a fantasy – this was really happening. The war had begun. There was no telling what the future would hold. All was in God’s hands. Not everyone was aware of that. The city carried on its business as usual.

Suddenly, at noon, one could hear the whirring of engines. We saw aircraft flying very high. People raised their heads. “Its ours!”, they cried out. What a bitter surprise it was when bombs started falling on our heads. Only then did they understand. At that moment, everything went haywire. There was chaos in offices, the daily paper did not appear. There was general confusion.

A few minutes before 2pm came another raid. We ran to the shelters. This time more planes arrived. There was an occasional rumble of anti-aircraft artillery. Suddenly, a whizz, and another, and another ... Bombs came down and exploded. And then quiet again. The whirring faded into the distance. No trace of our fighter

planes. People came out of the basements to examine the damage. There was smoke in the air.

At 6pm a third strike. This one was the largest. You could hear the loud rumbling of bomber planes. Sirens are wailing over the radio. A raid is being announced. We rush again to our building's basement shelter. It is already crowded. Explosions resound. The first bombs come down. And again, one, two, three, an entire series. We listen anxiously. Then all of a sudden: bang, smash, a terrible noise, our heads are about to explode. Dust, windows get smashed. Everything seems to be caving in on our heads. This bomb must have hit our building. The impact threw us against the walls. Everyone screamed "gas!" and ran up to the higher floors. We reached the top floor and our apartment. It is a sorry sight. Shards of glass everywhere, window curtains shredded pathetically, doors and windows off their hinges. A scene of general devastation. A woman prays out loud. A grim view of burning buildings extends from the window. All this evokes horror and fear. There are huge plumes of smoke and dust everywhere, which we mistook for a gas leak.

Meanwhile, the raid is over. No one wants to stay in the apartment. We move to a public shelter which is already packed with people. Designed for 500, it now holds more than 2,000. But then it is always good to be together. Condensation is streaming down the walls. It's terribly stuffy. I look at people's faces. Pale, fear in their eyes, they hardly say a word. A continuous stream of the wounded coming in adds to the general mood of depression. The injured are carried in on stretchers by paramedics. They groan loudly. The crowd remains silent. A single word now and then, and then silence again. The rumbling of bombs resumes. Everyone wonders whether it is their house this time. From time to time, the glow of a burning building illuminates the sky.

This is how we spend the first night, and then two more. We walk around like zombies. We then reach a point where we no longer care. We are going home. I examine the damage. A bomb has hit the building's corner. There is a crater and a cracked wall – that's the effect. We were lucky. Once I reach the apartment, I throw myself on the bed fully dressed and sleep for 48 hours in a way I've nev-

er slept before. In the morning, I realise the night has been quiet. The streets are now crawling with troops. They are leaving the city. Something important must have occurred on the front line. What? We don't know. I go outside and pass some cigarettes out to the soldiers. Their faces are sad. No wonder. A retreat. Once the troops have left, we hear loud explosions – the bridges are being blown up. The enemy must be close. The night is grim.

Such were the first days of the war ...

Closing

Today, as I conclude this account of recent events, I understand that the sacrifice and dedication of Polish soldiers did not go to waste. They will always show us how to serve and to put our lives on the line for our homeland. I am grateful to our soldiers for the opportunity to attend a Polish school again, for seeing Polish flags flying and for having brought us freedom!!!

2

Teresa Szychówna

born 11 January 1931 in Poznań

Before the war, she resided at ul. Źródłana 19/32, Poznań.

Currently: ul. Szamotulska 21a/1, Poznań

Student of Grammar School XVI of Poznań, Year 6

I was eight when the Germans rudely invaded our beloved Poland. Despite my young age, I vividly remember being in town with my mum. As the Germans passed on bikes, in cars and in trucks, they spat on the Polish people. When we reached home, I was upset and kept asking mum: “Mum, who was that? Mum, why were they spitting? What were they saying? Where did they come from?” Mum explained that they were our enemies and that they spat because they hated us. “We hate them too”. It was a difficult time, I couldn't study, despite my normal zest for knowledge ...

Alona Włodarczakówna, Poznań

born 22 May 1932 in Poznań

Resided at ul. Marsz. Focha 149/4, Poznań

Currently: ul. Bieruta 45/1, Sopot

Student of Grammar School in Poznań, Year 6a

A few days before the terrifying war broke out, there was a lot of military traffic in Poznań. Everyone spoke of the inevitability of the war with Germany. On 27 August, P.K.O.[Powszechna Kasa Oszczędności] officials were ordered to evacuate their wives and children. Since my dad was a P.K.O. official, he sent us to Siedlce, east of Warsaw. Mum packed our bags and we set off on 28 August. Our journey was fine, even though crowds of people were leaving Poznań. We arrived in Siedlce on 30 August, the day the mobilisation was announced. There, too, was a lot of commotion and anxiety. On the day after, my uncle joined the army. We were left with no men in the house, as daddy was still in Poznań and my uncle was in the army. A few days went by in relative peace.

Then came 1 September, and the first bombing the following morning. It wasn't all that scary, and it continued for a few days until 48 German aircraft arrived at 8am on 7 September and a terrifying bombardment began. We were right in the centre of the city, where horrific scenes unfolded. There were no shelters there and so there were a lot of casualties. Our house was miraculously saved, but all around us there was just rubble and fires. During a short interruption a few hours later, we ran for the suburbs. We walked over debris and burning beams. Trees were also in flames. As soon as we had covered a short distance, pandemonium was unleashed again and continued until nightfall. The night was quiet, only we were suffocating from the smoke as the windows were broken. We only slept until 3 in the morning.

Mummy stepped onto the street to see what was going on. Some Polish soldiers advised us to leave town. They also helped us get a wagon which we took to the village of Pieróg. We fooled ourselves

that the place would be good and quiet, but not for long. The Germans soon got there and fired their machine guns at unarmed civilians. We feared they would drop incendiary bombs and burn down the entire village, whose roofs were covered with straw. We were terrified again and, at the break of dawn, went a kilometre out of the village and hid in a small wood with nothing to eat or drink. It was only in the evening that we returned to cook and have a meal. During the day, we heard the bombardment of nearby villages, at night we were kept awake by the rumble of artillery.

It took a gruelling 14 days for things to quieten down. The worst thing was that with the quiet came the Germans. At that, we realised we were under occupation. We cried terribly over this turn of events. Mummy told us then that things would get rough, but we still didn't realise the gravity of the situation. We returned to Poznań on 11 November. This was a distressing return. Our Polish city of Poznań was drowning in blood, decorated with red Nazi flags...

4

Wiesław Allery

born 2 May 1925 in Przybychowo, Municipality of Czarnków

During the occupation, deported to the General Government

Currently: Wójtostwo 17, Rogoźno Wlkp.

Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Wlkp.,

Year 2 of Junior High School

It was a beautiful September day, in 1939. On that day, the Nazi dictator ordered his forces to attack our homeland. On this day, remembered by the whole nation, I left my home and the tranquility of my garden, in which I had spent so many pleasurable moments. All this had to be left behind to avoid the upheaval of war.

What followed was a wearying flight. The first stop for me and my family was in the town of Inowrocław. On the following morning, a few kilometres from Inowrocław, we watched the first German

bombardment and saw its impact. We thought it wouldn't be too bad, especially that we, young people, romanticised war. Many of us undoubtedly thought of knights in armour, or wanted to see the uhlans wielding their sabres. I can no longer recall it all, but there is one thing that stuck in my mind: I was happy to hear that war had broken out.

The first three days looked like a hiking trip. On day four, however, a powerful air strike on fleeing civilians scared us to death. Since then, we moved at night and spent our days resting with our horses, which provided the only means of transport available to us. On the sixth night, we entered Warsaw. This same night, and the day that followed, Sunday 10 September, have left a vivid memory in my mind.

In Warsaw, in the middle of the night, our family got split up, but then providence reunited us. With a deafening roar, amidst dropping bombs and a hail of bullets, we ran across several streets covered with broken glass and over a bridge across the Wisła in an attempt to reach the Warsaw district of Praga. The German bombardments that day were indescribably heavy. At the point of exhaustion, people were disoriented. They didn't know whether they were dead or alive, or just dreaming. No words can express their distress.

In the evening, we all got out of Praga in one piece, riding in a cart among the smouldering ruins. On our way to Mińsk Mazowiecki, we spent the night in Wesola by Warsaw. On the following day, we got to the Glinianka estate near Mińsk Mazowiecki. Two days later, we tried to get through Mińsk but were turned around by a panicked crowd fleeing from the approaching Nazi forces. Our hearts raced when, on the following night, we heard voices speaking German outside our door and then saw four thugs walk into our apartment. They shone their flashlights and told us, all children at the time, to raise our hands. They then took our father. On the following day, they released him. Eight days later, the German military authority issued papers that told us to return home. We left the Glinianka estate on 22 September and reached our home a week later ...

Tadeusz Zborowski

born 1 January 1925 in Czekno, Municipality of Dubno

*During the occupation, he resided in Tłukawki,
Municipality of Oborniki.*

*Currently: Rogoźno Wielkopolskie – Wójtostwo
Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Wlkp.,
Year 3 of Junior High School*

All of the summer of 1939 passed in tense anticipation. Finally, on 1 September, I heard the terrifying word: war! It didn't take long for its effect to become evident. Crowds of refugees began streaming by on the following day. The day after, I joined them myself. I rode dazed, fearfully watching frantic crowds, fleeing as if from the black plague, whispering something apprehensively to one another.

I soon arrived in Wagrowiec. I curiously examined the ruins and charred remains of buildings damaged by air strikes. Some 200 meters away from me, a bridge was blown up. Wooden planks and stones flew into the air with tremendous force. The glow of fires could be seen all around us. The whole sky appeared as if covered in blood.

My heart sank and I rushed to Gniezno, the further away from these scary sights, the better. Even there, though, I failed to find peace and quiet. I saw hundreds of people lined up in front of offices and demanding to be issued arms. A small number of them toted old rifles and two cartridges. All the able-bodied people were hurrying to the positions in Kłęcko^{*)}. Even that didn't help. The gangsters^{**)}, as people called them, were approaching Gniezno. There was little choice but to leave the town, which was expected to be taken by 9.

Around noon, I got to Witkowo^{***)}, which was experiencing its own "judgement day." Civilian Nazi thugs were shooting at people

^{*)} Gniezno County.

^{**)} Made up of German colonisers.

^{***)} A town to the east of Gniezno.

from the nearby hills with machine guns. I made my way across the city and continued on towards Kutno. Then, all of a sudden, a column of German troops emerged 200 paces in front of me. It was obvious – we were cut off. The compelling question “What do I do?” pressed into my brain. There was no other choice but to turn around and head for home.

The way I imagined our future occupation was that we would carry on as usual, except that our rights would be curtailed. I later found out the hard way just how wrong I had been.

I turned around and set out on my way back to Gniezno. In the suburbs, I saw a Russian soldier surrounded by a bunch of Poles who listened with interest to a stream of lies. I continued on my way.

Before dusk, I stopped at a small village near Kłeczek. I entered the first farm I saw. Not a soul in the yard. Only in the most remote corner of the house did I find a weeping woman. I had hardly managed to ask her why she was crying before the news started hitting me like a ton of bricks. “Are you Polish? Hide quickly! The Germans are murdering people! A moment ago my husband and son were shot dead before my eyes.” I had no choice but to take the unfortunate woman’s advice and find safe shelter for the night. The day after, I got some directions and headed for Rogoźno across the fields. After being frisked repeatedly and numerous document checks, I finally made it home.

I hoped I would breathe easier then. Wrong again. There was terrible news coming from nearby. Murder and violence descended upon us. Every night, the sound of guns being fired reverberated from the nearby forests, terminating the lives of the finest of Poles.

On the third day following my return home, I saw six of them, one of them a cripple walking on a peg leg with a cane. Where are they taking them? Why? Must be to forced labour! They couldn’t possibly be killing the disabled! This, however, was the painful truth. Half an hour later, six shots rang out. On the following day, after several hours searching, I found a grave in between the pine trees, covered with bits of moss.

The first two weeks passed. In time, the police arrived, the shootings died down and the German's famous "order" was established. A swastika was put up in front of the presbytery. Passers-by were forced to take their caps off. Woe on those who failed to comply! The SS would invite them unceremoniously to an apartment and teach them a lesson with leather straps and fists. And this was not all. One was supposed to bow down before every member of the "master race" and get out of their way. In other words, not only were we deprived of all rights, we were also abused in the most wicked of ways. This is how the autumn and the winter went by ...

THE DEPORTATIONS

IV

1

Grażyna Remleinówna

born 6 June 1931 in Poznań

Student of Grammar School III, Year 6a

Moved to ul. Żwirki i Wigury 6/7, Gdynia

“Right there!” came a whisper.

That’s right! A small bus slowly emerged from the evening shadows. It stopped near a building. Three policemen stepped out. They headed for a tenement.

“They are coming for us!” called out mother in terror.

They quickly blacked out a window and started scurrying around. Someone was getting dressed, others made travel bundles, the children ran into the hallway, where they heard the footsteps of the policemen making their way up the stairs. The gate must have been left open as they walked through without knocking.

Then everyone sighed. The footsteps didn’t stop at their door and could soon be heard passing on. Everyone returned to the living room in silence and quietly sat down.

A moment later we could hear a loud sound of boots and fists pounding on the door of some other apartment. Shortly afterwards, we heard the voices of the people walking downstairs, the wailing of children and the voice of their mother trying to calm them down. Once they reached the ground floor, they shut the gate and then, a few minutes later, the family sitting in the living room heard the whir of a car driving away. This told them that another family had joined the ranks of the sufferers.

2

Regina Garyantasiewiczówna

born 5 May 1933 in Poznań

Currently: ul. Traugutta 23/7, Poznań

Student of Grammar School I in Poznań, Year 6

Although I was only six at the time, I remember distinctly the day on which we were transported to Radomsko. On a freezing De-

ember day, we were all lying in our beds when, suddenly, we heard a sudden, sharp and impatient ringing of a bell. We could not believe it when two German gendarmes told us to vacate our lovely apartment immediately and follow them. Where to? They wouldn't say. Father had to hand over all of his cash. They only left us 13 zlotys. Stripped of all our possessions, we were moved to the ul. Główna barracks by the Warta River. They put us behind bars there as common criminals. (Poor Romek was only two). We slept on straw, one person next to another. Even today, I can still hear the crying and complaining.

A week later, we were loaded like cattle onto box carriages and moved into the unknown. We continued on our way for two days, cold and famished. Tired and depressed, we finally stopped at a grim little station in Radomsko. On a dark night, we walked towards a new home, hoping finally to stop and rest. What a disappointment it was. The room was filthy and dark, like a cave. A sorry sight. Not a table, not even a bed. Romek and I slept on the floor, while dad tried to get some straw. These were tough days. The hunger and sub-zero temperatures tormented us continuously. Our only comfort was our hope that the war would soon end and that we would return to our home ...

3

Teresa Krupska

born 19 June 1932 in Poznań

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Limanowskiego 19, Radom.

Currently: ul. Św. Wawrzyńca 31/4

Student of Grammar School VI in Poznań, Year 5

... One winter night, mummy went to sleep early as she felt ill. Myself and my little sister, who was five, helped me wash the dishes after supper. Then we all lay down. Dad fell asleep, mum was still awake, as was I. Suddenly, someone banged on the door, mum rushed out of bed and approached it. She looked through the peephole and saw a gendarme and a civilian. They demanded that she open the

door! As soon as she did so, they ran in, turned on all the lights and told us to get out. A neighbour came by and helped us get dressed and pack. My sister and I cried hard, but that did not help. They stood over us and kept us from taking anything other than a quilt and a couple of pillows. We had to sneak all of that out, because whenever they saw we were moving something, they would order us to leave it.

As soon as everything was packed, we had to leave. The door was sealed and they walked us to the street where a bus was waiting. The bus took us to a barrack where we were searched and stripped of all of our money. We then went to another barrack. As soon as we walked in, we were struck by the stuffy air. It was terribly humid - water kept dripping on us from the ceiling. We spent for two weeks living on a scruffy bedding in the barrack.

When the two weeks were up, we were taken to the General Government. Once there, we were dropped off at a train station in the town of Radom. The temperatures were way below freezing.

My sister and I stood there waiting for dad to find a horse-drawn cab. While he was searching, a stranger came up and took us all into his place. We stayed there for two or three weeks. We then moved to another apartment and then another. We suffered extreme poverty. We had nothing to eat, we slept on floors as there were no beds either. My sister caught a terrible cold and came down with the croup. At some point, she had to go to a hospital where she underwent throat surgery and they put a tube in her throat. As that didn't help, she was sent off to Warsaw where she didn't survive very long – she died ...

4

Zenon Łakomy

born 31 May 1931 in Sebastianowo, Municipality of Śrem

Currently: ul. Niecała 8/2, Poznań

Student of State Mechanical High School I in Poznań, Year 1

The night of 18th January 1940 was terrible for me. The German Gestapo smashed our gate and entered the yard. They then knocked down the second gate and rang the doorbell. I was petrified.

47

After they walked into the apartment and turned on the lights, I saw five armed men wearing helmets and green uniforms. The German Gestapo told us to leave the apartment within fifteen minutes. Daddy wasn't home then as he was at work. Mum and I struggled to pack. On leaving our home, mum asked the Gestapo officers to wait for dad to come home from work.

One of them threw us out of the apartment. I thought that the German's heart was made of stone. My little brother and I cried. One of the Germans had a softer heart and wanted to give us candy but we refused to accept anything from such monsters. Then, they took us to a bus near the theatre. Other deported people were already waiting in it. They took us from there to the barracks on ul. Główna.

5

Teresa Hasińska

*born 9 September 1931 in Poznań
Currently: ul. Małeckiego 11/12, Poznań
Student of Grammar School III, Year 6a*

... Finally, the fateful day of 13 February 1940 is here. I am particularly nervous today, wrecked by the anticipation and looking out for the arrival of violent Gestapo men. I am awakened by the sound of knocking and kicking at the door of our apartment. I look at the wall clock – it is 1:15am. Five minutes later, Gestapo officers barge into the apartment. In the harsh German language, they order us to leave in fifteen minutes and go to the police station from which we will be taken to a camp. This way, together with many Poles, with some of our belongings, we go by truck to the ul. Główna camp. After a month living in harsh conditions, we were transported to Sanok ...

Zbigniew Pisieczek

born 4 march 1922 in Krotoszyn

During the occupation, deported from ul. Za Bramką 5a, Poznań

Currently: ul. Za Bramką 5a, Poznań

Student of State Mary Magdalene High School in Poznań,

Year II of High School

... It was 9 November 1939. The fair weather suggested nothing about what was about to happen. It was evening and our entire family were gathered over dinner when we heard a sudden violent banging at the front gate. We were all petrified. Finally, someone mustered the courage to go and open the door. A throng of screaming German soldiers pushed their way in and spread out towards individual apartments. Deportations!!! We don't know where to or why. Seven uniformed thugs barged into our apartment. One of them, a NSDAP Leiter, another a Gestapo man, the rest: Schutzpolizei. "In fünfzehn Minuten raus" (Out in fifteen minutes, sound a categorical order backed with a more convincing argument: the strike of a rifle butt against the floor. We are only allowed to take the clothes we are wearing and a little bit of food. The rest is "beschlagnahmt" (confiscated) by the state. After my little ten-year-old sister wanted to take her pillow from her bed, it was torn out of her hand and thrown on the floor. "Du polnisches Ferkel!" (You Polish pig), is added to the injury. We are boiling up inside but have to control our tempers! After a while, the buses pull over and we all board. The column of buses seems to be endless. After all, they are displacing the whole population of Za Bramką street. They are the first to go. It is also a warning to show what methods the "winners" would use in the future.

After driving around town for a half an hour, we pull into a huge yard surrounded by barbed wire and filled with barracks. It is pitch dark. We have no idea yet where we are. Moments later, we realise

we are on the premises of the former military storage facility on ul. Główna. Being unaware of what awaits us makes for a pessimistic outlook, especially as once the trucks are unloaded, we are sorted into groups of men and women. It is drizzling and gets cold. After another half an hour in the rain, we are moved to the barracks. Women take one, we take another. The cement floor is covered with a thin layer of straw. Everyone is tired but no one can sleep. More than four hundred people in the room remain in complete silence, the mood, like a funeral wake, is broken only occasionally by a louder sigh. Everyone is soaked through, freezing, staring dispassionately. The uncertainty is killing us all.

The morning brings no relief. Having nothing warm to drink takes a toll on people. Only in the afternoon is some coffee provided ... but only for the children. No trace of a warm meal. "Later", respond the guards, grinning ironically. As it turned out, that "later" didn't come until a week from our arrival. How we survived all this time, I can't really say. I have the impression that no one could really eat, and that the "provisions" brought from home were enough to keep us from death by starvation. A week later, things seemed to become normal, as it were, meaning we were given a quarter of a litre of soup and one eighth of a loaf of crummy bread per person. A week later, the ration is doubled and remains at that level until the camp is closed. The lunch menu is fixed for the duration of the camp. One day it's swede, the next – cabbage soup, followed by buckwheat soup. And then over again, swede, cabbage, buckwheat. This helps the management supply us all with "nutritious food" and us, the detainees, with our digestion. Diarrhoea symptoms were very common.

I should note also that the headcount of camp "residents" kept rising after 9 November. We meet many familiar faces, say our hellos and give them a grand tour of the place. We, "the old-timers," explain how things work.

Some of the people I met at the camp included my former and present teachers, Professors Węgrzynowicz, Jakubisiak, Abgarowicz, Marszałkiewicz and others. One of the best known "residential" barracks was Barrack IV. It was a huge shed, more than 120 meters long, more than 30 meters wide and two stories high. Its walls

were made of wooden planks with many cracks between them. It is hard to imagine sleeping or even sitting there in the winter, in temperatures of 40 degrees below freezing. Although four stoves were provided to heat this enormous interior, the coal allotment per stove was one and a half buckets per day.

The most horrific transports were the ones in the winter. People would be brought in around ten in the evening. Quite often, the poor souls waited to be checked in outdoors before they would be allowed in. One can easily guess how that affected them. The flu was rampant. Things got even worse in moments of birth or death. Any poor mother who brought new life into the world would be deprived of medical assistance. She was left to fend for herself with the help of good people. I will never forget the day when twins were born. If I'm not mistaken, this was in Barrack II. Once the little ones arrived, they were washed in warm coffee, as warm water was out of the question. The twins and their parents were then moved to the General Government. This was three weeks after their birth. What happened to them afterwards, I don't know. We were completely cut off from the world beyond the barbed wire. No messages came through.

Let me quote another example of the "cultured" behaviour of the "Herrenvolk" ("master race"). In the upstairs room of Barrack I, my neighbour was an old man. He was roughly 75 years old. His cold turned into flu, of which he died two days later, around 2am. His body remained in the room for another 36 hours. Finally, "Lagerverwaltung" (camp administrators) took pity on us and graciously allowed us to move the body to another site, until it was trucked off to a cemetery.

The camp was initially run by "Sturmbannführer" Sauer. Under his "rule", the abuse of us, the Poles, was the harshest. We were insulted ("polnisher Mist" or "polnische Sau", Polish shit or Polish pig) in addition to being given all kinds of speeches and orders. It was thanks to the Polish committee established in the camp that the poor conditions didn't become even worse. Everyone in the camp was obliged to work. We were made to secure order within, supply fuel for the kitchen ovens, clean up the latrines, etc. The most moving moments experienced on ul. Główna were Christmas eve

and Holy Masses. The notorious Sauer, who moved to Łódź, was replaced by Sturmbannführer Schwarzhuber, who was from Bavaria. As a Catholic, he treated us slightly better. His first sign of “benevolence” was to allow us to arrange for the sharing of the holy wafer. Thanks to the generosity of the Poznań community, pastries, some cold cuts and even apples and other fruit were provided for the Christmas eve supper. A Christmas tree was also sent to us, decorated in an ingenious way. We had candles and, most importantly, a wafer. Teary-eyed, we shared it, wishing ourselves a better future. After the wafer breaking, we shared our gifts and moved on to “artistic” performances. Some youngsters, dressed in fairly decent imitations of Kraków folk costumes, staged *The Kraków Wedding*. This was followed by some soliloquies, and a host of songs and carols. It is not easy to describe the mood of the celebration. It was solemn, somewhat sorrowful but not without hope for a better future.

Equally emotional moments were experienced during holy services. A total of eight or so were held. All took place in the notorious Barrack IV. We used a lot of space, as some four thousand people were in attendance. The masses were celebrated by Father Helak. He performed his pastoral duties, risking his life. He heard confessions, held communal prayers and even gave holy communion. The missal, wine, chalice and wafers were supplied by the ul. Główna parish. What channels were used to bring them into the camp will remain a mystery. The altar, cross, candlesticks and other paraphernalia were made by ourselves in the camp workshop. We made a service bell out of a sizeable former alarm bell. Imagine a holy mass taking place inside a barrack while unsuspecting German “watchdogs” did their rounds on the outside. Note that the holy mass was attended by every single detainee without exception. At the end of the service, once the missal, candles, and so on were removed, we sang the hymn “Pójdź do Jezusa” (“Go to Jesus”). It became our camp anthem. Sung by a crowd of many thousand, the hymn carried far and wide the message that our faith was strong and that we trusted in God’s mercy.

The detainee headcount fluctuated over time. The average number was from three to four thousand. As transports departed for the

General Government, the space they vacated would immediately be filled with new arrivals. Since the camp's establishment on 5 November 1939 to its closure on 22 May 1940, more than 40,000 people passed through.

By mid-March 1940, only residents of Poznań had been brought in. Between mid-March and the camp's closure, the prisoners brought to and transported out of the camp came from the "province." At the order of the Lagerverwaltung (camp administration, we were required to do our morning gymnastics and then play volleyball. During these exercise sessions, pictures were taken to show the world how "cultured" the Germans were in their treatment of their enemies. However, other evidence was also recorded of their "culture," and this certainly remained unpublished: pictures of departing transports, personal searches, package checks – none of those were shown. During personal searches, any valuables such as jewellery, silver cases, cigarette holders and watches were confiscated. Anyone who the searching oppressors deemed to be suspicious would be stripped naked, regardless of their sex!

A great deal about these methods could be told by the late Mayor of Poznań Cyryl Ratajski. He, too, spent some time in the camp, abused with particular vengeance by the Germans.

One form of such abuse was making Poles genuflect in front of any German that passed through the camp. Those who failed to remove their caps in their presence would be insulted and, for added emphasis, hit. The lucky ones would get away with having their hats knocked off their heads. On one occasion, the camp commandant asked Mayor Ratajski why he didn't genuflect. The latter replied he was not yet familiar with the rules. Amidst a host of insults, he was told to make sure this never happened again. Next time around, Mayor Ratajski dutifully took off his hat and said: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". Under such circumstances, a handful of our members of the grand Polish committee, survived to the end of May. On 22 May 1940, once the camp was fully dissolved, we were released and set free. We returned to Poznań after nearly eight months in prison. We received a designated apartment, albeit far removed from our pre-war residence ...

Teresa Górska

born 20 April 1930 in Kalisz

Deported from Blizanów, Kalisz County, to the General Government

Currently residing at ul. Poznańska 2, Kalisz

Student of State High School of Kalisz, Junior High School, Year II

The final night of October 1940 was terrible. We were living in Blizanów. My father was imprisoned. On this fateful October night, sleet was falling. We went to bed early. Around midnight, we heard knocking on a window. This was an agreed signal that indicated something was amiss. Our mum got up to see what it was. Since the night was dark, she couldn't see a thing and only heard voices and the barking of agitated dogs in the distance. Suddenly, like an earthquake, there was banging at our door and swearing. Our aunt opened the door and saw two Germans, a gendarme and an SS man. She only managed to scream: "the Germans" before she fell down, shoved aside by the soldiers. In the ominous silence that followed, we could only hear the beating of our terrified hearts. Then, one of the Germans roared: "Be ready in ten minutes". Our mum got a heart attack from the fear or perhaps the despair. At this, we were lost and didn't know what to do. Our aunt, who kept a cool head, started resuscitating mum, who, once she came to, told us to put on our best clothes. A few moments later, two German women walked in and forbade us to take anything. They pulled a fur coat off my back and a leather jacket off my brother's, and took away any valuables we were holding.

One of the gendarmes fixed himself a ham sandwich and started to eat it, with visible enjoyment. My two year-old brother Antoś asked for some food. This seemed to stoke the German's appetite even more. The aunt made a fire to boil milk. The gendarme hit her on the face saying "You Polish pigs, may you die of hunger". They chased us from our home with nothing. Our neighbour, an old lady, handed us a packet saying "Please take this for the children." It was her down quilt, as we were not allowed to bring ours.

We walked out onto the road, followed by two gendarmes. We then saw a terrible sight. Stretched over a distance of two kilometres, one

wagon after another, people with bundles, surrounded by gendarmes with guns at the ready like criminals. The Germans who escorted us stopped one of the wagons and ordered us to climb on board.

They took us to a muddy yard. There, they lined us up and counted. While doing that, the gendarmes hit people with their rifle butts. After the people fell into the slush, they trampled them down with their feet. An old man begged to be allowed to stay and die on his own land. He was hit with a rifle butt in the head, fell over and, covered in blood, remained on his land. Children were torn out of their parents' arms and thrown into the mud, from which only their dead bodies were later retrieved. My two-year-old brother grabbed mum around the neck, screaming, "Mum, don't let go, don't!" I held him as tightly as I could and called out "God, save him!" A gendarme who saw this hit me and walked away.

We were taken by horse-drawn wagons to Kalisz. There, we were made to get off on ul. Poznańska in a camp filled with people and bugs. It was unbearable. We stayed there for three days. Some Poles shared their food with us. They were beaten for helping us, but disregarded the pain. Three days later, we were placed on a train without windows or any other openings. The weaker ones died, children would suffocate. This is how we reached Warsaw. I then fainted due to the lack of fresh air. When I came to, we were in the open air. It was freezing. Mum said we were in Mińsk Mazowiecki. After a while, scores of wagons driven by farmers came around and took us to their farms. They received us cordially, sympathising with our misery ...

8

Jan Węgrzyn

born 8 February 1926 in Kalisz

Deported from Kalisz to the General Government

Currently residing at ul. Staszica 19, Kalisz

Student of State Junior High School in Kalisz, Year 1

... Heavy footsteps resound in the hallway. Some people talk loudly in German. I have no doubt in my mind: the deportations

have begun. Something we've long feared and expected, an ominous and intangible destiny long hanging over our heads was now reality.

My mum enters the room. She speaks fast, trying to explain something to me, but I understand it all anyway.

I get dressed quickly and move to the next room. Standing in the pool of light from the lamp is a German gendarme and two party officials in Sturmabteilung uniform, their guns ready to fire. One of them pulls a document out of his bag and reads it out loud. I can't understand all of it as my German is poor, but one thing is clear: we are to vacate the flat immediately.

Father stands nearby and listens to the command with a stony face. He doesn't say a word, not a muscle twitching on his face. I look at him admiringly, and am proud to have such a father. I can't help thinking that once I grow up to be a man, I want to be so composed. For now, though, I am only 13, and I tremble with anxiety.

The gendarme is done reading and puts his document back in the bag. The Germans are somewhat surprised at my dad's composure. They seem to be embarrassed. They probably expected an outburst of despair, or begging for mercy. How little do these animals dressed in human skin know about Poles. Incapable of recognising anything but brute force, they view personal dignity and moral ideals as empty clichés.

Mum packs the bare necessities in a suitcase. I try to help her, but there is very little we can take as the Germans are urging us to leave. I tighten my fists and bite my lips, not to explode.

We take our luggage and step out into the street. It is still pitch dark. We walk in silence, unwilling to speak in the presence of the armed escorts on our sides and behind us. I feel like turning back to catch a final glimpse of our lovely home. I control that impulse. In fact, I don't feel particularly sorry. I think I am too young to grasp the seriousness of our situation. I look at my parents and feel sorry for them. They've worked so hard to build this house.

A gendarme, an elderly man whose last spark of humanity still glows in his heart, is most likely ashamed of his companion's actions. He timidly offers to give mum a hand with her luggage. At this, I protest - no, we don't need pity, I will carry them both, even

though my hands are numb and I am compelled to stop to rest every now and then. In this manner, we drag through the sleepy town towards the market hall, which is said to be the gathering point. As we get closer to our destination, we run into more and more people led by gendarmes, SA party men and Hilfspolizei, backup police made up of Volksdeutsche. All headed in one direction, all deported families just like us, our future companions in misfortune.

The sight gives me comfort – we are not the only ones to be meeting this fate. Perhaps having this happen to us now is even better – at least we’re done with the uncertainty.

The market buildings are filled with shaggy straw, loud conversations and the blinding light of arc lamps. We settle down in one of the few unoccupied spots and sit down on our luggage. Sleeping is out of the question. I notice a few people I know.

Some are very relaxed about the whole affair – they laugh, joke around and play harmonicas. I am impressed. I couldn’t possibly manage that. Overall, however, the moods are depressed. There are roughly one and a half thousand of us here.

Around noon, mum pulls out our food supplies and encourages us to eat. However, I can’t eat – the food simply won’t go down my throat. I am completely exhausted and can hardly think straight.

In the evening, we’re ordered to move out. We line up in rows, surrounded on all sides by gendarmes with bayonets kept at the ready on their rifles. We cross the city, moving along small streets towards the railway station.

“Scumbags, they are ashamed to take us on the main streets,” hissed a man walking next to us through his teeth.

As we pass the street where we once lived, mum breaks out into uncontrolled sobbing.

“Don’t cry, mum, we’ll be back”, I try to comfort her even though I hardly believe my own words.

At the freight train station, far beyond the passenger terminal, they load us onto a train made up in part of goods and in part of passenger carriages. Luckily, we end up in a passenger carriage. We make ourselves as comfortable as we can and wait for what is next to come. Utterly exhausted, I doze off moments later – this is

not real sleep but rather a feverish numbness out of which I am soon shaken by a powerful jolt – the train is departing.

It is now pitch dark. The engine puffed asthmatically and belched out balls of fire. I can still make out a vague city skyline in the distance. I take a final look and turn away slowly.

The train picks up speed.

9

Julia Nowakówna

born 29 January 1926 in Nieciecza, Dąbrowa County, Kraków Region

Currently residing at Kaziopole, Oborniki County

Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Wlkp.,

Year 3 of High School

We worked all year long on our farm under the constant supervision of the Germans, incessantly threatened by deportation and removal to Germany. Until 5am on 15 September 1940, when loud knocking at the door rudely awakened us from deep sleep. It was German gendarmes, who, as soon as they had read out the deportation act, told us to get dressed quickly. Without letting us take more than a few items and some food, they took us to a meeting point. From there, we were transported in rail carriages overcrowded with people, and especially with children, suffering from thirst in the warm autumn weather. Our little compatriots did their best to give us relief: at every station, a bunch of boys and girls bustled around bringing us bottled water to quench our thirst.

Around midnight, the transport stops and we disembark in Łódź. In the darkness of the night, the cobblestones on Łódź's streets seem bumpy and full of larger and smaller potholes. Every now and then, a child or an elderly person falls over, hurting themselves. The even pavements next to us look appealing, but woe betide those who dare walk onto them – they soon felt German rifle butts on their bodies.

We supported and helped one another all the way to a large building which later turned out to be an empty factory hall. There,

exhausted, some of us lay down on the stone floor and fell asleep. The following morning, called on group by group, we were showed into a huge building in the centre of Łódź. There, after an enormous fat man separated the men from the women, beating generously with a massive club anyone who got too close, we were let into special residences, in groups, with our luggage.

As soon as we entered, a sharp voice announced we were to surrender all of our jewellery, cash and any stocks and bond deeds. Then, like a pack of hungry wolves, a bunch of oppressors who do not deserve to be called women, and who, to make things even worse, used our Polish language, jumped at the belongings of these people who had already been stripped of everything other than these few bundles. Any valuable objects quickly disappeared during this search – woe betide those discovered to be concealing cash. Sticks would then swish through the air onto the backs and heads of the unfortunate victims, the elderly and children included. Once we made our way through this “purgatory”, able-bodied youths would be separated and earmarked for further transport to labour in Germany. The lamenting and crying of mothers bidding their farewells to their children mixed with the wailing of the babies, who weren’t spared the suffering.

We were moved to Konstantynów outside Łódź and placed in a large factory building. Group by group, we would walk to the designated sectors, claim a spot on the bedding straw and throw ourselves down, desperately needing to rest, ignoring the nests of fleas which eagerly descended on their victims. The agony of life in the camp was made worse by the camp commandant who terrorised us by beating us mercilessly for even the most minor transgressions, such as looking at the street through a window. He didn’t even spare the children. Every few days, after a major roundup for labour in Germany, dozens of detainees were brought in, many dressed only partially and barefoot, trembling in the cold late-autumn weather. The young people, who were at the end of their tethers, could think only about escape. Two youngsters managed to flee unnoticed. However, they were soon recaptured by gendarmes, brought back and beaten cruelly by the German oppressors, their bruised and swollen

faces disfigured beyond recognition. The only person to cheer up the dispirited people was an old, good-natured cook who had seen many a transport of deported people come and go. As I got to know him better, I realised what a noble person he was – a true Pole indeed. Working in the difficult circumstances, he did his best to procure the supplies needed to feed some 2,000 people at least with camp soup. As he watched people suffer, he composed poems and presented them to everyone he could trust, every time a new transport arrived. On 11 November 1940, once all the hall occupiers had fallen asleep, we gathered quietly in the cook's room to celebrate a national holiday. We listened to fervent patriotic poems and heart-rending speeches, wished one another a better future, in which we would be able to celebrate independence day openly, and then dispersed, unnoticed by anyone.

Our despair was unspeakable when, on the following morning, after the cook's room was searched and a whole file of documents removed, the cook himself was cuffed, moved out and shot dead.

After two months in the camp, late at night, in howling wind and rain beating down hard on us, we were all rounded up in the camp yard and placed, a group at a time, in tram carriages. The dismal crying of bitterly cold children reverberated long in the quiet of the night. Once in Łódź, we walked to the train station, wading in the darkness, up to our knees in mud and water. As we stood at the freight station for eight hours, we covered up the young ones whose teeth were chattering in the cold. In the evening, we set out to Chełm in unheated passenger carriages, where they placed us in a large Railway Company building turned into a camp. There, we spent a two-week stay on lice-infested straw beddings eating groats every day. The groats made us come up with the saying, inscribed on a camp building wall, which said: "Today groats, tomorrow groats, the day after tomorrow, Poland is ours." The Germans who served us food did wonders for our appetites - not even hungriest of us touched these delicacies.

Once the two weeks were up, smaller groups were sent out to different counties. Our own group, which was shipped to Zamość, arrived there on a frosty December night. Our teeth chattering in

the cold, we were received in a church to rest and warm up. Some of us, utterly exhausted, lay down in the pews and tried to get some sleep, which turned out to be impossible in the extreme cold. Soon, however, the Red Cross got involved and took the elderly and the children in to feed them and warm them up. For two weeks, like a caring mother, the Red Cross did their utmost to offer us at least some relief from our misery.

THE GENERAL
GOVERNMENT

Zbigniew Marszał

born 26 August 1923 in Oborniki

During the occupation, he was in the Reich and Szydłowiec (Kielce Region).

Currently residing in Rogoźno Wielkopolskie

Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Wielkopolskie,

Year 2 of Junior High School

Soon after my return^{*)}, mum fell sick. After two months of suffering, cruel death took her away from me. This terrible fate befell me unexpectedly – I couldn't get over the awful feeling. It wasn't until the coffin lid was shut that I realised the whole horror of the situation in which my father and I found ourselves. The loss experienced during deportation hit us hard.

A short time later, I was called upon to join the labour gangs (*Baudienst*, construction duty). Once again, I fell into the hands of my tormentors. We worked with spades building railway embankments. An unending theme was the thin German soups, coffee with the grounds in and a piece of bread. No wonder our strength was diminishing, and we needed it to carry the heavy rails. The regimen was very strict.

One day, we were late coming back from a day off. We were punished severely by being placed in a "bunker" for two days. The bunker was a small room measuring four square meters. There were 40 of us boys there, standing next to one another up to our ankles in water, and this was winter. There was no way to sit or lie down, one could only rest by kneeling down. Although this only lasted two days, it seemed like ages to us. While in the bunker, I learned about my father being sick. This came to me as a heavy blow.

^{*)} From the Reich.

I applied for leave and went home. Father's disease was precipitated by the terrible living conditions. We had a small room furnished with two chairs and a small stove. On top of it, my father received no medical attention or even womanly care. Medications and injections were very hard to come by. There was nothing that could be done to keep my dad alive. He left me when I needed him most. I believed my family was cursed. This second blow hit me like a bolt of lightning.

I was all alone. Only then did I experience the bleak fate of an orphan. There was no one to care for me, uplift me or encourage me to endure. I returned to the working party broken and resigned to completing the regulation one year of service. Having done that, I returned home where I worked in an orchard for myself.

At about that time, the Germans suffered their first defeats. That made them treat us more severely. One day, young people suspected of conspiring against them were locked up in a Radom prison. I ended up among them. I will never forget the terrible moments I lived through at the hands of the Gestapo. The interrogations and the floggings were dreadful. Not one of us, though, let out as much as a peep – we kept all of our secrets despite the heavy torture. This went on for two months.

In the meantime, Russian troops pulled closer, bringing doom to the cruel Germans. We were all given a death sentence and only owed our lives to a sudden operation by the Russians who captured the town and freed us. Two hours later, we would have been bricked up, which is what had happened by then to some of the other prisoners. After the liberation, I set out for my home town. As I no longer had a home, I went to Rogoźno to my uncle's family, where my aunt and my cousins greeted me cheerfully. Together, we waited for the return of my uncle, who had spent five years doing hard labour in Germany. The harm and moral suffering caused by the loss of my parents was sweetened by the sight of my liberated homeland.

Marian Dąbrowski

born 20 January 1929 in Rogoźno Wielkopolskie

*During the occupation, deported to Sokołów Podlaski, then moved to the Reich
(Szprotawa, later Wschowa)*

*Currently residing at ul. Czarnkowska 36, Rogoźno Wielkopolskie
Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Wielkopolskie, Year 1b*

Towards the end of 1942, I got to know some partisans whom I served as a courier, as someone my age would not be suspected of involvement with an organisation that posed such a threat to the occupier. At the time, the German feldgendarmerie and officers stayed at Soldier's House^{*)}. I stole a revolver from one of the officers. I hid it under my coat and luckily carried it past the guardhouse and into town, where I put it into the right hands.

Two hours later, the gendarmes and Gestapo came around and searched my home. Of course, they found nothing. But then they told me to get dressed and follow them. They took me to a prison and began interrogating me, giving me an opportunity to become familiar with the oppressors' fists and rifle butts. I kept saying "I don't know" to all of the questions. All this went on for three weeks. An interrogation and a beating for about two and a half hours every morning. I shared my cell with a few other poor fellows with broken arms and ripped-off finger and toe nails. They said they were tortured by the commandant himself. Every third day they would round us up in the courtyard, tell us to undress and give us a cold shower in temperatures of about three degrees below freezing. When some of us got sick, they would shrug their shoulders and say "Let them die. There'll be all the more food and space for others." For three weeks, many of those taken out of our cell never returned. We only heard gunshots and then saw Gestapo officers come back without the prisoners.

^{*)} Dom Żołnierza, in Sokołów Podlaski.

After the three weeks, they gave me my belongings back and said in parting: “What you have heard and seen here, and what has been done to you may never leave these walls. If we find out you have been talking, you will meet the same fate as the others.”

Once I passed the gate, I was overjoyed to be free again. My flat was some 300 meters from the prison. I was so weak and beaten up that it took me one and a half hours to get there. After I returned from prison, I was severely ill for a month. Shortly after I recovered, I received a notice to show up at the Labour Office, which sent me to a gathering point in Siedlce. From there, I was transported to a “transition camp” in a former school on ul. Skaryszewska in Warsaw.

Ten days later, we were sent to Germany. I ended up at a gardener’s house in Szprotawa (Sprottau in German) in Lower Silesia. My boss was German and a true Nazi. He once suggested to me to sign the “Volkliste.” I replied that he should take Polish nationality. This offended him – he said he would never do such a thing as he was a true-blue German. I told him then that I was Polish and could not be German. This hurt him badly and he reported me to the “Parteikreisleitung” (party leaders). As a result, I had to pay a fine of 500 marks.

In September, I was assigned to a team that was digging ditches outside Głogów. In October, they moved me to a sugar plant in Wschowa. For a meagre pay of 12 marks a day and very poor food, I had to work continuously 12 hours a day. My job was to burn lime, in terrible dust, without a mask or goggles, which, as my foreman explained, the sugar plant did not have. He then added offhand that the few sets available were “nur für Deutsche” (only for Germans). You, Pole, just die as you are not the “Herrenvolk” (master race). Some Frenchmen lost their sight there, others fell ill with tuberculosis. I managed to hold out.

In December, we were sent back to our former employers, or tyrants rather. I worked for the horticulturist until as late as February 1945. We were then liberated by the Red Army.

The evacuation of the city was announced on February 9 and everyone had to flee. I was to drive a wagon with my boss’s family.

But since the fighting was taking place 12km from the city, I hid amidst the tomato stores in the basement. They searched for me and called my name, but I didn't reply. And so they left without me. I could not leave my hiding place as the SS soldiers would kill me. After starving for two days, I came out. The city was in the hands of red army soldiers.

Several days later, I set out on my way back. Farmers from Poland were bringing wagons, which the occupier required them to supply, and were happy to take me with them. This is how I got to Kochlau on this side of the Oder. As trains to Poland ran from there, I thanked the farmers and travelled onwards by rail. A train took me to Krotoszyn. As there were no services available from Krotoszyn to Poznań yet, I joined the police force. I stayed there for some two months. Once the trains started running, I left the police and, after years of wandering, finally reached my home town where I was reunited with my parents who had also returned home. As I describe all this now, I shudder at the recollection of the harm we suffered from the Germans during the five years of occupation.

3

Janusz Kaźmierczak

born 2 June 1925 in Pobiedziska, Poznań County

Deported on 10 December 1925 to Włoszczowa, Jędrzejów County

Currently residing at Rynek 10, Chodzież

Student of State St. Barbara High School, 2nd

year of Junior High School

One event during the occupation has become etched deeply into my memory. It took place on 9 August 1943 in Włoszczów on a day which has since been known as "Bloody Sunday."

As I was having supper, I heard shots being fired. I ran to a window and cautiously sneaked a glance. I saw three men being led away by gendarmes. I knew one of them by the name of Friske. They

were handcuffed as criminals. One of them, named Kościelny, was injured in the arm, his blood dripping to the ground. Then came the order: "Halt" and the party came to a stop. I strained my ears. After the order to halt, the escort seemed to have instructed the prisoners to run ahead quickly. A glimmer of joy crossed the faces of the unfortunate boys. They set out and passed our house running. Before they were out of my sight, I heard a short burst of machine gun fire. I saw a broken line of fire, then one of the runners trip and fall, flailing his arms, followed by another. The third one was still running but then he too fell to the ground a bit further like a cut down tree. In the meantime, the first two stood up, after which the third followed suit. Hardly had they walked two steps when another salvo cut them down again. This time they were unable to rise. Only Friske got up and ran, limping and bleeding profusely. This didn't last long though as, exhausted, he dropped to his knees. He pressed his hands together, raised them up and called out, "God, oh God! Mother, my dear mother!"

A German bandit ran up, kicked him to the ground and shot him in the stomach, once and then again. The other gendarmes finished off the other two, hitting them with the butts of their guns and then shooting them twice in the head. A few nervous motions of agony and there they were, three dead bodies lying before my eyes in the middle of a street.

An hour later, wagons came around. Their frightened owners loaded the bodies of the dead heroes and drove away.

The incident made a terrible impression on me, putting me in a strange state of stupor.

What triggered this "cleansing" by the gendarmes among a peaceful population?

The reason was the killing of an SS officer, which filled the Germans with a craving for cruel retaliation.

The death toll on that day wasn't just these three, but roughly 32 people. They were buried in a field, the earth above them compacted thoroughly to cover up all traces of the Gestapo's latest bestiality.

Stefan Holzhausen

born 4 October 1926 in Luboml (Volyn)

During the occupation resided in Włoszczowa, Jędrzejów County

Currently residing at Rynek 41, Szamotuły

Student of Rev. P. Skarga State High School, Year 3

^{*)}... A farmer wearing his Sunday best, most likely coming from church, was on his way to town, taking the side streets. Noticing he was all alone, he kept speeding up. As he emerged onto a main street, he noticed a bunch of gendarmes. His pace, previously composed, now lost its rhythm – you could see he wanted to back up. Yet, he knew this would be suicide. The scream “halt!” mired him to the spot. One of the gendarmes frisked him and then roared: “Nach Hause (home), move!” The farmer began to move backwards, his sight transfixed on the gendarmes. Another yell made him turn around. Nevertheless, he was still looking at the Germans. Enraged, the gendarme took his rifle off his shoulder and fired. The farmer staggered but didn’t stop running. He was close to the corner when another shot killed him. At that moment, other gendarmes escorted a woman and a man out of a nearby house. They were followed by a mother who screamed, “You have taken my daughter, then take me too.” The scream was silenced with a shot straight into her mouth ...

Helena Łyskówna

born 17 January 1924 in Rogoźno Wlkp.

Deported to the General Government during the occupation, she resided in the Toczyński Czortki estate, Jabłonna Municipality, Sokółów Podlaski County.

Currently residing in Rogoźno Wlkp.

Student of Przemysław High School in Rogoźno Wlkp., Year 1

... A terrible fate befell me on 25 September 1943. I was found in the village of Jabłonna by the Germans looking for labourers to

^{*)} The description of these events in Włoszczowa in 1943 ties in with a previous account by J. Kaźmierczak.

work deep inside Germany. This was the worst moment of my life. I will never forget it! They barged into the village even before sunset like mad dogs.

They immediately surrounded the village and began their hunt. Rather than returning home, I stayed by a fence among the raspberry bushes all evening and throughout the following night. Despite my fear and fatigue, I dozed off and only awoke early the next morning when the place was quiet. I took advantage of this and ran home, but then suddenly noticed catchers marching to surround the village. I thought to myself: all hell is about to break loose – and I was right. I rushed through the garden and, I don't know how, jumped over a fairly high fence to avoid being seen by the abusive tyrants. Several metres behind the garden fence a few guards were watching their captives.

I sat there and kept quiet amidst the screaming, crying and lamentations of the women, the shrieking of children and the harsh blasting bellowing of the German thugs. Every now and then, a rubber whip banged against innocent human bodies. I was very sad but couldn't cry – I tried to keep quiet, so as not to reveal my hiding place.

Suddenly, after a minute of dead silence, I heard a rustling of twigs against springy clothing and a boot. I immediately raised my head. All I could see were legs, but that was enough to make me freeze and drain of all my strength as I felt and heard him coming my way. I prayed to God for protection. I haven't the faintest idea how he could have missed me. He picked a raspberry from a bush, looked around and returned behind the fence. I thought to myself: the last drop of life has been drained out of my body. However, I was saved, with God's help. I think that a momentary blindness came over him. Yes, this was certainly my hardest experience ...

Seweryna Urbanowiczówna

born 17 December 1926 in Poznań

*During the occupation, she remained in Poznań until her deportation
to Starachowice in March 1941.*

Currently residing at ul. Wielka 9, Poznań

Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls' High School in Poznań, Year 1

... After being deported from Poznań, we settled down in Starachowice, a town located on the Małopolska Upland. It was challenging at first. We worked together not to allow poverty get the better of us. We survived. We had the Holy Mother to thank for her assistance and care, and for not letting the Germans separate us. In 1943, my dear father came down with a serious heart condition. This forced me to look for a job to contribute to the family, as dad was no longer fit for work.

I found employment in a food office working for a *Kreislandwirt*. I can't say the work was either hard or difficult. Still, I found it extremely boring to have to issue hundreds of "bezugscheins" (ration cards) be it for a hundred grams of buckwheat or flour or a single egg. Simply put, the office job was "paperwork war." The only relatively fun part of the job was typing. Every time I copied a German document that I could not understand, I imagined I was writing a sentence convicting the Germans. Life would have been easier to bear were it not so uncertain – we never knew what to expect from one hour to the next. To make things worse, our German customers made our work all the more unbearable.

Other than five Germans, all the staff in our office were Polish. The office was headed by *Kreislandwirt* Kurt von Szczepański, a former petty clerk in a small-town slaughterhouse in Germany. He was a real gendarme type: fat, rude, with an uncouth facial expression, glancing provocatively out of his bulging eyes. The way he spoke to Poles was downright boorish, peppered with fierce German insults and swearwords. The way he treated the workers alone was enough to show that his "von" was fake and that he did not come

from an intelligent family. What made him particularly happy was to be able to vent his anxiety caused by bad political news and take it out on his employees. He made the place resonate as he delighted at his voice and the reflection of his face in a mirror hung next to his desk. The humiliated Pole would be pounded with a fist on the back of his neck or receive a blow on the back with a walking stick or a rifle butt to make way for “the Boss” who, puffed up like a peacock, would turn with glee to look into his mirror... We hated his guts but could never say anything... especially as v. Szczepański occasionally hunted people like hares.

I was once involved in an incident of this kind. I was all alone in our department when a Gestapo man popped in and demanded that I issue food ration coupons for him. As usual, I handled him calmly, ignoring every rude taunt he made. Finally, to torment me, he announced I had given him too few lard coupons and called me a fraud. As he began to curse like the Kreislandwirt, I sent him to the manager. This made him really mad. He insulted me for being a Pole and then tried to slap me on the face. By some miracle, I don't really know how, I avoided being hit by his huge hand. I then saw his hand descend to his colt and immediately composed myself. After all, I had a sick father who could be persecuted. On that day, I saw a newspaper headline that said, “Germans bring culture to Poland ...” (!!??)

Days and weeks went by in this nervous existence. During this time, we heard all kinds of news. The Germans burned down entire villages to punish the residents for failing to meet their quotas. Little children were thrown into flames. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen the charred remains of one such village myself. I can't remember its name, but I know it was close to the Krzyżanowice estate.

One day, a decree was passed, calling on each family to voluntarily (or by force) send one family member to work digging ditches. As one might expect, no one stepped forward, especially as half an hour later, other posters were put up that said: “Shame to Poles who serve the Germans!”

Several days later, I noticed a strange commotion as I got up in the morning. It turned out that the Germans had cordoned off the entire town and staged a “slave” hunt. Heavy machine guns were set up on every corner. Like insects, gendarmes and soldiers crept into every house, storage room, basement, nook and cranny, looting whatever they could get their hands on. As soon as they found someone hiding, they would take him without mercy. Those who attempted to flee would be shot dead on the spot. There was no mercy for the decrepit or the old. Those with employment had their documents torn up before their eyes. Once the gendarmes entered our flat, father had a heart attack. By some miracle, they eventually left us alone.

On the following Sunday, a roundup was staged at the church. We had no other choice but to hide. We chose to seek refuge in the forest with a number of others. Those who did not succeed in escaping from digging the ditches ended up transported to Germany. On the following day, on an odd premonition, I returned home. I spent all night there on a vigil. In the morning, some 3,000 Kalmyks came to Starachowice. None of us had any idea what a murderous instrument they would be in the hands of the occupier. I thanked God for having returned home later with my sisters, although mother trembled every time the doorbell rang. Living quarters were assigned. Some of these “nice guys” entered our neighbour’s living room and immediately showed us that a tired horse may as well rest on a rug. We learned other interesting things, such as that one can wash without a washbowl by using a running water from a bucket straight onto the floor, while the washbowl is best used as a helmet for our guests’ amusement. A hen tastes best if freshly killed, plucked and eaten raw. On the following day, we suddenly began noticing that perhaps the German military was actually civilised. The wild hordes set out on a manhunt in the forest. They fired their guns continuously for four hours, perpetrating a horrible massacre. Starachowice residents were caught off guard and defenceless. One third of the people never returned. Those who failed to escape were tied up with rope and herded to a train. The sight of a friend of my

father's with a noose around his neck, tied to a horse and being hit with a whip is still vivid in my mind.

The suffering got to the point where the Poles simply could not tolerate it any more. One day, the Chief of Gestapo mysteriously dropped dead, "becoming fertiliser" for the Polish soil. Our hearts froze in terror. We knew that such actions would not go unpunished.

And punishment did come. In August, as usual, before a round-up, the city was cordoned off. They captured people, picking them at their fancy. Some 700 people were detained that day. After a good day's work, the Germans drove the prisoners to a factory yard where trucks were already waiting. The Germans acted like a crowd of wild savages abusing their victims. The prisoners were kept hungry all day, with nothing but some soup in the evening. Due to the lack of bowls, people ate out of spittoons. Then, in everybody's plain view, the men were told to hop onto the trucks and lie down flat one on top of another. Loaded in this way, the trucks went off to Radom. Some of my girlfriends were wearing summer dresses. Some people died on the way, the rest were moved to Auschwitz. A dozen or more notices reached us soon about previously healthy and strong people who "died a sudden death." I never again saw my uncle, who was also taken on that day.

We have God to thank for having survived all this in one piece, and actually in good health. Eternal honour is due to all those heroes who didn't hesitate to sacrifice their lives for their homeland!

7

Irena Garwolińska

born October 20, 1925 in Życzyn, Municipality of Garwolin

During the occupation, she resided in Rabka Zdrój.

Currently: Stupca, Boarding High School

Student of State High School in Stupca, Year 3

The events described below took place in Zakopane in the summer of 1941

The air was stuffy in the telegraph station. We found it hard to work on that day as we were all anxious. Strange rumours cir-

culated in the city regarding prisoner transports to Auschwitz and Dachau. No one really believed it. We waved the thought away like a persistent fly. The morning put me in an upbeat mood – no gloomy thought had access to my heart. But then something that people would never believe in their wildest dreams took place. Around noon, the head of the Zakopane office, a fat German man, appeared to tell us to keep a skeletal crew at the machines while all the rest were to follow him to the square.

On the way, he instructed us what to make of the scenes that would soon unfold before our eyes. He told us to remember this day well, as it would provide us with guidance on how to act.

And remember we did, to his misfortune – we have clear memories of the acts of violence performed on innocent victims.

The square was surrounded by a cordon of soldiers. Behind it was a crowd of people with pale faces and eyes wide open in fear. We blended into the crowd. The head of our office followed us closely, watched our every motion, gesture and facial expression and strained to capture our every word.

We caught the word “execution” whispered here and there.

As there was hardly a family in the city that did not have a member arrested, everyone was tense and uncertain to the point of fainting. Who will it be today?

A moment later, a few trucks drove by and solved the mystery. A bunch of Gestapo officers came out of one of them, the most senior one, climbed a makeshift platform and started to speak. His facial expressions, which changed from one minute to the next, said it all. His face had the hatred of the ages painted all over it. Faced with all this blasphemy against us, our homeland and “these bandits” whom not only we but also the rest of the world believe to be national martyrs, we had to bite our fingers to restrain our rage at the magnitude of his deceit, falseness and savagery.

To convince us of the futility of dreaming about the restoration of Poland, we were made to watch the last act of the play titled “The German Culture.” You could hear a pin drop, with only the uncontrollable sobbing of a woman breaking the silence, after which it was quiet again.

Some rag dolls were pulled off the trucks after which - Oh my God! The rags started to rise and adopt proud human form.

They looked at us with fiery eyes, their gaze showing the drudgery of partisan fighting in the forest, the hunger, the cold, the torture of imprisonment and the approaching liberation. I recognised some of their torn clothes as high school uniforms.

The crowd swayed. In many places, there was turbulence and pushing and shoving against the military cordon. Near us, a woman cried in distress, "Jesus, that's my child!" and tried to force her way through a row of German musclemen. One of them suddenly turned and knocked the poor woman down to the ground with a single blow of his rifle butt. She lost consciousness under the barrage of punches that followed from the bully. The Germans began to prepare their guns. The boys proudly rejected the black blindfolds offered by the merciful murderers. Everyone's chest was about to explode with crying. Tears which could not come out of the eyes broke our hearts with burning pain, choking us at the throat. Then one of the convicts stood on his toes, as if to be heard better, and cried, "Poland is not yet lost!"

The dry crackle of a gun rang out in the air, after which a body fell. Further interrupted cries followed, "The Queen of the Polish Crown," ("Królowo Korony Polskiej) "Mother of God, we take refuge..." ("Pod Twoją obronę") and a heart-rending "Mother - forgive us!" ("Matko, wybacź")

My fists were clenched, my fingernails dug deeply into bleeding flesh.

God! I whispered, take me away from this place! I felt strangely weak, but also blissful, as if God heard my whisper and sent peace upon me.

Oh wonderful death!

I fell into an abyss... oh...

It was a dreadful nightmare, and although I only heard and saw the beginning of the crime, the image ended up etched into my soul all too well.

At that moment, I wished to die even more than I had wished to live this morning – now, however, all I want again is to live – I must live to avenge that day, that horrible day.

8

Mieczysław Cielecki

born 12 October 1925 in Zduńska Wola

During the occupation, he resided in Kielce (1940-42) and at ul. Koszykowa 40 in Warsaw (1942-45).

Currently: ul. Pułaskiego 15, Kalisz

Student of State High School of Kalisz, Year 1 of High School

9 October 1944, 1pm.

... I am leaving. A final look back at the flat, the familiar possessions, and here I go, descending down slowly from the third floor. The place is quiet, there is no one around any more. The final dead-line for leaving Warsaw elapsed at noon today.

With a small suitcase in hand, I make my way down ul. Marszałkowska towards the Dworzec Centralny. At 1.30pm sharp, I have my final rendez-vous in Warsaw – I am meeting two of my friends on ul. Marszałkowska and Aleje Jerozolimskie after which all three of us are leaving town. I walk down the middle of the once hectically busy street, amidst partly dismantled barricades.

It is a strange feeling. On the one hand, I am almost happy to be finally leaving this hell, but then I also feel like a small defenceless child forcefully dragged away from the body of his dead mother.

It is an eerie feeling: why is it so quiet? Why can we no longer hear the howling of diving Stukas, the bangs of blasting mines and artillery missiles? Whatever happened to the Tigers and Panthers, and the heavy weapons of the German infantry? The silence is crushing, makes the city look surreal and alien.

The streets are deserted. I shudder at the sight of a German Gendarmerie patrol – here is the occupier again – the feeling of freedom didn't last very long! I reach ul. Wspólna where a group of

gendarmes are standing on the corner. Halt! I stop and come closer. I see a group of people surrounded by gendarmes nearby. They make me join them. They don't even ask for the documents – why would they? Being a young male is incriminating enough. I remember I was to meet you at the corner of Jerozolimskie at 1.30. I may never see you again – you are on your own now!

There are 16 men and a few women among us. We walk down ul. Wspólna towards Plac Trzech Krzyży in rows of four. Most of the gendarmes are drunk, they don't tell us anything, no explanations. They answer our questions with blows of their rifle butts and that is clear enough! I am drained. As recently as yesterday, I could still think, advise people, assign projects and come up with ideas. Today – nothing, nought! I have turned into a thoughtless automaton, automatically moving my arms and legs. A shot is fired that sends a bullet over my head – one of the “winners” wants me to pick up pace. Let him shoot, he could shoot me straight in the head, at least he wouldn't waste bullets.

The street is changing: we're walking up and down now, negotiating the terrain. “The Uprising Tatras,” as someone called it once. Where there was once a street, there are now mountains of rubble, bricks, walls, tenements, wooden and iron beams, concrete and what have you!

You could use what is here to fill a huge warehouse of building materials, as well as... a cemetery! There are certainly enough dead bodies – tens, hundreds, thousands of the dead, murdered people, buried under the ruins of every house. I was once in a bomb shelter in the district of Mokotów. Before an air strike, there were 120 living people there. By the time the Stukas flew off, the four-storey tenement had been turned into a “mountain,” just like the shelter, which has become one big mass tomb for the people who were alive moments earlier. No one was dug out – there wasn't the time or manpower to do that!

We are now descending, almost reaching street level. Someone falls down in front of me. A gendarme hits him with a rifle butt, cursing. Only a side wall is left of the five-storey building. The rest,

now under our feet, is the work of the Big Berthas and Stukas. As we continue on, we see more of the same.

Suddenly, I stop unwillingly: I spot a man hanging out of a third-floor window, his hand pointing to the sky: is he threatening, imploring or perhaps cursing? The gendarmes point their fingers at him laughing: one of them fires his gun, the outstretched hand drops – there will be no more cursing – we move on.

One house after another has been reduced to rubble. We arrive at Plac Trzech Krzyży. I look at St. Aleksander's Church. The entrance I used is no longer there. Another enormous entrance has been made by an air bomb – it is too big. And there is a lot of debris.

We are being led down Aleje Ujazdowskie. This is not what I imagined a walk down the Alley would look like two months ago – after all, this is the parade route.

We make a turn by the park – they take us to the Police Headquarters on ul. Wiejska. We arrive at a courtyard surrounded on all sides by the walls of tenements that are still standing and which the Germans have been using all along. We sit by a wall exhausted. A few civilians come out of the building. They come from Czerniaków. They say they do nothing there, they're just being watched so they won't escape. The civilians bring us some soup and bread – I eat both, mainly the bread though – it has been a while since I had so much to eat in one go. I never thought that bread could taste so good. I savour the very word "bread" – my stomach is elated. My only regret is I don't have two stomachs – I could be twice as happy.

We await our interrogation patiently – the Gendarmerie Chief is supposed to be here. I sit on my suitcase and begin to contemplate ways to escape. No, there is nothing I can do, the whole district is deserted.

Here comes the commandant – a Gendarmerie Oberleutnant. He can hardly stand on his feet. He begins his interrogations with the women, then pulls out a gun and, waving it, asks us, "Which one of you belonged to the bandits?" I turn away, afraid I might lose it. He comes over, puts his gun to my head and tells me to turn around saying "Verfluchte Banditen, ich werde euch alle erschies-

sen” (Damn bandits, I will shoot you all). Some of those present show fear, others don’t understand.

Four workers from the men’s group approach the commandant. They work in a German company in Pruszków and have come to Warsaw on business. They had been dragged out of their truck and are now requesting to be released. The commandant will check if they are telling the truth and, if they are, they will be allowed to walk. For now, he tells them to step aside while he lines us up in groups of four with an uncocked gun. Surrounded by the gendarmes, we leave. Where to? Will we be shot dead? We don’t know! I look at ul. Wiejska. I want to know whether the people murdered there (by the same gendarmes who are now escorting us) have also been interrogated in this way. I hear they were saved the interrogation and that grenades were tossed straight into their basement. I spoke to someone who miraculously escaped death.

They take us to Powiśle – I don’t know that district. We turn left. They take us to some military barracks and hand us over to the guards. The gendarmes walk away. The soldiers lead us to a room with tiny barred windows. We strike up a conversation with a guard. He’s from Vienna. He says he is sick and tired of the war. He’s been near Moscow, but he’s never seen the kind of fighting we have here. One of us has cigarettes. We exchange them and a ten złoty bill for a few tomatoes and some soup.

A Wehrmacht officer comes around at 6pm. We are escorted by soldiers to the criminal police headquarters at Al. Ujazdowskie. On the way, we pass the patrols of Ukrainian Gendarmerie who hurl insults and threats at us.

The criminal police don’t know what to do with us. Three hours later, they take us to Al. Szucha. I feel slight shivers running down my spine.

On the way, they add four prisoners of war to our party – they are Kościuszko Army soldiers, completely exhausted – they haven’t eaten for three days. We share our bread with them. They tell us the details of their operation of crossing the Vistula River, about their landing in Czerniakowo and Powiśle and the fierce battle with the Germans. Nearly the entire group was destroyed – it proved impos-

sible to bring armoured vehicles across the river. On top of that, they were not used to city combat. Most of them perished. These few were pulled out of the sewers.

We get separated in front of the Gestapo building. We are moved deep into the building to two small basement rooms. SS officers stand guard watching us.

There's no need describing what Al. Szucha is. The address is all too familiar to any Warsaw resident. I feel uneasy, this is my first time here! There are no Gestapo officers in sight, just the SS and the Ukrainians. We examine our accommodation. There are straw mattresses on the floor, one drenched in blood. We also find a helmet, a bayonet and two grenades in a corner. Who knows, this may be our last chance to get out of here alive!

There is electric light everywhere as Szucha has its own power plant, independent of the city grid.

We sit on the mattresses and wonder what to do. To wait idly for their decision about us is certain death.

I get to know Tadek. He is in the same boat as myself. We make friends quickly – under such circumstances, people tend to get close a whole lot faster than normally. The two of us decide to try our luck tomorrow. We disclose our plan to the others (they are a random collection of people of all kinds, from all districts – some are fascinating to watch).

We hear footsteps from the hallway leading to our rooms. In walks a civilian, a tall man followed by an SS-man with a gun in his hand. The SS man leaves, the civilian remains. He comes from Czerniaków, he hid in the sewers but was spotted by the Ukrainians and pulled out. He survived miraculously, as the routine treatment of anyone caught hiding in the sewers is instant death.

Tadek has a bag of coffee – we decide to fix some supper. Someone pulls a pot out of a suitcase. We use a kitchen stove, burning the straw from the mattresses and a chair which the Germans imprudently left in our living room. We have a close brush with death, as we had hidden one of our grenades in the stove ash box, most likely when the SS officer entered the room. It was pushed in deep and totally forgotten. Suddenly, as we boil our coffee, the heat gets to the

ash box grenade and triggers an explosion. No one gets hurt, only two of us have their eyelashes and hair charred. A moment of extreme tension follows: will they come or not? Silence. No one is coming. We sigh with relief, look at one another and together conclude: “dumb luck.” No such accidents have ever been seen at Szucha.

At night, someone pulls out two litres of vodka which we share to calm our nerves. Our spirits improve. I find Tadek really smart – he used the vodka to get to know a German guy, a chauffeur, who gave him a lot of information, as well as a kilogram of bread and some artificial honey. It takes special skills to procure such valuables at Szucha. At night I dream about my cousin: is she alive? I searched for her in mid-August in Mokotów to no avail. Perhaps she is in Pruszków?

10 October.

Our morale is high. We go to Al. Szucha, Commandant SS Major von ... (I can't remember his name). We ask him for a release and a pass to walk into town (we heard from the chauffeur that the SS has been ordered to shoot any civilian they come across in town that doesn't have a valid pass). The Major evades the question: we are to wait for things to clear up, then he himself will help us leave the city (!?).

On the way from the Major, we follow our plan, as put together yesterday – we form pairs and walk towards the main exit. The gendarme guarding the exit calls out to us: “Halt! Wohin?” (Stop! Where are you going?) We step forward and say we are coming from the Major, who told us to leave the town by a designated exit and that we don't need a pass today.

We are as tense as can be – we are risking our lives. The gendarme looks at us with a dumb gaze – the little time he takes to mull it over seems like an eternity. Finally, he steps aside and silently waves us through. We are afraid to breathe in relief yet but no, no one is calling us. We walk across Plac Unii Lubelskiej and down Marszałkowska towards the Central Train Station.

On Litewska, we are stopped by Ukrainian Fascists. We mention the Major and they let us go. At Plac Zbawiciela it's a disaster. We are apprehended by a gendarme patrol. Our explanations aren't

working. “We are leaving town”, we say. “Fine” but we have to take down the barricade first. Two hours later, the barricade is down and we continue on our way, this time much more cautiously, not to get caught again. We escape twice but then the Kalmyks^{*)} stop us. We have to clear the road for a truck. It is buried under the top floor of a demolished house. There are no tools available, just our hands. A Kalmyk stands by toting a machine gun.

Around 5pm, an inspection officer cycles by. We tell him we want to leave the city. “Kommt gar nicht in Frage” (That is out of the question), we are to stay as long as he wants to keep us, it is not up to us. Once we are done clearing the street, we go to the barracks. Tomorrow, just like today, we are to remove debris and take down barricades.

That makes our situation clear – we just have to find the right moment. Now! The Kalmyk leaves to stand guard on ul. Marszałkowska, while we hit the road, moving down ul. Poznańska and by the station. This time we seem to really be leaving town.

It is 8pm. We follow a route known to all Warsaw people. On Żelazna, I turn back for a final glance at the city. A dozen plus buildings are ablaze on Marszałkowska, there is a glow coming from Powiśle – and these are just today’s fires. The Germans are setting on fire any buildings that survived the uprising.

There is artillery firing luminous shells from Okęcie. They shoot to turn whatever is left of the city into rubble.

A horrible eerie sight can be seen on the Towarowa side: dozens of figures trudge along – an old people’s home being evacuated. Old ladies sit on both sides of the street and cry or pray out loud. No one is helping them and they have no more strength to continue. They are starving.

SS patrols, which constantly shuttle up and down the street, look at the old people and laugh. We turn left and follow the EKD train tracks. On a chair in front of the SS Schule is a woman aged 90 or so. She asks us for help – she is paralysed and can’t walk by herself. All four of us pick her up together and carry her down the road. I find her very heavy and pass my suitcase to my friend from

^{*)} Soviet prisoners of far-eastern origin whom the Germans used as an auxiliary service and even on the front lines.

Al. Szucha^{*)} to take care of until we switch helping the elderly lady. He agrees, especially as he has no luggage of his own. We go on. It is now pitch dark and there is still quite a distance to the West Station. We stop to rest at the church on Plac Narutowicza.

We hear a car which stops next to us. Out comes an SS sub-officer. It is night, we are not allowed to walk around, we must spend the night in the church and walk to the West Station in the morning where we will take a train to Pruszków. We do not protest!

We put the old woman down in the church and look around: a few candles are lit. There is a catafalque inside – around it, sleeping people, most of them old, on church rugs.

We put the old lady to bed and think about tomorrow. I look for my suitcase, but it is gone, as is the “helpful” fellow. All I have left is what I am wearing and that is how I will have to return to Kielce. The things I miss most are my books and ... the flour patties that I made for myself for the road back on Koszykowa.

The old ladies can't sleep – they are afraid that the Germans will soon come and murder everyone: they must have heard about Zieleniec, I shudder!

Artillery fire can be heard from Okęcie again – they are shelling the city. We can hear the Berthas twice. I try to sleep. Tomorrow, we are in for our final stretch. The last candle on the catafalque is about to burn out ...

9

Jan Gąsiorowski

born 17 June 1923 in Żnin

Spent the occupation in the town of Dubienka in the General Government

Currently: Bożejewice, Municipality of Żnin

*Student of Śniadecki Brothers Private Municipal Coeducational School
in Żnin. Year 2 of High School*

... I served as assistant cowshed inspector in the Municipality of Dubienka for the sole purpose of being officially employed. The work

^{*)} A Gestapo building and an infamous place of torture.

involved an extraordinary amount of travelling “in the field.” One morning, I was peacefully on my way to work, preoccupied with my concerns and thoughts. My mood hardly reflected the overall situation, which was indeed bleak. Strong groups of Soviet saboteurs kept crossing our border from the east. The occupier was enraged by this fact, but nevertheless unable to control them. The German police and Gestapo were helpless. We believed that this would not change until the front rolls by, meaning until the Germans are defeated. It turned out we underappreciated the Teutonic penchant for violence and for keeping us miserable at all times.

As I rode my bike, I had no inkling that it was my fate to experience this historical truth about our occupier on my own hide. Near a small wood that I was about to go through, I was stopped by German soldiers of various formations who were screaming terribly.

They kept me at gunpoint at a safe distance asking me why I was travelling and where I was headed. When they ordered me to move closer and show my ID, I thought they were going to relax but they remained just as hostile and suspicious. They never tried being polite. In fact, one of the thugs twice gave me powerful blows below my ribs with his gun butt.

All in all, despite having produced all the required documents and presented all my arguments, they took me and two young people to the nearby village, shoving and beating us and screaming at us along the way. We passed by deserted homes with broken windows. Every now and then we saw the trembling face of an old person, or the head of a crying child peeking out. Something ominous hung in the air in the village, escalated by the sounds of the guns firing around us. The bright sunshine and fair May weather did their best to sweeten the ordeal and put hope into our hearts.

At some point, we stopped by a tree where the body of a man, presumably a local villager, lay in a pool of blood. Our oppressors noted emphatically that we’d meet the same fate if we attempted to escape. My heart sank while my thoughts dispersed like a flock of frightened sheep, putting me in a state of serious spiritual depression. This was the first dead body I saw in my life, under circumstances in which I could easily share a similar fate. Luckily, the shock passed quickly

and I felt an anxious chill in my soul, which I think is what all martyrs feel before they die. In my desperation, I bravely peered into my oppressors' eyes and put myself at the mercy of fate.

The sight of the village came as another blow. Himmler's ruffians drove forward groups of villagers taken straight off their ploughs, horses and cattle. They were headed towards the school, just like we were. This was a truly dreadful sight. The shooting ceased replaced by a loud: "los, los!" (faster!) from our oppressors, interrupted at times by the emotional cries of women who stood by the roadside, each holding a bundle for their relatives. Tearful, the women had to keep their distance as every time they got closer to hand the bundles over, rifle barrels would be raised in their direction. This confirmed to me that I was witnessing the Polish tragedy which the Germans referred to as "pacification."

In a large yard, we were all told to lie on the ground face down in orderly rows with machine guns pointed at us. We were sure our lives had come to an end. The braver ones among us raised their heads to assess the situation, while the rest sighed from time to time hiding their pale faces. As it turned out, this was just one means of terrorising people and keeping "the bandits," as they called us, from running.

I was at the edge of the group, and dressed differently than the rest of the people with whom I shared this misery. No wonder that some Gestapo menial found fault in that (as it turned out, this was the same man who had taken my bike). He walked up to me and, in an insane way, started to taunt me wildly, calling me a dog, a bandit, and so on. Finally, he grabbed my white cap and put it on his head, pretending to be a civilian. Since I did not respond to his jeering questions, he stomped heavily on my head. Desperate, I stopped thinking and acted instinctively. I gathered all of my strength and raised my head so that his foot slid off to the side.

Enraged, he called me a slew of other names and began kicking me. He then ordered me to stand up and lie down a dozen times. By that time, I was certain this a run-up to my death, as I heard the Gestapo did this routinely. Luckily, a "move out" command interrupted his bestiality and he let me live.

With my hands tied to those of another victim, I lost all hope of escaping. Yet I still hoped for something unusual to happen and save me. This hope helped me through the atrocities, which were committed in great abundance. Suffice it to mention rifle butt beatings and mass executions carried out before our eyes. The victims were mostly Jewish, but a few dozen Poles, allegedly guilty of something, also paid with their lives.

I will never forget the horrible morning when the German looters raided the tranquil village of Tuchanie, to pacify it, of course. Before sunrise, we only heard remote gunshots, grenade explosions, moaning and yelling. Eventually, the entire village was engulfed in flames. As it turned out, the Germans murdered 60 of its residents, including many of women and children.

These were the kinds of circumstances that our prisoner procession experienced on the way to our destination, while we suffered from thirst and heat. Two days later, we arrived at the gates of the Trawniki camp which was the outer ring of the infamous Majdanek. The “masters of our lives” sorted us into groups of one hundred with an expression of butchers and gods all in one, and shut us up in a yard behind barbed-wire fences. I happened to be the one hundredth and first person in a row, and some Gestapo bigwig put me in charge of his hundred, as he held me at gunpoint.

My outrage at this rendered me speechless for a while, but I kept nodding, unwillingly hoping the nomination could be my chance to escape. In the meantime, things went from bad to worse. The walls of our prison were now barbed-wire fences. From behind them, we were watched by slant-eyed Soviet slaves in German service. Our roof was the sky, cloudy by day, star-sprinkled and almost frosty by night, our beds: black rocky slag.

Our meals, if you can call them that, were, very precisely: 100 grams of bread covered in blue mildew, and a cup of water brought directly from the Wieprz River. Each of us felt the effects of this diet by day three, as our empty stomachs made us nauseous. On one occasion, when I picked up bread from the kitchen, the cook (who, by the way, was Czech) offered me a bowl of bean soup whose very smell was mouth-watering. After I had a few spoonfuls, I felt

I couldn't swallow any more. I carried the rest of it to my friends in a loaf of bread. The incident showed me what hunger was.

Even worse than the hunger were the freezing temperatures at night, and having to lie motionless through the night for 12 hours. By morning, we felt like having been nailed to a cross, and, to make things worse, weakened by the starvation. For our morning amusement, we did warm up exercises in lieu of breakfast. At first, the common experience of misery bonded us strongly together. We supported one another as best we could, keeping up our spirits and coming to one another's rescue when needed. However, after a few days, our mind-sets changed completely, most likely influenced by the famine. The noble feelings were replaced by the instinct of self-preservation, which made us fight over every bit of bread and stoop to informing on one another and stealing. The weaker among us fell ill, many went mad or suffered a nervous breakdown. We had to hide such people from the Germans, who had their own ways of relieving them from their misery. Even there, the oppressors didn't cease to terrorise us. Every morning, two Nazi thugs would come by to shoot a few of the 16,000 prisoners dead, making us watch the executions through the wire fence.

In other words, the place became unbearable. All of us felt innocent and expected an imminent release. Yet, what our tormentors had in store for us was even worse – Majdanek. Our departure was arranged in a particularly perfidious way. They rounded us up in a separate fenced-off section of the camp, leaving a narrow passage in the barbed-wire fencing. We were made to lie one on top of another and watch ten Gestapo men holding long leather whips form a row. Upon hearing your name, each of us had to run the gauntlet and absorb a barrage of lashes aimed at the face. Most of the unfortunate wretches lost their bearings after the first blows and ran blindly trying not to get hit and getting stuck on the wires or having the barbs pierce their eyes, giving the bullies the satisfaction of being able to torture them even more. The abuse continued until dawn, varied by the lynching and shooting of selected victims. I will never forget one of the tyrants who passed right in front of me holding a thick birch-wood stick soaked in the blood of a freshly killed

victim. I couldn't get my head around how such a thing was even possible. However, this is what it was.

Before I could even calm down, I heard my name being called. All fatigue gone in an instant, I yelled: "here!" I only looked for that narrow passage and could almost feel the whip blows coming down. Then someone screamed I was a centurion [having earlier been put in charge of a group of one hundred prisoners - Trans.] and I was told to step aside. In fact, being brought to the side created a terrible feeling of uncertainty, as there was no telling whether I wouldn't end up being even worse off. However, as it turned out, I was part of the ten per cent of the people who would be spared. I collected the pass document with a sense of unspeakable relief, although I was teary-eyed, thinking of my friends facing two months of torment ...

WARTHELAND

1

Genowefa Krzoska

born 08.01.1932 in Poznań

*During the occupation, she resided at ul. Wołkowyska 30/3, Poznań,
where she still remains.*

Student of Grammar School XIX of Poznań, Year 5

What hurt me the most was to watch my parents work hard. When my sister turned twelve, she was assigned to a factory job. She toiled at a machine, depleting her strength. She wasn't ready for such heavy labour! When she returned home in the evening, there was more hard work waiting for her. She had to take care of herself on top of everything, mend her clothes, do a whole number of chores. We all felt wearied and drained. I also had a little sister and she needed to be cared for. The garden required our attention as well as, there simply wasn't enough time to do it all.

Mum was also exhausted from work. She was expected to produce 65 pairs of trousers a week, and that alone was a tall order. Who can manage to work a sewing machine ten hours a day? The same sewing job, day in day out! And then she had to take her output to town! Whether in winter or summer, it was always hard. To carry such weight over such a distance – it just wastes one away. And how it ruined her eyesight! She often felt piercing pain in her eyes from exhaustion. She frequently stayed up late at night sewing to finish things and would still fall behind her schedule. I just couldn't bear watching mum work like this. I did all kinds of little things to relieve her. Sometimes mum would not deliver on time as she fell behind on her sewing and they threatened her with punishment. But they couldn't force her to do the impossible! She just couldn't do it and no violence could change that.

Then, one autumn, they took me out of school and assigned me to a farm job. I had to work from 7am to 7pm with an hour's break

for lunch, which I had to go home to get. And home was more than a half an hour's walk away. Initially, the work wasn't too hard. We followed a machine and picked up potatoes. But it was tedious, I was tired and hungry, as I got quite an appetite from being out in the field all day, and there wasn't enough food at home to get one's fill. I returned home tired and drained. And there was more work waiting at home. I put more wear on my clothes in the field than I would at home ... There wasn't that much that I could do at home in the evenings as I came back tired and sleepy. There was a lot of work and little time. And then I had to rush in the morning to make it to work on time! I worked all day, in terrible cold or heat, as the weather varied. I then came back home late in the evening. This is how my days went by ...

It was even worse when we were picking cabbages or beetroots. Our hands would go numb from the hoeing and our backs hurt. Working all day with your back bent is no fun! I always looked forward to the evenings when it was time to go home. That meant at least a little rest over night, but then it was back to work the following day.

I worked like that for over a month, but it seemed like an eternity. However, all this ended! And now I was able to help mum out around the house a bit more. These five years of German occupation were really hard on us! ...

2

Juliusz Janiszewski

born 29.03.1932 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Woźna 16/11 in Poznań.

Currently: ul. Dąbrowskiego 64, Poznań

Student of Grammar School XVII in Poznań

Around mid-September, posters appeared on building walls in Poznań (then called "Posen") calling on Polish children to attend their schools. I went to school, too, surprised that no classroom had a cross hanging in it, not even a small picture or drawing. I was

also surprised that the school headmaster arrived in the presence of a German officer who ordered our teacher never to speak Polish out loud. We had three classes in German and only one in Polish! We could only write in old-German script and it had to be in German too. We didn't get to enjoy this school very long anyway. The final class was held in School 5 at ul. Wszystkich Świętych 1, on 15 November 1939. On the following day, I learned that our teacher, Pani Wachowska, was deported to the General Government.

What followed was a long time without textbooks and notebooks. During this time, I suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of the Germans. For instance, wherever I showed up out of town I would get a beating from the Hitler Youth. There were various other forms of maltreatment as well. Still, never during the entire war did I ever forget how to think and feel in Polish, despite all the thorns they generously put in our side. The two biggest ones were the arrest of my father for "high treason" at his workplace on 24 June 1940, after which he never returned home, and our near deportation at two in the morning on 21 February 1941. What kept them from displacing us was the three heart attacks that my mummy suffered that night.

At 12.30pm on 12 September 1942, I began my first German class at a school in the Rataje District, some 2.5 km from my home. Classes in the school lasted 2, 1.5 and $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour a day. Sometimes, when a teacher didn't show up, all classes were cancelled. After we attended school for two weeks, they started sending us off to pick potatoes, cabbage and beetroots for free, for farmers. This kind of work continued for the entire three years of school. When the work was over, we had classes again. Holidays lasted from two to three, but never more than four weeks. During that time, we had to do all kinds of jobs such as pruning small trees in the parks or pulling weeds. On top of this, my mum worked as a maid three times a week for four hours at a time, which made it impossible to complete all the household chores.

School was mostly about ... writing. In grades 4, 5 and 6, which I completed during those three years, writing was the "core" activity. There was also reading and arithmetic (the multiplication table). Other knowledge, which was said to be "very important" but that

“we didn’t need to know,” was adding and subtracting fractions and some German and European geography. We could only write and read in German and, throughout the school, speaking too was only allowed in German. I remember the time when the school “headmaster,” an SS man, beat a boy for speaking Polish in the school yard until his nose was bleeding. Nevertheless, the Polish spirit in the school ran strong. Despite the beatings, the swastikas and Hitler’s images in each classroom, the school had something Polish about it. We disregarded the teacher’s cane and always spoke Polish in the classroom. None of our teachers were trained educators, most of them were the wives of SS men.

In 1944, we were sent to pick potatoes and sugar beets in Oborniki County. We left the school and went to the infamous Arbeitsamt (Labour Office) where a clerk wrote down everybody’s names and gave us the look that froze us to the bone. This work went on for two months, from early September to 15 November. Towards the end, it snowed and, dressed inadequately, we shivered in the fields, where we remained from 6am to 6pm, working hard and carrying weights. As soon as we returned home from this work, we were assigned to earthworks in the Dębiec District. Luckily for us, we only stayed there for two days. The work made me seriously ill – I was bedridden until Christmas. Then, suddenly, out of the blue, came the evacuation of the Germans, military operations, a fire in our house at ul. Woźna 16, all of which seems like a dream ... And now we are free again and I can attend a Polish school.

3

Edmund Stefaniak

born 1931 in Węglewo, Chodzież County

Currently: Grobla 9/25, Poznań

Student of Grammar School 10 for adults

While on my way to a shop to get milk in 1942, I saw Oberleutnant Scholz run up to a bunch of men standing in a street and

start hitting them on the face. “No loitering – disperse!” One of the Poles tried to explain that the German authorities had ordered them to show up there for work. At this, the German started insulting them and made them scatter, as he didn’t want to see groups of Poles loitering around.

The occupation was rough. We weren’t supposed to speak Polish in public. We no longer played in the streets, as Germans would take away our bicycles, balls, etc. They wouldn’t even let us play on ice. We weren’t allowed to watch the Germans play either – whenever we did, they would immediately throw things at us and beat us up.

I was forced to take a job. I was made to work ten hours a day. I had to walk from Ławica to the Grobla gasworks. The Hitler Youth often beat me on the way to work. When I was sick and couldn’t work, the Werkschutz came for me to my home. They locked me and some other boys up in a separate room in the gasworks and whipped us with a cane. I had it rough under the Germans. I had to work and was often hungry and freezing. I will never forgive the Germans for the suffering they caused me.

4

Bożena Jahns

born 14.11.1931 in Kiekrz, Poznań County

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Wroniecka 17a,

Poznań, where she still remains.

Student of Public Grammar School 40 in Poznań, Year 5

In the second year of the war, mummy was forced to take a job. She worked hard in a factory on ul. Św. Marcin from seven in the morning to four in the afternoon. Daddy also worked, from eight in the morning to five in the evening. In the second year of the war, I started attending a school in Rataje, 3km away. I also cleaned at home, cooked lunches and did the shopping. When mum returned from work, she would make supper. When Dad came back home from work, we ate potatoes and soup, then I washed the dishes, made beds, we washed, and my sister went to bed while I did my

homework for school. Mum did some sewing – she made underwear and dresses until midnight, sometimes 1 am.

In the morning, I had to get up at six. At the time mum went to work, dad was only getting up, as his work was very close and he didn't have to hurry. One day mum and dad came home so tired, they didn't feel like doing anything, even though there was lots of work to be done. That night, they had to stay up very late to finish it all.

On the fifth year of the war, I had to take a job and could no longer help out at home as much as I used to. My sister had to take over and do more. My job was in a plant that produced various oils and essences. The good thing about it was that my work was close, in the building in which we lived, although the plant had a different entrance on ul. Mokra. I worked from 7.30 in the morning until five in the evening. The first thing in the morning, I would start a fire in three furnaces, bring coal into the shop and clean up the office. I then split wood for the following day and filled oil and essence containers. Next, I went to the store to take care of office work. I washed and affixed labels on essence bottles. Before departing at 5pm, I had to clock out in the office, to prove I had stayed at work until the end of the day. Then the boss would allow me to go home. The boss then checked if we weren't sneaking anything out. They paid me ten pfennigs per hour, that is three marks per day. Being the youngest, I had to do all the odd jobs.

My scariest experience was in the third year of the war, on 25 May, when the Gestapo showed up at 2am and arrested dad. When mum wanted to give him soap, a towel and a change of underwear, they said, "What for? He will be back tomorrow!" On leaving, dad said goodbye to us all. We cried and wanted to follow him into the hallway but the Gestapo man shut the door in our faces and told us to be quiet as dad was coming back the next day.

From that day onwards things got really dreadful. We didn't have any money and there was nothing to eat. We survived on potatoes and soup alone. Whatever we got from the food stamps, we sent to dad in Fort VII^{*)}. We waited for dad's return for days, weeks

^{*)} Fort VII in Poznań served as the site of a prison and concentration camp.

and months. Three months later, dad came back, ill and weak. The joy we felt from that day onwards was beyond words. Once dad felt better, he returned to work. Since that time, dad was sad and brooding, he didn't want to go anywhere. We kept telling dad to go with us for a walk to cheer him up, get better and be as healthy as he used to be.

5

Janina Tokłowiczówna

born 06.05.1931 in Poznań

During the occupation, she resided at Śródka 3/5, Poznań, where she remains to this day.

Student of Grammar School 19 of Poznań, Year 5

The most fateful day was 20 October 1939. I happened to be at a train station when I noticed an approaching train loaded with prisoners. I suddenly saw my father among the soldiers. I was overjoyed! Paying no attention to the German soldiers, I did my best to get close to him. When I got near him, I became painfully aware of his wound and how wearied he looked. Then a German soldier noticed me and violently dragged me away from my father. Two days later dad was released and returned home. Because of his injuries, he remained in bed for a long time. He then died on 23 March 1943.

6

Ineza Sobecka

born 28.06.1930 in Rogoźno, Żnin County

In 1937, Ineza's parents moved to Zamość. During the war, they died, most likely at the hands of the Gestapo, leaving behind two orphans.

Currently, Ineza lives with her grandmother, Jadwiga Katajiasz at ul. 3 Maja 15, Gniezno.

Student of Public Grammar School 6 in Gniezno, Year 6

It was a beautiful June day in 1940. Early in the morning, we heard violent banging on the door. Several Gestapo men barged in.

With insane and cruel expressions on their faces, they spread out into our rooms, overturned everything and ordered my parents and uncle to get dressed. They took them to the trucks that were waiting outside. Many other men and women in our tenement were arrested on that occasion. No one knew why. My parents disappeared without a trace as the Germans took them into the unknown. Ever since, life became very hard for me and my brother, as we remained all alone and desolate. It hurt badly and my heart is still sore at the thought of that difficult time – I can't express it all on paper. It is all too painful and horrible.

A few months later, we were visited by our aunt from Gniezno. She took us in and gave us care and love. God did not forsake us. Things are good here with my grandmother and aunt.

We nevertheless anxiously await news about our beloved parents and uncle, for whom we sincerely pray to God.

7

Krystyna Warczyńska

born 04.01.1931 in Poznań

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Dominikańska 7, Poznań.

Currently: ul. Raczyńskich 2, Poznań

Student of Public Grammar School 40 in Poznań, Year 5

I worked in a Nivea crème factory. I got up at six and had to be at the factory by seven. My job was to clean glass crème containers. We had to be very quick, to make sure the machine produced as much as expected. Every week, we would go to the Antoninek glassworks to replenish our supply of boxes and bottles.

One day, we were joined by our foreman, whose job was to watch us. As soon as we were done with our work, we took a tour of the glassworks, as the foreman wasn't around – he had gone to the canteen to warm up. We also wanted to get warm and so we ran off. Then, all of a sudden, a girl ran in and said they'd been waiting for us for a half an hour and that the foreman was really angry. We ran

quickly and found him standing by the truck door. He wrote down our names and then hit each of us on the face.

The first thing we had to do on arrival in the factory was to put away the supplies we brought. Afterwards, we were summoned to the office. After they questioned us one by one, it turned out that each of us told a different story. At that, our gaze wandered towards the wardrobe in which they kept the cane. The wardrobe was open – the merciless foreman picked up the cane and punished us again. When he was done, the headmistress said just one thing, with an ugly grimace of a smile on her face: “Eine Woche Strafarbeit!” (One week of penal work!). The sentence brought tears into our eyes – the reason we cried was not because we would work longer hours but because we felt that our treatment was unfair. While we normally worked till 6pm, we were now supposed to continue until 8pm. There would be no pay for this overtime: we would still get the usual seven marks per week.

Mum worked in a laundry. She ironed collars and other clothes. In the evenings, we heard lots of complaints but we quickly retired to bed so as not to be late on the following morning. I had my lunches in the factory and they were good. When I was still in school, our shop was searched. The Germans went from shop to shop and turned everything over. When they came to ours and knocked on one of the walls, there was a hollow sound. They made a hole, looked in with torches and discovered a lot of merchandise. They brought a wagon and started to unload the cache – it contained clothes, coats, fox and other furs, waddings, linings and coat buttons. They ended up loading two wagonloads on a furniture moving wagon called “Hardwig wagons.” And they immediately arrested grandpa, even though the cache contained the stamps of the previous pre-war owner and the full name of the man who hid the things away when the Germans confiscated shop goods. Then they transported grandpa away.

I will never forget 6 August when mummy went to the “Einsatz.” On Saturday, mum received a notice from the Labour Office ordering her to leave the following morning. We were terribly worried and all of us cried. Mum was to become a godmother but now had to leave. We accompanied her in the morning on the way to

the station. And when the train started rolling and everyone left, I remained and watched it disappear from my sight with my dear mummy on board.

8

Ryszarda Krysiakówna

born 08.01.1932

During the occupation in Poznań, she resided at ul. Górczyńska 7a/1

Currently: same address

Student of Public Grammar School 10 in Poznań, Year 6

For me and the rest of my family, the German occupation was a time of mourning. On 6 October 1939, they shot dead my uncle who was the head of the Kórnik Foundation. They also executed 14 other residents of Kórnik in the market square. The victims died chanting: "Long live Poland, let our children take revenge!" Our family was deeply moved, we yearned for the end of this horrible war and dreamed of revenge, but unfortunately, the war continued on and the enormous death toll never stopped growing.

Then the horrifying transports began. We were constantly on edge and I always shook from anxiety in evenings. We had our bundles ready, and perhaps it would even have been better if they had deported us, because my daddy might still be with me. Then came that fateful, horrible Sunday morning of 20 April 1940. At 4.30am, two pot-bellied Gestapo men entered our home. They came for my dad and told him to get dressed and follow them. Oh, what an unforgettable goodbye. All three of us children cried, including the oldest, myself, 13 at the time, and so did my mum but none of that crying affected the thugs. My dad left crying, too. He was also confident, showing the pride of a Pole. We stepped outside and saw that a truck parked in the street already had two other Poles in it. Daddy was the third. We spent the day with mum praying for daddy's happy return.

It wasn't over, as on the following night, five other goons came for my grandpa, my mum's father. On that night, they took many

other Poles, including our provost, Górczyński. The days and weeks that followed the arrest of my dad and grandpa were horrible.

Two months later, we got a letter which said that both ended up in the Dachau concentration camp. Nothing we tried to do to help worked and only God could set them free. My granddaddy is said to have died there on 24 November 1940 followed by my dad on 28 November. This is how our guardians perished. We buried their urns solemnly in Górczyn. This is how my mummy ended up single with us.

Life wasn't easy. Mum worked in a printing shop, and only at night. Being the eldest child, I ended up running the house pretty much all by myself. When the "Einsatz"⁹⁾ started, I was afraid that I too would be summoned to work. Now I can breathe easy, as the German occupation is over.

We were liberated by the invincible Red Army with the immortal Polish Army at its side. I rejoice in this coveted freedom. I am happy to see my girlfriends waiting for the arrival of their dads but am also very sad. There's this voice in my soul that keeps asking: Why will my daddy not return?

9

Zygmunt Krajewski

born 17.04.1933 in Poznań

Currently also in Poznań

Before and during the war resided at ul. Mostowa 24/14

Student of State Grammar School XXXVII, Year 6

During the German occupation, I was taken from my family home and transported to a camp in Kalisz. From there, myself and many other boys were moved to Gmunden, Austria on the Danube River after four months of Nazi indoctrination. Initially, our stay there was bearable and the food was decent. Then we were instructed no longer to use Polish and our ordeal began.

⁹⁾ The term was used in reference to ditch digging duty in the months leading up to the end of the occupation.

The schedule we kept in our rooms, each occupied by forty boys aged six to thirteen, was as follows: we woke up at six in the morning, went through our exercise routine, washed, got dressed, made our beds and had breakfast at 7.30. Then came the roll call and we would start work in the garden: digging, carrying water, and so on.

This was hard work, and many of us ended up with pulled muscles and sick. Every minor transgression, every act of disobedience or use of the Polish language was punished by beating, withdrawal of food or an extra hour of work. I never denied being Polish and, if only to spite them, spoke my language. For that, they would tie me to a post and beat me. But I was tough and unshakeable and persevered.

When the winter came, things got harder as we were all lightly dressed, the Nazi way. German women would come and select the boys they liked.

We were told that our parents were dead and we would now get others. The boys' first and last names were changed to German ones. I remember a few such cases during my time there.

When the German women began to lie to us and offer us candy, I understood it all and responded in Polish, which – needless to say – was punished severely. I still preferred that than the disgrace of being placed in a Nazi family. Whatever they tried, it didn't work on me. Eventually, I managed to escape and, with the help of some good people, return home. I caught a terrible cold and to this day I have a bad bladder. But I didn't forsake my Polish soul.

10

Celina Marciniakówna

born 11.11.1931 in Rąbiń, Kościan County

During the occupation, resided in Rąbiń, where she remains to this day.

Student of Public Grammar School in Rąbiń, Year 4

I, Celina Marciniakówna, born 11.11.1931 in Rąbiń, hereby describe all of my sad memories from the time of the occupation.

When the Germans invaded our Polish land, I was eight years old. This was my childhood, which for most children is joyful, easy and carefree. I myself never experienced such beautiful years of childish delight – all of them were stolen from me by the Germans, who instead gave me a series of gloomy and tragic memories filled with pain and tears. All that I describe here happened in early September. The rumbling of artillery rang out in the distance. There was fire around us. People asked one another in terror what to do and what would become of them. The only answer was: run. But where to? Across the Warta.

This started a mass flight. We ran without knowing our destination, determined to put as much distance between us and the enemy as possible. People from our area only managed to cross the Warta and reach the town of Luciny. There, we set up camps in fields and gardens and by rivers. As we heard that fleeing was futile, and that the enemy was advancing fast and could cross the Warta at any time, we lost all hope and put ourselves into the hands of God. The flight lasted a week, amidst cold weather, discomfort, rain and storms.

When the week was up, we heard the sad news that our village had been taken over by the enemy and that we were to return home. We set out on our way back, low-spirited and fearful, as we all sensed what was to come. The return was much harder as all the bridges had been blown up. We crossed the Warta on boats and took horses, cattle and wagons on ferries. Along the way, we kept encountering German soldiers who would stop us, inspect our documents and tell us to return home.

We reached our village which became our prison, as we were not allowed to leave. All roads were blocked and guarded, the whole village was filled with machine guns. There was no way out and the only thing left to do was to trust in God. Soon afterwards, every Pole had to get registered and be assigned a job. The work was hard and food was scarce. We received ration coupons which were not enough to survive. To stay alive, Poles secretly slaughtered pigs, risking their lives. My parents fell victim to the German violence. This is the worst and saddest memory I have, and one I will never forget.

The enemies, these rascals, took my father and mother to prison and along with them all of my joy and happiness. I remember it vividly.

In the afternoon of 23 June 1941, my parents were at work while my older brother Maryś brought me a tea time meal. My younger brother Janek was playing with some other kids while I was busy with household chores. Suddenly, the police showed up. There were five of them and they wanted to know where my parents were. Terrified, I told them they were at work. At a stern command, I ran to get them while they searched the house. When we got back home, everything was knocked over, the underwear and other clothes lay around on the floor. The search turned up some pork, and so they told my parents to get dressed and go with them to the police station. There, they registered their crime and were sent home. At 9pm, all of us crying children were overjoyed to see our parents back and thought it was over and that they wouldn't take them away from us.

This happy state didn't last long though. A very sad, desperate and painful day came that made us all cry. At 10am on 17 November, the police came back to take our parents. In our despair and weeping, as we said our goodbyes to them, we never imagined that we would never see them again and that we would become orphans. When our parents left, a neighbour took care of us and immediately notified our aunt, who has been caring for us to this day.

Soon afterwards, mum wrote to us saying they were in a prison on ul. Młyńska in Poznań. From Poznań, mum was moved to the Fordon camp while dad went to Wronki. Several times we received very sad news that dad had died. At some point, he was taken to the Mauthausen prison in which he was tortured horribly until his death. Mum was taken to Auschwitz. In February 1943, we received the very sad news that dad died on 20 December 1942. This news came as a heavy blow. At that moment, we children understood that we had been orphaned. We were devastated by the realisation that he had to endure torture during his last days.

We only had mum now, but couldn't help fearing to hear similar news about her. This premonition became a reality in September 1943 when we received the devastating news of mum's death on 6

March 1943. Again, our home filled with despair, crying and pain to the point where we thought we would not be able to survive. However, God watches over orphans and he gave us the strength to endure this adversity.

11

Halina Kowalska

born 08.02.1926 in Konarzewo, Poznań County

During the occupation, resided in Dopiewiec, Poznań County, where her father was an administrator and then manager.

Currently: Brudzewo, Śrem County

Student of Klaudyna Potocka State Girls' High School IV, Class 1b

As early as the first year of the war, a certain German by the name of Kauffman came to the property under my father's administration. Kauffman had lived in Poland for 20 years. He spoke good Polish and, when upset, would speak Polish exclusively. At first he was kind, and did everything to make us feel good. He kept telling dad how he would make sure our family would not be separated. These were the days when young people were taken to Germany for labour. He made my eldest brother dad's helper and the other, although still rather young, manager. One of my sisters got a job in the main property office while the rest of my siblings and myself were told to stay home. Kauffman bragged about us throughout the neighbourhood, although we hated his guts.

But then one day his true nature came to the surface. He tried talking dad into signing the Volksdeutsch list. The scoundrel wanted us to give up our Polish identity. This was out of the question. Having lived for so many years in and for Poland, how could we give it up, along with our faith. After we refused definitively, the horrible tyrant started to persecute us along with all the other people on the estate. The only punishment he knew was beating. Every small transgression, every time we straightened our backs at work or gave a response that wasn't sufficiently clear, he would beat the workers and fine my father. Often, father wouldn't get any wages at all.

The German was a truly formidable man, tall and fat. When angered, he roared like an angry bull, screaming “Poland is not yet rotten”⁹⁾.

I was once witness to such a fit. Kauffman came up to a few girls who were picking potatoes – I never learned what prompted his fit. Anyway, he began roaring like a lion and hitting the girls who naturally scattered all over the yard. Unable to beat all of them, he picked on the local manager, a man even taller than himself who could have crushed Kauffman with one blow. He nevertheless had to stand still while the German kept hitting him on the face mercilessly with his big hand while holding him by the throat with the other. The manager started bleeding but that was not enough. The German came up with the idea to step on the manager’s fingers. Once he vented his rage, he got into his buggy and drove away leaving the manager ill and with impaired hearing.

Beatings of this kind were a daily occurrence. If there wasn’t a beating in the first of the properties, there would certainly be one in either of the two others. One of the worst incidents was the beating of an old man, aged about 60. Again, the reason for the abuse was unclear. No one knew. Perhaps he failed to bow down to the German’s daughter and address her as “Ma’am.” The German summoned him to his office, pulled out his thick cherry-tree club and kept hitting him until the club broke. My sister, over whose head the club was whizzing, had to cower and watch Polish blood being spilled unfairly, dripping onto the desk. In the end, the man could no longer work and was let go altogether.

Kauffman got worse by the day. He brought a young “director” from Germany who used the same methods as himself, except that the young one would close his victims in the wood storage shack in front of the office, order them to take their shirt off and beat them mercilessly until he got tired. You could hear the moaning and the pounding. He would also intrude into the house of any woman who didn’t show up at work and break the cupboard and all the pots with his stick.

⁹⁾ Translator’s note: The phrase closely approximated and mocked the opening words of the Polish national anthem, “Poland hasn’t perished yet.”

This goes to show that perhaps “Mr Kauffman” was not such a degenerate after all and that he was normal, not very different from other old or young Germans. When he approached father again about the shameful signature and was categorically refused, he changed his tactic. He put us all to arduous labour on the estate. He placed my sister in the office. He always threatened to call the Gestapo, to scare father and my brother whom he suspected of sabotage. Oh, how horrible were the days when I would return home after a day’s work in the field (6am to 8pm) to hear of a new torment. Father was such a nervous wreck that he requested a day off on several occasions, only to hear “You will die here” every time.

As the saying goes: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. I think God heard our prayers. One November night, a car holding a German and a “certain lady” crashed on the tracks along the Poznań-Zbąszyń railway. While the Polish driver was unscathed, the others were mangled beyond recognition. I admit we were never as happy throughout the war as we were on that night. In my case though, it took a while for the news of the rascal’s death to really sink in.

With this evil gone, everyone wondered what would come next? Who would replace him? Would he be better or worse? And then he came. Just as edgy as the other. He preferred financial penalties though. As for Sundays, I don’t think we got a single Sunday off all summer. He wasn’t a farmer and sometimes didn’t himself know what he wanted. He fired father twice and hired him back twice again.

I was assigned to work in the granary, which took me from the frying pan into the fire. It was gruelling work – we moved the grain brought from three properties on our backs to the first, second or third floor. Unaccustomed to carrying hundredweights, I felt terrible. Hardly a day went by without me crying. Working from dawn to dusk and being unable to talk to anyone or read anything – that life is fit for an animal, not a human being. And then when the “boss” came, we had to bow down or else he would take it out on father. Only God knows how much this cost me. This one pestered us in other ways than his predecessor but it hurt just the same. All

these five years amounted to one big string of suffering. Nevertheless, we never lost hope.

Then, finally, the the moment arrived when our “boss” left weeping, his parting gift being thousands of thoughts wishing that he would “never reach his destination” or “suffer the way we did”, etc. In our suffering, we trusted in God and found comfort in knowing that He would help us. They didn’t know God, forgot about His power and now He will forget them forever too.

12

Józefa Szulcówna

born 23.10.1921 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided in Tomiczki, Poznań County, “Heinrichshagen”.

Currently: ul. Podkomorska 27, Poznań

Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls’ High School in Poznań,

Year 2 of High School

... My experience was not unlike that of many others. Banished from my home, I had to search for a bearable place to live and stay away from trouble.

After many failed searches, my family and I found some suitable accommodation and I got a job. This is where my most terrible memories begin. I got a brown booklet ID that said I was a “farm worker.” This made me a tiny cog in an enormous machine. I lost myself in it, all I had left was my name, my occupation, the worker ID number and my job. Days went by, grey, monotonous, hopeless ... I walked 2km to my workplace and started work at 5.30am regardless of the weather. An hour’s lunch break was thrown to us like a meat scrap to a dog. After lunch, we continued work until eight, which was the regulation quitting time, or – in fact – until sunset. We were given no respite as the estate was run by a German, a “Pole-eater,” who fanatically hated Poles.

We had our pre-work roll calls at 5.30am sharp, at which the estate clerk assigned us tasks. Those who came late or whose

face didn't take the fancy of the cruel "master" would soon have their backs, faces and the rest of their bodies thrashed with either a leather riding crop, which he used while horse-riding, or an iron-tipped cane. He never deemed the victim's grey hair, old age, begging for mercy, severe illness or dignified state of motherhood to be a sufficient reason to stop the beatings. He pulled no punches, pounding away and leaving lasting black-and-blue bruises or even painful wounds.

I trembled at the very sight of this bully. He hit me like the others, powerfully, making it hurt. The tyrant was mad, he sent people to prison for the most minor faults in their service. His buggy, drawn by a black horse, inspired fear in the field workers.

In the most scorching weather, in direct sunshine, or during a raging storm, he attentively watched every move of the people in the field and spurred them on by cursing, hitting them with his heavy hand or kicking them with his boot. Even when water streamed down the workers' bodies, he wouldn't let us go home. He would go berserk even when people answered the call of nature.

The manager liked to have us work on Sundays and holidays, including Easter. Whenever he fancied having a job completed on a given day, he would keep us toiling until we were finished, even if it meant working through the night. We worked the land by moonlight, to the chirp of grasshoppers, carrying heavy rocks or piles of couch grass. He then thanked us with lashes of his whip.

The manager derived satisfaction from watching delicate female bodies weighed down by a 1.5 hundredweight bag of grain, grist or flour. He liked watching us carry sugar beets in heavy wooden crates or lift Scheffels of potatoes in a piece-work system. The muddy bags stuck to our backs, the water ran down our bodies, we shivered in the wind in our scanty clothing. Young people fell ill, commonly with lung conditions. Terrified of their persecutors and drained of all strength, girls would faint. One of them fell while building a haystack, fractured her ribs and came down an incurable lung disease with chronic fever.

This is how the days of backbreaking farm labour went by. We thinned out swede and sugar beets on all fours for nearly four

weeks, did the repetitive mind-numbing weed hoeing, the tedious piece-work in the harvest season, picked potatoes, threshed hay, collected hay and built haystacks. The sick ones were threatened with camps and beaten. The manager wouldn't send for a doctor, saying that the sooner the ill died, the better for them.

This wretched day-to-day existence was hopelessly desolate. What completed the picture was police checks and the endless fear of losing what little remained of our personal freedom.

Dantean scenes unfolded on the arrival of the Germans on a quiet night. They appeared like a bunch of devils and behaved wildly. Despite the walls, we could hear the spiteful voices, the violent beatings of victims who were later moved out, the heart-rending bellowing of children and mothers. My heart sank at the sight of the skulls staring bleakly from under the high brims of the Gestapo caps. I was at the end of my rope from violent document inspections, cross-examinations, trick questions and searches of our shoddy bundles - the sole reminders of our past, and hateful looks – how repulsive!

In the evenings, German farmers who were party members did their rounds to “see how things were going and what we were up to!” They scattered all over the place like cockroaches, snooped in every nook and cranny, asked about every possible detail, the books we read, the letters we wrote, our past. On snowy winter nights, they moved under our windows like menacing shadows, eavesdropping to catch us out saying forbidden things.

Winter evenings bring back another memory that has stuck firmly in my mind. I was on my way home one day carrying a few Polish books. It was way past curfew and I ran into a police patrol. They skimmed through my documents, hit me painfully and then noticed my books. They tore them out of my bag violently with a triumphant gesture, wrote down my name and told me to show up at the station on the following day. When I turned up, there were two of them there, a rubber whip on the table and, next to it, two of my books. I remember a litany of profanity and insults and how the books landed at my feet and the rubber club on my back. They then hit me in the face and threw out the door. To my joy, they threw the

books out with me. The books were well worth the slap in the face as the very thought of their content gave me fortitude and chased away desperate thoughts.

13

Wanda Kotlarkówna

born 07.03.1926 in Poznań

During the occupation: Ostrów Wlkp. (1939-1941), Berlin – Munitions factory (18.11.1941 – August 1943), Bydgoszcz (1943-1945)

Currently: ul. Kościuszki 4, Kępno

Student of State High School of Kępno, Year 2 of Junior High School

Pages from my diary

April 1940

...Spring is now in full bloom. Orchards blossom, meadows turn green, the whole world enchants me with its beauty. How wonderful it would be to get on a bike and race with the wind somewhere far away, as far from this place as possible, somewhere where I could feel completely free and could spend an hour or two or even a whole day studying or reading a book. As little as this is to ask, even this wish is now unattainable. Will this war ever end?!

I work in a bakery, from seven in the morning to seven in the evening, with an hour's break at noon. Since my home is quite far, some 3km away, I rarely go out during the break. I must admit that when the boss is in a good mood, he comes from town to pick us up, as the shop in which I work is out in the outskirts. However, whenever possible, I try not to accept kindness from the German, especially as I don't have a totally clear conscience as far as he is concerned, as I have always been against the ration coupon system and I still am fighting it vehemently. Of course, I realise what will happen when this comes to light (and if the war continues long enough, I will certainly be discovered) but I don't let that worry me. I know I will not be the first or the last one to join the ranks of the

“wires,” as we call the people who live behind barbed wire, that is in the camps.

But that is not what counts now. My bigger concern at the moment is that the war drags on and on, and that people have even stopped talking about its end. I also worry about being forced into inertia, a senseless existence, waiting for a miracle to happen and prophesying. I am fed up with all this – it drains me of the will to live.

We have set up a secret scout organisation, a Red Cross institution. We edit and publish a small newspaper for young people. What is all this compared to what one can do and what should be done? We secretly listen to London radio and generally news from abroad even though it is difficult to learn anything specific.

What engages me the most, and takes the most of my time is my scout activities. Despite mounting difficulties that arise wherever we turn, scouting is going quite well. It’s only that at times my thoughts wander to what will happen to me if the war lasts much longer and I can’t get any education – what will I be good for in Poland once it is restored? Poles are transported to work in Germany nearly every day. Poor people’s fate is even harsher, as they don’t have a home and don’t get to see their close ones. Compared to them, I consider myself very lucky.

Although I have plenty of work, my work could be different, useful, the kind that gives you satisfaction and therefore compensates for all the unpleasantness that goes with it. If the war ended this year, I wouldn’t have many regrets as I would soon make up for the lost schooling. After all, during the war, I acquired some “experience” and that is worth something, too. I think “to be or not to be” wasn’t as important for Hamlet as “what will happen next” is for me...

July 1941

Life often surprises people in more ways than they can dream of. Never in my wildest dreams did I picture myself working as a waitress. It would almost be funny if it weren’t true. A white apron, lace

in my hair, a polite smile on my face – I wear all the usual attributes of a waitress. This is what I have become: after my previous boss was drafted, his wife, who took the shops over from him, “cleansed” the Polish personnel. This put me under the authority of the Arbeitsamt which considered me “worthy” of this esteemed position. Upon hearing this, my mum went into a fit of spasms and God knows what else, but that didn’t make an ounce of a difference: I had to do the job all the same.

Although the restaurant to which I was assigned had a poor reputation in the city, the conditions exceeded my worst expectations. After a month there and many requests, the owner eventually sent me back and wrote to the Arbeitsamt director explaining that she was only letting me go because “weil sie zu gut erzogen ist für meinen Betrieb...” (“she is too well bred to work in my establishment”). As a result, I became an engineer’s secretary in a construction office, which was a bit more to my liking. The days dragged on. Will my entire life be like this? The portents for the immediate future are all miserable and hopeless. You keep hearing that the situation is unchanged and yet some people spread prophecies (probably in the hundreds now) stating plainly that the war will end this year. It is a tough call to decide whether to mock human naïvety or join people in their beliefs. All in all, I don’t care much any more. I console myself with the knowledge that all that heroically spilled blood, all those tears and prayers must bear fruit sooner or later. On the other hand, I fear that “before the sun rises, the dew will eat the eyes.” There is no telling though who will get to see that moment.

In the meantime, the Germans are having their way in whatever they do. They expropriate us, transport us to camps, put us to work – they treat Poles in ways that we never even thought existed. Many Poles (who don’t even deserve the capital “P”) have failed the test and became Germans who are equally if not more eager than the “real ones.” This is, in fact, fortunate as even though it speaks poorly of us as a nation to have so many turncoats, the new Poland will benefit from getting rid of the unworthy element that sells their national dignity for a piece of bread or other purely materialistic reasons.

*Let us persist! Remain together in our misfortune
Let us either wipe out our enemy with iron
Or, if such is the holiest will of the great gods,
Free ourselves of bondage in the refuge of our graves.*

A little while ago, two scouts were arrested in a mass roundup on the charge of listening to foreign radio. They managed not to give anyone away during their interrogation and were both transported to a camp. Our lesson from this is to give up on always having the latest news and to stop listening to the radio. It would be very unwise to endanger ourselves and others for news that is, in fact, rather trivial. One needs to be patient, wait and persist to the end ...

14

Grażyna Harmacińska

born 11.06.1926 in Słupca

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Bóżniczna 11, Słupca.

Currently: same location

Student of State High School in Słupca, Year 2 of Junior High School

... My first job was with a certain Malermeister (painter). I was 15 years old at the time. I found it very hard, as I had to do the kinds of work that would even a strong, grownup woman would find a challenge. None of the other members of our household helped me. I had to keep a whole single-storey house in relative order. Every week, I had to scrub, wash and polish the floors, wash all the windows, do the laundry, cook dinners and darn clothes. Generally, I had to do all this work by myself. All day long, without a moment's rest, dawn to dusk, alternating from one chore to another. I would return home dead tired and go to bed crying as I knew the following day would be just as hard. Then, some time later, I got a different job. The previous German, the painter, let me go, thanks in part to the efforts of my father who couldn't bear to watch me suffer. What I found with the second German, the woman, was that things could be much worse. I went to work at daybreak and returned late in

the evening. It was summer. Some days went by without me ever having as much as a chance to talk to my family as they would still be asleep when I left for work and already in bed when I got back. While at work, I would be called names, insulted and abused all day. At the Employment Office, I was registered as a nanny. In fact, though, I again had to run the entire house, take care of the yard and struggle with some utterly spoiled brats. Only one other Polish girl worked with me. She was assigned to field work, though, and could hardly help me. She was the daughter of a rich farmer. Her parents were old and sick. Her brothers had been deported to Germany and only a 10-year-old boy was left at home. The Germans didn't care. The whole farm wasted away because there was no one to do the work. This girl suffered a lot during her service. She shed many tears and received many beatings! One day, she ran away from work without telling anyone other than me. It is difficult for me to say how long the German woman did her best to extract information from me about her whereabouts. I kept replying "I don't know" to all of her questions. But she kept at it and pulled all kinds of strings until she got the girl caught by the police. They beat her so badly in the Arbeitsamt that she passed out. They knocked out her teeth, bruised her, left her face covered in blood. She had to return to the same German woman, who then triumphed at being able to force a lazy Pole to work.

She abused her twice as much after that at every opportunity. She used whatever object fell into her hands to beat the innocent girl for mere trifles. The girl wasn't allowed to set foot outside the farm. It is hard to describe what she went through. I don't know what happened to her, as I was taken away to another job. I was assigned to a military sewing shop, where I remained until the Russians got there. We were burdened with jobs beyond human endurance. One week we would sew during the day, another – at night. Everyone had to finish their task strictly within the few minutes assigned. The boss stood over us with a watch and timed how long we took to sew a given item. This told him how much we could sew in a day. The sewing machines never stopped. Our eyes hurt from the electric lights, our heads ached from the racket and fatigue. We

weren't allowed to talk, as talking reduced productivity. Every time the boss caught us chatting or sitting idle, he would pick our punishment. The transgressor would have to scrub floors, do the most hateful kitchen chores or work extra hours.

Being ill was not allowed either. The boss would visit the sick in their flats and drag them out of bed and back to work. The ill were forced to "make up for the time they wasted", sometimes collapsing from pain and infirmity. The boss stood over them, smiling ironically, enjoying his power over us and being able to force even the ill ones to work. He said he had never been ill in his entire life and that he didn't approve of people who are and that he simply couldn't understand what sickness was.

We often had to work on Sundays until noon. For any trifle, the boss would punish us and apply various tortures. No one could ever speak up, protest, show outrage or complain. You had to bottle up your hatred and be compliant and humble.

There was a German boy who worked with us and who was a member of the Hitler Youth^{*)}. He was mean and often made us suffer. We had to watch our every word and step, as he would immediately tell on us to the boss. The aversion to Poles ingrained in him was more deep-seated than in most Germans.

A bunch of boys who escaped from a Poznań factory were hiding out in our town. They found it too hard to commute to work every morning and return late at night. If they ended up in a camp, they would starve. Therefore, they preferred the life of a wanted fugitive. They were manipulated by the German boy. He did it so cunningly that no one suspected he could harm anyone. He learned everything he needed to know, why they weren't working, what they were thinking, how many of them didn't have a job, etc. Then, always at night, one by one, he would visit them with gendarmes in their flats and have each of them sent to jail. He was so shameless that he would then visit them in the city jail in their cells and mock them. After a good share of lashes and an interrogation, they would be moved to a prison. We were unable to learn which one though.

^{*)} A party organisation of German youth.

Some of them returned home after the arrival of the Russians, two disappeared without a trace. We still don't know what happened to them. They must have been killed along with thousands of other innocent people ...

15

Aleksandra Lebedziówna

born 11.01.1924 in Gniezno

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Poznańska 22, Gniezno

Currently: Rynek 7, Gniezno

Student of Blessed Jolanta Municipal Girls' High School in Gniezno,

Year 1 of High School

A few months after Gniezno was captured, a decree was passed obliging the residents to register themselves in the Employment Office. I was recovering from a severe illness at that time and was therefore assigned to a tailor. This job protected me from being deported to labour in Germany. I worked at the tailor's shop for a few months. After that, my work documents said "seamstress" under occupation. This got me another job in a newly-opened uniform factory. I was 17 at the time. This was the start of a very hard and mentally wearying job for which I was ill-prepared vocationally. I started work at 6am and ended at 5pm with a half-hour break for lunch, which wasn't even enough for me to make it home.

The factory's workflow system was American, which meant an assembly line. An electric conveyor belt was set up on a narrow table between two rows of electric sewing machines. Parts of coats, uniforms and trousers were placed on the belt. The work was divided among 30 people who sat at machines on either side of the belt. Each of us did a fraction of the whole job and passed it on to the next person until a complete coat or uniform would roll off the far end of the belt. A given person would always perform the same task and therefore become incredibly proficient. One could adjust the speed of the belt as needed. Needless to say, we were expected to give it our best. Throughout the day, we hardly had time to raise our

heads as that would delay the process, as the next machine would demand to be fed.

Obviously, such a system works well for the employer but puts the workers under enormous stress, straining their health and draining them spiritually. Such work is of no value to the worker. Workers become a cog in a machine. Yet, it wasn't just the work that drained us. The factory management tried to suppress any perceived expressions of freedom. Added to this was the anguish of terrible living conditions. We lived in a suburb sharing a single room without a kitchen among four people. Throughout the war, I was constantly hungry for knowledge. When I started to work in the factory, studies became impossible. After I got somewhat adjusted to this work a year later, I realised I was at risk of becoming completely dull, and set for myself the aim of not giving in.

After returning from work, I would study, read and take notes. I always kept my notes at hand during work and whenever I managed to outperform the conveyor, I would pull them out and review them. I also ate my breakfast during working time to be able to use the 15-minute break. Whatever I read during the break would become my food for thought during work. I spent all of my Sundays studying. Often exhaustion took over and I was unable to overcome it by pure will power. I was very hard on myself for that.

Then my studies were interrupted completely. I was assigned to building fortifications for six months. This new way of life was hard, and again took some getting used to. After a day's work digging ditches, I would only have enough time to teach the two children of the farmer where I lived. I impatiently and longingly followed current events in the belief that only the end of the war could put an end to this new ordeal. How many evenings did we spend exchanging delusions about the new Poland that was to be resurrected? How many times did we sing Polish songs in seclusion, with tears in our eyes, wondering together when we would be able to sing them in the open? We spoke a lot about the work that awaited us – the hard but joyous work of restoring our homeland. Would we be able to put these dreams into practice? Weren't we building castles on sand? Time will tell.

*Irena Źelazkówna**born 3.05.1926 in Pałędzie Poznań County**During the occupation, she resided at ul. Górna Wilda 107, Poznań.**Currently: same location**Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls' High School in Poznań, Course I*At a munitions factory^{*)}

During the war, when the Germans forced everyone to work, I was a fourteen-year-old girl assigned to work in a munitions factory. As ordered by the authorities, I was to show up at the factory on a specific date to be taken to my section by the local Wachmeister (shift manager). As I walked there, I tried to imagine my future job – I was fearful but also curious.

My guide took me to a room filled with a racket and banging of running machines, and clouds of dust in which, like in a fog, I made out the shapes of female and male workers going about their daily duties. For starters, I was given a relatively nice welcome from my future foreman. Asked if I'd ever worked anywhere, I replied I hadn't. At that, he smiled sneeringly adding that I would now learn how to work. This didn't take me aback as, despite my young age, I was prepared for something a whole lot worse. What could I do?

I became a messenger girl. My workshop employed 300 people. With so many workers around, there were always good reasons for abuse. After all, there was no shortage of all kinds of tormentors. They were all headed by a German man who climbed up through the ranks from being an ordinary locksmith to an engineer. As he arrived at the workshop every morning, he would use different ways to greet the in-coming workers. He kicked some of them for failing to say hello respectfully enough. He greeted others with a thorough beating for inaccurate performance, combined with verbal insults

^{*)} The Cegielski Works (D.W.M. = Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabrik), Poznań, Górna Wilda 88.

about Poles. By and large, the days were filled with arduous labour performed by the Poles who served the Germans. During my extended stay in the factory, I often fell victim to abuse. Nevertheless, that was all bearable.

However, one day they surprised me by making me a machine operator. Naturally, I am not talking about a sewing machine, which I might even want to use. I am referring to a heavy lathe, which was very difficult to operate. And this heavy work was assigned to us women. I was barely tall enough to reach the controls, not to mention performing the actual work. Unable to mount a piece in the machine with my hands, I used a hammer. The hammer wasn't as light as regular hammers and, when I used it, the impact was so powerful, it damaged a part of the machine. For that, amidst some shoving and hitting, I was moved to a different machine: a vice.

Contrary to the lathe, the vice was small, mounted on a proper workbench where special files were used to shape a particular item. However, even this was hard, particularly on the hands. The feet suffered too, as they got tired from carrying my weight all day.

This didn't take long, as I was moved back to the lathe. I was caught up in a long cycle of alternating day and night shifts. Wearing factory overalls and shirts, our sleeves rolled up to the elbows, we worked standing at our machines for eight hours on end. Those who left their machines for longer periods were soon punished severely. To make things worse, the two Polish specialists who sharpened and set our machine blades were replaced with two Germans who did little by themselves other than driving us to work. Neither of them had the faintest idea of what a professional turner should do. Set up poorly, the machines no longer produced quality pieces, which of course was blamed on us. We spent many Sundays repairing the defects, of course for free. At some point, our shop was flooded with orders. They demand the kind of precision work that should only be done by an expert turner. It was nevertheless assigned to us girls. They timed us carefully, so we wouldn't take a minute too long to complete each task. The recommended time limit of 30 minutes a piece was reduced to ten. Every item was installed on five machines and worked on each of them. It was essential to be ac-

curate – maintaining the standard cost us a lot of effort, leaving us very tired. As motivation for diligence and precision, we were threatened with the infamous Schtraflagers, or penal camps. None of this scared us – many fearless Poles intentionally produced junk, which of course didn't go unpunished.

We were then given another job that was equally hard and challenging, but which was particularly important to them. They wanted to deliver as many pieces as possible every day, and therefore watched our every movement like hawks. They set the machine transmissions to the highest speeds, disregarding the hot shavings that flew off all over the place burning and hurting people. As I made one such piece on a machine, I was overseen by our German foreman. After I went over the surfaces three times having made sure it was properly mounted, I started working it to make the finished product. Once done, I put it into a gauge and found it was ten units off. Before I could figure out what had gone wrong, I felt the German's heavy hand on my face, as he slapped me twice on both cheeks. This wasn't all, as he punished me with three working Sundays in a row. It wasn't until the end of this punishment period that the bruise under my eye I got during that incident began disappearing.

After every meeting organised by the General Director of the Factory, the “venerable” Schneider, the Germans would treat us twice as badly. The director gave them lessons on how to treat Poles. They would then come back and begin nit-picking and finding fault with the smallest flaws in our performance.

One day, as I operated the machine as usual, I witnessed a scene that left me dumbfounded. A frail boy stood in front of a muscular German man who kept hitting him ruthlessly with a thick leather strap while the boy swayed on his feet.

Even that didn't satisfy the mean, beastly nature of the bully. He grabbed the boy by the collar and powerfully threw him aside. The boy hit a sharp edge of the iron machine so hard that he died three days later. What prompted this merciless maltreatment of a weak child? The boy finished his work and washed his hands three minutes before quitting time. This was reason enough to cause the

boy's death. This was not the first or last incident of this kind. Time went by. One day, month, year after another would pass and nothing changed in the gloomy factory existence.

The same monotonous clatter of running machines, the same repetitive, arduous dirty work, the same violent German invaders.

17

Maria Jankowska

born 22.08.1928 in Poznań

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Wroniecka 12, Poznań. Currently:

Sacre-Coeur Boarding School in Polska Wieś at Pobiedziska

Student of Comprehensive High School of the Congregation of the Heart of Jesus (accelerated track) in Polska Wieś at Pobiedziska,

Year 1 of Junior High School

During the German occupation in 1941, a decree was passed ordering any girls above 12 years of age to take up employment on pain of death. Not to put my family, which had already lost some of its members, at risk, I went to the Arbeitsamt to sign up. There, amidst a crowd of other girls, I was assigned to one of the infamous munitions and weapons factories, called D.W.M. We worked from six in the morning to six in the evening. Initially, we were treated gently and assigned to relatively light jobs. This didn't last long, though. After a few months, myself and a few other girls were moved to a large hall filled with enormous multi-storey machines powered by electricity. The floor overflowed with oil and all other kinds of obnoxious greases, the stinky air was filled with metallic dust and noxious fumes. I was terrified to have to mount various items in the machine which were then cut. I remember my utter panic at being put in front of a huge machine and told to operate it myself.

This fear wasn't groundless, as I knew that one false move could leave me without fingers or even an entire hand. Such accidents happened very frequently. There were also a few fatalities after a machine caught someone's hair. I must admit they warned us sternly about that. We were given headcloths which we tied around

our heads so that no hair was showing. But then even these precautions weren't always enough! When an accident happened, the foremen would bring blood-covered hair to us, often with a piece of scalp attached to it, and hang it on a wall. This was to serve as a reminder. They also often threw severed fingers at us, taking pleasure in our fright.

There were several foremen overseeing our hall. The majority of them were staunch Nazis, hardly any of them showed signs of human nature. There were some whose very recollection today makes me tremble. One of the worst of them was a cripple with a humped back. His face was deformed, and anyone smiling in his presence made him think he was being ridiculed, evoking the inconceivable reaction of hitting the person's head with a metal rod. I myself got hit by him a few times. He demanded accurate and quick work. He was also very vindictive.

Anyone who missed a day at work would immediately be taken to the Żabikowo labour camp. Therefore some girls often continued working despite a fever of 39°. They would only go on sick leave if a German doctor approved it. The maltreatment grew worse and worse.

In time, we gave up our original rebellious thoughts. We grew indifferent to whatever happened. We sank into a terrible state of detached stupor. Days, weeks, even years went by.

At 13 and a half, I got a heart condition, and also a mild lung disease. Lung disease was rampant, due to the terrible air we were breathing at work, the hard work itself and the inadequate food. At noon, we were given something that resembled soup, but was too revolting to swallow. No one ate it. Due to an illness, I got two weeks off and then only worked until 3pm for a few months. But then, six months later, they pronounced me fit for work just like all the others.

At this, I returned to the daily torture. I would get up at 4.30am and return home at 7pm, sometimes even later. Therefore, on returning home, all I had strength for was to eat supper and retire to my bed. The worst thing of all was being unable to study. I so wanted to be back at school again. All this lasted until Saturday 20.01.1945. Two weeks later, we were liberated from this hell by Soviet forces.

*Stefan Moszczyński**For the five years of occupation, he was employed at Cegielski Works in Poznań.**Currently: ul. Winogrody 143, Poznań**Student of State Cooperative High School in Poznań, Year 3*

... In 1940, I was captured in a street and sent off to the Cegielski factory, at the age of fifteen. There, I became a foundry worker. I worked twelve hours a day, sometimes even more. We were beaten with rubber clubs for even the slightest transgression and I was not spared. We didn't even have all of our Sundays off, as even the slightest problem during the week was enough to make us work on the following Sunday.

Foundry work was very hard. In scorching 80 degree heat, I had to carry 1.5 hundredweight moulds and fill them with boiling steel. The gases which were exuded during the casting process wreaked havoc with our lungs. Every few weeks, young people would be sent to the "Kutno hospital" with active tuberculosis, where they would die several days later. To this day, I thank God for giving me a strong and resilient body.

The most painful memory from that time is the death of my late father. One night, two Nazi thugs showed up to take him to a concentration camp. Since dad had a heart condition and had seen a lot of grief, he died suddenly of a heart attack without as much as a good bye. Being the eldest son, I became responsible for providing for the whole family ...

*Zenon Schneider**born 05.03.1928 in Poznań**During the occupation, he resided at ul. Winiarska 74 in Poznań, where he remains to this day.**Student of Public Grammar School 17 in Poznań. Enrolled in a course for adults.*

It was on a Saturday in the summer of 1943. It was 2pm which meant quitting time^{*)}. We changed our clothes quickly, without

^{*)} He worked in the Siemens-Schuckert factory at ul. Fredry 12 where he was responsible for electrical and lighting installations.

washing, everyone grabbed their bag and ran to pass the gate as soon as possible and breathe a little easier after the strict rigours of the workshop. Unfortunately, on that day, relief was not in the cards. We heard the hateful sound of the foreman's whistle calling on all of us students to assemble. All of our faces fell, and there were about thirty of us there. Each trying to guess what this was about, inadvertently tidying up our lockers and looking at our bags and the fellow workers. Soon enough an impatient sharp voice yells: "Schnell! Donnerwetter noch mal!" We run out into the yard and skilfully line up in two rows. The foreman, a sinewy Volksdeutscher whom we named Czerwonka, gives us a brief speech in German telling us that our misbehaviour, laziness and, as seen today, our mockery of himself, would land us all an afternoon of extra work as punishment.

The bubble of all of our plans for the rest of the day bursts instantly. A sharp command sends us marching in fours. We communicate with our looks and gestures as no talking is allowed – we are expected to march in perfect silence. Czerwonka follows us about fifteen meters behind. There is muffled muttering and then a soldier's song rings out: "Przy piechocie fajno jest!" ("It is good to be in the infantry!") We walk onto the pavement. There is a German woman with a dog in front of us. We head straight for her – she steps aside onto the street but opens up her trap, which makes us sing even louder. Czerwonka goes blue in the face, catches up and threatens us.

We now walk in silence, until suddenly my four start singing the very same song we are being punished with extra work for. The others pick it up: "Mister Czerwonka, I'm in a good mood today ...!" The German looks at us with the eyes of a basilisk, his jaw shaking – this certainly looks like trouble. Despite that, we are happy to have made this display of slave rebellion as, unfortunately, we are nothing more than slaves. We finally reach our workplace.

On command, we line up in a disciplined double row. As the names of my foursome are read out, we step forward. Enraged, the German folds his fist and punches us on the face making us swagger and close to losing balance until a blow on the other side of the

face sets us straight. My friend is bleeding and spits out a tooth. Next Czerwonka grabs a rubber cable and jumps on the two rows of people. Finally, with each of us bruised in several places and the foreman dead tired, he snarls: “Zur Arbeit” (“Off to work”) followed by profanity. We get down to work and, during its course, many of us get further thrashings.

Finally, at 7pm, a whistle blows and the foreman delivers a lengthy speech. Out of concern for our health and to provide us with physical education, he explains, we will now have a sports class. It starts with a march which soon becomes a run. The foreman positions himself in a corner, wielding his rubber cable and whacks everyone who confuses his steps or who comes around last. We are pushed to the limit. Our hearts are pounding, we trip more and more often. Czerwonka grins jeeringly. Finally, we’re saved by the whistle. Then roll call, a short speech filled with insults and at long last: “Jungs, auf Wiedersehen!” (“Good bye, boys!”) Without a reply, we disperse slowly. As we walk away, we think of many ways to take revenge. Unfortunately, he escaped, like many others.

20

Janusz Jaźwiecki

born 25.03.1927 in Kalisz

Currently residing at ul. Babina 8, Kalisz

Student of Merchants’ Society Trade High School in Kalisz,

Year 2 of Junior High School

...I remember vividly hearing a hurricane-like pounding on the door at 11pm. Awakened, I immediately ran to the door. I had no idea who I was letting in. At the door, I heard an authoritative stern voice ask me in German, “Who lives here?” I couldn’t answer. My head filled with many chaotic thoughts. After a moment, I got a grip. I replied. Two gendarmes and a civilian walk in. The civilian is Polish, a colleague who met with the same fate as myself. Once inside, I hear a command in German: “ID and food ration coupons

on the table. And you, get dressed – you are going with us.” I stand there dumbfounded. I want to know where to. The answer is “You will find out when we get there.”

The harsh and loud conversation wakes up and frightens all other members of the household. I had no idea what I was doing, my mind fixated on the single question of where I was going. But with all the rushing, I started getting dressed mechanically. My mum kept a cool head and immediately packed two changes of underwear and some food in a suitcase. This was all I was able to bring on my trip into the unknown.

We set out. In the hallway, I get a warning backed up with the cocking of a pistol. “Try to run and I’ll shoot you like a dog”. We walk, they show us the way. Surprisingly, it only takes us a dozen or more minutes to reach our destination, which is the cellars of a police station. They lock us up together in a cell. It is only now that I make friends with my fellow detainee. We only remain in the cell for 32 hours. We eat the food we got from home which they let us keep.

On day two, at eight in the morning, the whole bunch of us get a ceremonious bath. We are destined to join a transport of 64 people. One hour after our bath, we are at a station leaving for labour in Łódź. Once in Łódź, we are brought to a training centre where we are to remain for three months. After the training, we are to go to the Reich for labour. At the training centre, we worked eight hours a day in a mechanical workshop. On top of this, we were assigned to such chores as peeling potatoes, scrubbing rooms, moving coal and many others for at least another four hours a day. The discipline was incredibly strict. For instance, when, during the potato peeling hour, one of our colleagues felt sick and fell asleep instead of peeling, a guard noticed him during his rounds and woke him up with a riding crop. The colleague jumped to his feet and, disoriented, began to run from the room. He was soon caught and beaten unconscious. For 24 hours, the doctor doubted that he would live. This was just one of many other similar cases I witnessed during my stay. Added to this was the hunger that sapped all the strength out of our young bodies.

On completing the three-month course, I was brought to Poznań to work at the Cegielski Factory (D.W.M.) where the real ordeal began. The mistreatment was brutal, the food intolerable. For 20 months after my arrival, I worked 12 hours a day in a mechanical workshop. The work was physically demanding, exhausting in fact, and highly responsible. Falling asleep on the job during the night shift was out of the question. There was no tolerance of errors and the only way one could get time off was if the factory doctor approved it. The Polish workers used to say, "The factory doctor will only excuse you if you bring him your head on a wheelbarrow." That wasn't far from the truth, as the only ones that got the doctor's excuse were those who would be in a coffin within two weeks.

They insisted on having us work on Sundays, apparently to spite the people who, like their forefathers, considered this particular day of the week as dedicated to worshipping God.

Many other ideas were conceived only to oppress the defenceless Poles. For all our transgressions, we were sent to the Gestapo, who came up with inhumane punishments. I, too, was once on the receiving end of such punishment for skipping work on a Sunday. I will remember this punishment for a long time. I was called upon to report to the Gestapo. When I did, they asked me about the cause of my absence. I tried to make it as straightforward as I could and said that "my last change of clothes fell completely apart and I had to go home to get another so I would be fit for work." Back came the reply, "I don't consider this a legitimate excuse – the whole factory work force could take off for this reason." I was then given a wordy speech which I wasn't focused enough to follow, after which "Mr. Officer" told his helper to bring a riding crop and give me an advance whipping and ordered me to show up again at eight the following morning.

I noticed I was being watched closely after that. I reported back to the station as instructed. They told me to squat for half an hour, hold a half-squat stance for three quarters of an hour, and then again with my face against the wall.

These penalty exercises were followed by a break of several minutes as "the Gestapo officers," had to have lunch. When they were

ready, they loaded a whole bunch of people like me onto a truck and, with pomp and parade, moved us to the Żabikowo labour camp outside Poznań. There, we were taken over by “other gentlemen” who first tested our ability to run under a rain of whip lashes. During this run, one of our colleagues collapsed from exhaustion. They immediately jumped on him and began to help him recover with sticks. I never found out what happened to him later. They cut our hair, handed us picks and spades, pointed at some large tree stumps and told us to dig them out. We were to work at full tilt without a moment’s rest. You couldn’t even straighten your back as that would evoke a rain of riding crop lashes. The work lasted until late in the evening and then continued the following morning. We rested through both nights. Within these 48 hours, we got no food. We were then released with orders to return to our previous jobs. We were so weak we could barely walk home...

21

Maria Lewandowska

born 01.01.1930 in Żnin

During the occupation, she resided at Zaulek Katarzyński 8, Śródka – Poznań

Currently: ul. Wrocławska 9, Poznań

Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls’ High School in Poznań, Year 1c

I was woken by loud knocking on the gate^{*)}. I looked around in fear. A pale moon lit the face of my peacefully sleeping brother. Everyone else was sound asleep, unaware of the imminent trouble. I heard steps at our door. I shivered... I could hear men’s voices. Torch light shone in through cracks in the door.

The doorbell rang impatiently. I jumped to my feet and woke up all the others. The German thugs ran out of patience. The door gave in under pressure, the door chain broke and the Gestapo men burst in, yelling terribly. They tell my father and brother to get dressed. What are they taking them for? It is for being Polish. My loved ones

^{*)} In September 1942.

had to leave without saying good bye. On leaving, father tried to come closer to mum to say good bye and console her but an SS man shoved him away with an insult. On departing, the poor souls only managed to say, "God be with you" for which they got kicked by their tormentors. Even after they left, we still stood there looking around in a daze^{*)}. We didn't shed a single tear. We were too upset.

Weeks went by without any news. Finally, on that fateful day of 2 September, a package arrived with the final letter. We never saw my brother again. Father came back after his camp was liberated.

22

Walburga Szulcówna

born 10.07.1924 in Drawsko, Czarnków County

Deported to the General Government in December 1939. She stayed, in this order, in Sobolewo near Garwolin (1939-1941), Huta Dąbrowa, Garwolin County (1941-1943), Warsaw (1943-end of September 1944) and Rabka (October 1944 to February 1945)

Currently: ul. Stalina 44, Chodzież

*Student of St. Barbara State High School in Chodzież,
Year 3 of Junior High School*

... On 9 November 1939, mass arrests were made throughout Mogilno County, allegedly to pre-empt demonstrations announced for 11 November. All the detainees, including my brother, were taken to the Strzelno camp. In the camp, the Nazis maltreated him savagely for having organised the police in Orchowo and for sinking rather than surrendering his weapon on the arrival of the German invaders.

After he steadfastly refused to become a Volksdeutsch, truly horrible torture began. Several times every day and night, he was brought into a separate cell where the Nazi thugs beat him with rubber clubs until he passed out. His cellmates saw his appalling

^{*)} Both escaped. My father went into hiding in Poznań, my brother ended up in Warsaw, took part in the uprising and recently returned from captivity.

agony and shared their pillows and blankets with him but, unfortunately, he could neither sit nor lie, not even stand up straight. Unable to bear the torture any more, he requested that his fellow inmates finish him off.

After a week, the camp was dissolved, with the exception of twelve prisoners (including my brother) kept as hostages. All of my parents' efforts to get my brother released proved to be in vain. All that father got was a visiting permit. When he saw him, my brother was black and blue all over, including black eyes, his teeth knocked out. This is the condition that the Germans put their prisoner in. On the night of 3 December, all of the hostages were moved out, never to be seen again. The locals believe they were murdered in the forests outside Strzelno...

23

Urszula Kotowska

born 28.09.1928 in Ostrów Wlkp.

*During the occupation: resided at ul. Parkowa and then ul. Koszarowa 32
in Ostrów Wlkp.*

Currently: ul. Parkowa 1, Ostrów Wlkp.

*Student of E. Szczaniecka State High School 2 in Ostrów Wlkp.,
Year 3 of Junior High School*

During the German occupation, schools for Polish youths were shut down. Some Poles made an effort and helped establish clandestine schools which provided young people with an opportunity to continue their education.

I will never forget 24 December 1940, the day I attended my first secret class^{*)}. I found this kind of learning very peculiar, and every time the doorbell rang, I was scared we had been discovered by the Germans. In time, doorbells no longer made an impression on me.

^{*)} The first secret classes were held in the flat of the Neutzigs at ul. Gimnazjalna 16, Ostrów Wielkopolski.

People not only feared being raided in their homes during class. It was also dangerous to carry books around in the street. If the Germans picked up the scent of clandestine education, they would not rest until they tracked us down. Therefore, we hid the textbooks and notebooks we carried in whatever we could: milk pitchers, baskets and even specially made bags we hung around our necks under our coats.

We didn't always hold classes in the same flat. Every time, we gathered in the place of a different student. Often, we would cancel classes when the alert level was particularly high. Despite all that, we didn't let the difficulties discourage us – we were eager to learn. What scared us most were the examinations. We trembled like leaves in the wind, afraid we would fail. We needn't have worried though, as we would always pass one way or another. Studying became harder after I started to work. We would then often hold classes on Sundays, as my other school mates worked too, each of them at different hours...

24

Tadeusz Gutowski

born 15.10.1919 in Kazimierz Biskupi, Konin County

During the occupation, he resided in Kazimierz Biskupi where the events described here took place.

Currently: ul. Poznańska 5, Słupca

Student of State High School of Słupca, Year 4

... I worked in an office located in a building adjacent to the Gendarmerie building. As one of my office walls adjoined the interrogation room, I happened to hear many conversations. Hardly a day went by without some noise coming out of this torture chamber. Groaning, words said in pain, the sound of whipping, punching, kicking, the yelling of the tormentors mixed into one big complaint raised to the skies that curdled one's blood.

It is winter. A windy blizzard rages outdoors, throwing blinding snow into people's eyes. You wouldn't even force a dog out. However, a German gendarme, bundled up in his sheepskin coat, is overseeing his team of poor Polish prisoners "exercise" in the courtyard. Three men in their prime, one elderly man and one woman, all frozen to the bone and bruised, are forced to march continually in circles. The lesson goes on for three hours. Those who lag behind or fail to march briskly enough get whipped.

A young man, aged twenty plus, who has escaped his workplace, was hiding in the village. He had the misfortune of falling into the hands of the police. They triumphantly brought him to the police station all tied up. They start the damn interrogation. After a few rounds, the poor man is in a sorry state. They make him wash his blood off at the well. At one moment, someone calls the torturers off. The accused musters up whatever strength he has left and tries to run. The chase party soon frustrates his attempt. The fugitive runs into a dead-end courtyard and, with nowhere to go, jumps into a well. The sound of water splashing and the noise of the winch give him away. Despite all kinds of threats, he steadfastly refuses to come out. One of the gendarmes descends down the well and with much difficulty retrieves the "criminal". Imagine the suffering the poor man must have gone through afterwards!

... Trucks with canvas covering their beds and trailers in tow filled with bundles, crossed the city every few hours, heading for the forest. At first, no one took notice. After a while though, we grew concerned. Bundles, police with rifles in the back – what is the meaning of all this? Why are they going to the forest? It certainly isn't for wood. Soon, the mystery is solved – the trucks were used to transport thousands of people who were murdered in the forest, with all evidence of the crime covered up carefully. The campaign went on for weeks. Once the "schlattrupp*" was done, the locals covertly discovered three large, well-camouflaged mass graves. A while later, the graves caved in and some of trees planted there wilted ...

*Nina Drewnikówna**born 30.07.1928 in Poznań**During the occupation, she resided at ul. Ratajczaka 10/10,
where her mother was arrested.**Currently: ul. Sołacka 7/1, Poznań**Student of Public Grammar School 17 in Poznań. Enrolled in
a course for adults.*

... 15 January, 1943. This date was etched deeply into my memory, leaving an indelible trace. I will never forget it, just as I won't forget my dear, beloved mummy. It was 11pm. We were all asleep, only mum was still sewing. All of a sudden we heard a knocking. I sat up in my bed. I forced myself not to cry out in horror. The Gestapo was at the door. Mummy greeted them with the utmost composure. She even put on a smile. They ordered her to take some underwear and food. Then came the farewell. Smiling, she kissed us, made the sign of the cross over each of us and said her last words, "Don't cry, dear kids, mummy will be back."

And that was it. Gone with her was all of our happiness, the bright joy she radiated was now replaced with sorrow and despair. This night and all the nights that followed were one horrible torment. We paced in our flat, like ghosts waiting. Perhaps she would return? But all our hopes were dashed.

A few weeks later, we got our first letter, filled with joy, longing and all that mummy's poor heart felt. After that, we would get a letter every month. She was in Auschwitz. Mummy's letters were a ray of sunshine that brightened up our dull, gloomy days. She was actively involved in our sorrows and joys, worries and troubles. She poured comfort and encouragement into our hearts. She never complained. Even though her life was a hundred times worse! Deprived of all freedom, she was left to languish. And we still had daddy.

It was only then that I learned of the magnitude of love, devotion and sacrifice that lies in the motherly heart. It was only then that I felt just how tenderly I loved her. I was very grateful to her

for my carefree childhood, the bright memories, the nights she spent at our bedside and the heroism with which she parted with us. I did my best to express that in my letters. I wanted her to feel with her whole heart and soul that we belonged to her and that our every thought was about her.

Mummy closed her every letter with a blessing and a request for our prayers. When grenades exploded in Poznań and bombs rumbled, the hope was reawakened. But alas, Auschwitz prisoners were transported well into Germany. Today, as I pray for mummy's return, I add the soft and simple, "Thy will be done." Somewhere up there, there is still compassion and I believe.

Mummy came back! On a glum, sad day, amidst wind raging outside and rain pattering against our windows. For us, this day was dazzling, filled with sunshine. Happy, carefree days were back. The 28 months of mummy's absence were like a nightmare. But still, they were real. We know that, reminded by so many painful memories which will never be forgotten, and the number tattooed on her left arm. Meant to symbolise disgrace and humiliation, it became a mark of victory, heroism and faith in God.

The few scenes from camp life that I provide are but a drop in the sea of suffering and torment that the prisoners experienced. The food was awful. A small slice of bread and a quarter of a litre of soup (unsalted) made up the daily ration. Wearied by work and the living conditions, people died in great numbers. Diseases and epidemics were rampant. A scourge of typhoid broke out in 1943. Hundreds of victims died every night and every day. The dead bodies were thrown in front of the barrack into the mud, where they would lie until morning. In the morning, the dead and the living were there for the roll call. The sight evoked horror, indignation and hatred. Hatred towards the Nazi oppressors who, having lost all touch with their humanity, turned into wild beasts that were hungry for blood and murder. Human life became completely worthless to them. They saw camp prisoners as slaves, deprived of all rights, and Germans as the masters of their life and death. After the roll call, which lasted for hours regardless of the weather, the dead would be trucked away to the crematorium where they were burnt.

All these diseases thrived due to the lack of water. People washed in the herbal infusions they were given to drink, or in muddy puddles. The hospital was infested with rats. The ill couldn't sleep at night as the beasts became so daring, they would climb into people's beds and eat up the patients' last bits of bread. Once, a rat bit a woman to death. On another occasion, ward prisoners demanded more bread. SS men arrived and told the prisoners to leave the building and bring a table. Every woman was forced to lie on it and got ten blows with a stick. Once the battering was over, they were asked if they had enough.

Mum is haunted by memories of the camp. When she kneels down in church, she remembers how the whole block had to kneel outside for even the slightest transgression. Whether in cold, rain or frost, they were made to kneel for an hour or two with arms raised. They weren't allowed to move or alter their position. An SS man stood by with a stick and hit them on the back every time they moved. Weaker people fainted from the effort, others prayed to endure. On another occasion, they dug deep ditches, standing in knee-deep water.

It took superhuman strength not to succumb to despair, not to give up, not to doubt in God's mercy and to believe strongly, trustingly and sincerely. Only true faith brings relief and only God prevails.

26

Tadeusz Zborowski

born 01.01.1925 in Czekno, Dubno County

*During the occupation, he resided in Tłukawy, in the Ryczywół postal district,
Oborniki County*

Currently: Rogoźno Wlkp.

*Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Wlkp.,
Year 3 of Junior High School*

...I was assigned to the village of Tłukawy (Schwanenfelde) which was completely unknown to me, more than twenty kilometres from home, where I stayed until the end of the war. In time, I got

used to hard work and sleeping in a stable. I would have peacefully waited out the war there if it weren't for a certain incident.

It was 15 August, 1943. I went to bed early that night, even though I was too tired to sleep. I had a bad feeling. Suddenly, a friend burst in yelling, "Get up! Fire!" I jumped to my feet and instantly ran onto the street. The red glow of a fire spread across half the sky over the neighbouring village. Should I go or not? I chose the latter thinking: let the Germans burn, and went to sleep.

On the following morning, I came out early to ask about the cause of the fire. I was told right away that the fire broke out where my brother served. As the cause was unknown, he was captured by the police for questioning. I went pale. I knew that no one who falls into the hands of these hoodlums comes out unscathed.

In the evening, I went to see if he had been released. Sadly, he wasn't home. I returned, speculating about what could have happened. I comforted myself with the thought that he would be back sooner or later. Then events began to unfold at breakneck speed and exceeded even the worst expectations.

On the following day, at six, my brother visited me in the flesh. At first glance, I saw that something was wrong. His paleness, disturbed clothes and bloody hands are still vivid in my mind. Flabbergasted, I didn't know what questions to ask first. Then he said, "I pulled out the window bars and escaped, I was beaten until I accepted all the blame – what do I do now? Where can I run?" I gave him some advice and we parted.

I waited, resigned for further developments. After an hour, a policeman came to ask about my brother. I feigned surprise as if I knew nothing. Nevertheless, with the help of the local Nazis, the entire property was searched, while I was brought to the police station. The first question they asked me was, "Has your brother visited you?" "No." "Stretch out your hands!" A dry click of handcuffs and a moment later I was thrown into a prison cell. There, I had time to think.

Why didn't I flee with my brother? Or perhaps it's better this way. If I'm taken to a penal camp, at least the rest of the family will be left alone. These and other similar thoughts raged in my head.

Oh, how wrong I was! By evening, they detained mother (father had been transported to forced labour into Germany a month earlier), while I was brought to an interrogation room.

I was placed before a skinny, tall police officer and looked down on. “You are a criminal” (Räuber). “Can’t look me in the eye?” I looked up straight into his cat-like pupils. Despite being tall, I had to raise my head to meet the gaze of this hops-stick caricature of a man that stood in front of me. This was a stress test for me. I answered all the questions with a “no” or “I don’t know.” Seeing how futile his efforts were, he drawled through his teeth, “You bitter Polish dog – we already have your brother. Now, get lost!”

The news struck me like lightning. I bit my lips and left with my head down. I sat up all night hitting my head against the wall and biting the chain in helpless despondency. On the following day, they called me in again. This time it wasn’t for interrogation. As I walked in, I saw my brother in front of me. Our eyes met and then moved down to the handcuffs. Then came a question addressed to me. “Do you know him?” I was astonished by the cheekiness of those words. I thought whether it was me or them that were insane. Then came another question, “Who is he?” I stood there flabbergasted, unsure what it was all about. My brother caught on sooner and asked “Do you know me?” At that moment it all became clear. They wanted to know if I would deny knowing him in misery. I replied...

After those words, I was told to leave and get on a bus. A bunch of armed thugs sat around me. We set off. I was sure I was on my way to a penal camp. With my eyes, I bid my farewell to the villages I knew, wondering if I would ever see them again.

Suddenly, we stopped in the village where my brother lived. I got off and was taken to a large room. What could it be? Rows of chairs, a black table with the hateful swastika hanging overhead. I went pale. I was in a summary courtroom. I would soon hear “free to go” or “death.” My brother was brought in followed by the judges. The trial didn’t take long, I was allowed to walk, while my sixteen-year-old brother was sentenced to death. One month later, red notices and a good-bye letter confirmed the execution of the court sentence ...

*Anna Kierska**born 23.09.1922 in Gdańsk**During the occupation, she resided at ul. Szewska 6/5, Poznań.**Currently: Al. Marcinkowskiego 11, Poznań**Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls' High School in Poznań, Year 4**The events described below took place from 8 October to 16 November 1945
in Pudłowo, Sieradz County.*

It is snowing, we are returning from work, angry and tired. I don't feel like singing or talking. Eventually, we arrive in front of the school building and wait for the mail. A while later, the group leader comes out and says that there is no mail. We've waited patiently for this moment all day, and nothing. Well, it is actually here, they try to cheer us up, but it hasn't been sorted yet. Over comes a German commonly known as Stopka^{*)}. Some drills – “left turn,” “right turn,” “run” and finally the long awaited “at ease” and “dismissed.”

We climb to our attic, up a rickety ladder with broken rungs. We drop our haversacks, pick up our mess kits and take our places at the end of the supper queue. Soup is served every third evening. After a half an hour in the queue, people grow restless. Some are complaining, some begin to fight, but the supper is nowhere in sight. Finally, the wagons come around. Only two cauldrons. As it turns out, some men robbed them on the way and appropriated the food. We make do with a slice of bread. Some set up candles on the hay, confident it won't catch fire as it is too moist. Some are sewing, others “pay visits” to each other, yet others are off to the village. The evening passes. At 8.30pm, one of us intones “Beneath Thy Protection,” which becomes our evening prayer.

My nearest neighbour and friend, known as “Kubuś,” went off to wash the mess tins. Although we spend our days up to our ankles in water or mud, we have no water to drink or wash. We wash our mess tins about once a week. I take off two layers of clothes and go

^{*)} His real surname was Dummeyer.

to sleep in the remaining five. All of them are wet anyway, including the innermost. I wait for Kuba to get back, as it is too freezing to be by oneself under a wet blanket. The place quietens down gradually, the candles are put out one by one. It is so haplessly, terribly sad. They keep telling us we are going to Germany and that there is no chance they will let us go home.

Then “alarm.” We jump to our feet! Unable to see in the dark, the moment we stand up, we fall head down. The ladder buckles under the weight. There’s screaming, crying and moaning. I frantically search for my trousers but am unable to find them. Finally, I manage to put them on. I set my teeth and jump down. I don’t really care. After a brief struggle with the door, we break it down and run out into the yard. I take a place in the second row as a precaution and adjust my clothes. “Stopka” is going ballistic. A few of the women in the front row get slapped in the face. Finally, after a long speech, we learn we are about to clean “village” toilets in the dark. Run! We run about to and fro with sand, water, etc. Those who aren’t fast enough get their backs thrashed with sticks. I’m more than furious and, despite that, feel like laughing at the amazing way in which we are dressed.

The *Truppenführers* are literally rolling on the ground laughing. The whole farce lasts roughly two hours after which we get more preaching, incomprehensible to most of us, and then they generously allow us to disperse.

We snatch a farmer’s ladder and lean it by our attic. It is too big, its base reaching way into the yard but at least it’s a ladder. There is a general commotion, the lights are on, there is a big rally. In my rage, I gobble up two slices of bread saved for tomorrow’s breakfast and turn in. Slowly, the others follow suit. Only a few latecomers return from the village and tell their immediate neighbours about their evening experience.

I try to sleep but can’t. I’m having heart trouble. Kubuś sleeps, resting her head on my shoulder. Suddenly, I hear a distinct rustle. I give Kuba a tug on the shoulder. She sits up on our bedding in terror. What is going on? Ah, nothing. It’s that *Truppenführer*, bored and drunk, looking for entertainment.

Luckily, he didn't make it to our corner. He got stuck across the attic. The night drags on endlessly.

The water drips regularly from the roof here and there. Otherwise, it is silence, interrupted by an occasional moan or scream in someone's sleep. Every now and then, shameless laughter comes from the other end. A persistent mouse scurries around my head. What a horrible helpless night. But now it is certainly time to get up.

I wake up Kuba again. "Kubuś, it is morning for sure, it's just that the others have overslept – we're going to be late!" "Nah, there's still time." Suddenly, a wakeup call, "everybody up." We scramble to our feet. Needless to say, we have overslept. I hardly manage to get dressed, when they summon us to a roll call. I grab the haversacks and mess kits and rush downstairs.

The way to the roll call yard leads over a footbridge across a ditch. There stands the Lagerführer (camp manager), who hits every latecomer on the back with his cane.

They read out the list of the ill in the morning. They examined them right there and then. Naturally, it took a mutilated leg not to be given a clean bill of health. One team after another left the yard.

Marching in this mud was an advanced skill, but they taught us that too. We even had to sing along the way, as that was the wish of "Stopka," our "lord and master."

28

Andrzej Kornaszewski

born 22.07.1927 in Ostrów Wlkp.

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Bratnia 21, Ostrów Wlkp.

Currently: ul. Kościuszki 2a, Ostrów Wlkp.

Student of State Boys' High School in Ostrów Wlkp.,

Year 2 of Junior High School

To describe the history of our troop's flag, I have to go back in time to 1933 when Tomasz Zan first established Scout Troop nr 5 in Ostrów. Ever since the formation of the troop, the flag was always

its most important possession. It was made to the order of Pack Leader Fr. Ziemski by the nuns who ran the Ostrów orphanage. Embroidered on nice, heavy-duty blue fabric, it could not have survived to this day were it any less resilient. The flag bears the scouting cross on one side and a map of Poland with an open book and a fleur-de-lis emblem on the other. It was christened – its godparents were Regina Dubiska and Władysława Hoffmanowa. Any new recruits joining the troop would now be required to take an oath by placing two fingers on the flag and vowing allegiance to God, their country and the scout code. Outgoing scouts would nostalgically recall the good times they experienced and would for ever retain in their hearts the memory of the swearing in ceremony. Then came 1939 - the year of the breakout of the horrible world war.

The flag was hanging, as usual, in the scout club in the high school building, when the deserted town of Ostrów was invaded by the Germans. As one could expect, as soon as they got there, they began “sightseeing.” They went through municipal authority buildings first and then turned to the railway and schools. At that time, previously evacuated residents were just starting to return to Ostrów. Among them was a member of Troop no. 5. His first thought was to check on the flag. He entered the high school through the back door, forced the scout club door open and seized the flags of the school associations, including those of Tomasz Zan Troop no. 5, Henryk Dąbrowski Troop no. 2, as well as the school Sodality and Crusade. With no other choice but to leave the building with the flags, he takes them off the staves, hides them under his jacket and carries them out through the back door the very moment the Germans start knocking down the front door. With his precious load, he reaches the garden of the adjoining orphanage where, together with the single remaining resident of the building, an old janitor, he places the flags in a metal can and, after dusk, buries them in the orphanage garden. Stowed in this manner, the flags survive until the longed-for liberation.

When Tomasz Zan Troop was re-established, its members began to wonder about where the flag was. Finding it was not easy, as the old janitor had died during the war, while the poor scout had been

tortured to death for being Polish by German tormentors. Against all odds, the scouts tracked down the family of this unsung hero. Its members told them that the flag was concealed in the orphanage garden but that they couldn't say where. Given no other alternative, the whole team picked up spades and began digging their way through the garden bit by bit. After a while, one of the scouts stumbled upon the can which, although almost entirely rusted through, still held the flags. The flags were brought to the convent school and retrieved carefully into daylight.

The best preserved flags were those of Troop no. 5, the Sodality and the other troop, the worst: that of the school Crusade. The flag was dried and brought to Troop no. 5 club where a debate started about how to restore it. Unfortunately, there was no one to entrust this responsible job to, and no money to pay for the work. A month went by. Finally, a person was found who agreed to repair the flag for a small fee.

Another month went by. During that time, the fleur-de-lis emblem and two tags with the names of the godparents turned up. One of the older scouts found them in the trash which the Germans discarded as they converted the high school into a hospital. As a result, after six years of horrendous occupation, the flag is now in one piece again. It was first flown over Troop no. 5 in the presence of the entire Ostrów pack on 3 May, 1945...

FOREIGN LANDS

VII

1

Alfons Mikołajczak

born 06.03.1927 in Karniszewo, Gniezno County

*During the occupation, he remained at Polnisches Lager (forced labour camp)
in Köln-Mühlheim, Frankfurterstrasse P501 (until 28.04.1944).*

Wounded during an air raid

Currently: Karniszewo, Gniezno County

*Student of State Bolesław the Brave High School in Gniezno, Year 2,
accelerated track, Junior High School*

Rather than the sweet voice of our mother, we were rudely awakened by a stranger's guttural bellow.

Always at five. Those of us who slept lighter would hear the guard lean his gun against the wooden barrack wall, open the door, switch on the light and yell at us to get up, frequently adding some insults.

We made our bunk beds as required by prison rules. Those who had bread would eat a slice, some would only have coffee and then, under the "care" of the guard, off we went to work. The work wasn't light. The Germans took the better jobs of overseeing machines, while the Poles, working under supervision, would get their hands injured removing rubble. The work was hard – in the winter, we suffered from wind and freezing temperatures. In the summer, we were burned by the sun amidst the dust and smoke that spewed out of factory chimneys... It wasn't just the sun! We suffered the burning bitter awareness that the sweat of our brow did not serve our home country but rather benefited our enemy. We worked from seven in the morning to six in the evening. We were made to do jobs that no German performed. We poured sulphuric acid without the protection of rubber gloves. The acid burnt our hands and destroyed our clothes.

In time, panic taught the Germans to be human again. It was only when the town burned for weeks after an evening air raid

which rolled through like a July thunderstorm, halting the trams and cutting power and water supplies, that the Germans recognised us as human beings. It wasn't much help, though, to have a German who used to insult us, now hand us a package.

Members of the SS never changed. They reduced our starvation rations, telling us they needed our lunches and bread to feed bombardment victims. Whether the victims ever got the food, we don't know. We can only suppose that it was at our expense that they presented their wives and lovers with shoes and fur coats.

The spiritual anguish we lived through in this banishment is expressed in a song as sorrowful as a graveyard birch tree.

*An old lakeside willow tree
Makes a gloomy sound.
Every night a sorrowful Pole
Sends a message to his mother with the wind.
Oh, willow tree, tell my family
How hard our lives here are
And how we spend our time.
Oh, how much longer will I stay here.
I can't see my mum or dad
I can't see my sister's smile.
Smiles are rare without seeing my land.
The work is hard and the food is scarce
Although drained of all strength
We are still forced to work.*

We hardly noticed how the allied bombardments made Cologne on the Rhine crumble into piles of rubble. Nor how cemeteries grew on the edges of town. One of them, designed for "foreigners," was used to bury those who would never return and who, like ourselves, were brought here to work as "volunteers." Most of them were labelled "bomb casualties"! The way I see it, they are "victims of German ruthlessness." Yes, they are! My ill barrack mate Walerian Wachowski was only sent to a doctor after he lost consciousness. His tormented soul ascended to our Lord, as we bid farewell to our dear friend.

2*)

Wanda Kotlarówna

born 07.03.1926 in Poznań

*During the occupation: Ostrów Wlkp. (1939-1941), Munitions Factory in Berlin
(18 November to August 1943), Bydgoszcz (1943-1945)*

Currently: ul. Kościuszki 4, Kępno

Student of State High School in Kępno, Year 2 of Junior High School

Christmas may well be the loveliest and most beautiful holiday in the entire year. When I was a little child, I considered Christmas Day to be the most joyous day of all. Why is it that today, of all days, I am feeling so painfully my solitude, my yearning for close ones and the bitter grief which I try in vain to suppress?

This is my first time ever***) celebrating Christmas away from my own folks and all alone. I sit by my barrack window and gaze into boundless space, teary eyed. The firmament spreads above my head, studded with millions of diamond stars. Rumbling around me is the huge city of Berlin, which, due to the "Verdunklung" (black-out), is now pitch dark.

I think of my close ones and that the same stars that shine over my head send their radiant greetings down to them, too. I then imagine joining them at a table and sharing a snow-white wafer. I am all alone in the infirmary room. Although I can hear singing, talking and dancing from other barracks, this once, on this silent, holy night of miracles and comfort, I'd rather be alone with my thoughts.

When I think that this is the fourth time we have celebrated Christmas in captivity, and that this time too our hopes have failed us, my gaze inadvertently goes up to the sky and my lips whisper imploringly: Are you there, God? Can you hear me? It is hard to believe that so many years have passed since the start of the war and that it still continues. It also seems to me that four years ago its imminent end appeared more likely than it is now. But then, His judgements are inscrutable and we will never have any other choice but to accept them.

*) Continuation of the diary published on pp. 115-118.

**) In 1942.

It is only now that man experiences he is nothing compared to God's omnipotence. What is the life of a single human being, the existence of an individual or even entire nations in the face of historic catastrophes such as this war? Who can predict its end and result? Without a doubt, not even those who started it have any idea. Meanwhile, death has been claiming countless lives for four years now and no genius among humans can stop it.

I work in a munitions factory which is the size of a city, some 15km from the camp where I live. I work 12 hours a day, and knowing what becomes of my work dispirits me nearly to the point of a complete breakdown. Other than that, abuse from the Lagerführer and other Germans makes my life so unpredictable I would rather be in a concentration camp than have to bear it all any longer. I plan to escape but have now been ill for six weeks. Perhaps I can still realise my plan. So help me God.

I am in Bydgoszcz^{*)}. I have forged a German identification card in the name of Irena Schmidt and hope that God will allow me to live here until the war ends. My mood is quite upbeat. I have managed to make it out of Berlin, even though I had been captured once already in Frankfurt during a failed attempt to escape and make it to Poznań. I was kept in Moabit for a week, then in Oranienburg for a month. My Lagerführer got me out and gave me a chance to leave Berlin again, this time for good, wiser for the experience...

3

Anna Jagiełło

born 11.07.1926 in Kępno

During the occupation, she resided in Kępno until 05.05.1942, after which she was transported to Wolfen, Bitterfeld County near Leipzig, where she worked in a film factory from 08.05.1942 until 12.04.1945, when the town was liberated by Americans.

*Currently: ul. Czerwonej Armii 5, Kępno
Student of State High School in Kępno, Year 1c*

^{*)} August 1943.

...I was assigned to work in Germany and transported to a film factory. I was 15. A forest of factory chimneys that never stopped spewing out smoke, the rumbling of machines and the sight of tens of thousands of people of various nationalities bustling about on factory grounds made a strange impression on me. Before I managed to collect my thoughts and come to terms with my circumstances, I had to start work. I worked in the darkrooms. As I walked into one, I thought I was entering a black abyss with no exit. The worst season of all was winter, when one would never see daylight.

Various chemicals etched sores all over my body. Such injuries didn't disrupt the work as being declared ill and unfit for work was out of the question. The German nurse we approached to dress our wounds ripped off the old dressings violently and insensitively spread a burning liquid over the sores, all the while abusing us verbally in the meanest way possible. I had the good fortune of having a Polish nurse in my team who helped me heal my wounds.

The work proper began at six in the morning and continued for 12 hours. After quitting time, there was still a great deal of work to complete. We were made to work in the barracks and were responsible for digging shelters, gardening and all kinds of other chores. We were punished for the most minor transgressions such as switching off lights, keeping fire wood for our own use or receiving mail. Punishments for the latter were actually quite common. The extra activities lasted until midnight or two in the morning.

The nights were horrible, as we were beleaguered by swarms of bedbugs as well as mice and rats. Our barracks were often fumigated, which gave us a few days of relief. All this left an effect on our health, with many of the girls contracting lung disease. Our health suffered also from poor nutrition, inadequate clothing and excessively arduous work. Polish women were granted no leaves of absence. Days, months and years passed by. Frequent alarms made the Germans nervous and they took it out on us. We would spend entire nights in designated shelters. Towards the end, it wasn't only the nights but also entire days. Staying in a shelter was horrible but gave us hope of an imminent end to our misery. We often watched searchlights, missiles exploding and fires around the factories.

Our torment came to an end on 19 April 1945. The camp was raided by Americans, who liberated us. With this long-yearned-for freedom came the anticipation of a return to our beloved homeland.

The lamp light has brought me back to reality. After all kinds of experience, I am now back home with my family, and all the things that happened seem like a nightmare that one wants to forget quickly. Unfortunately, impaired eyesight and the wasted years of youth are a constant reminder of the horrors I have been through.

4

Zofia Stachowiakówna

born 12.02.1922 in Poznań

During the occupation resided in Berlin Reinickendorf

Currently: ul. Wierzbicice 26, Poznań

Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls' High School in Poznań,

Year 2 of High School

... The trip went quickly. Actually, we passed the time singing and arrived at our destination^{*)} in high spirits. It wasn't until then that the torment began! We were taken to the Arbeitsamt (labour office), a site of terrible torture, in a long, three-person-wide column. Once there, we ourselves, our clothes and our underwear were washed, deloused and rid of bed bugs and the like. We were then put under lock and key in a huge room furnished only with metal beds without mattresses. They let us out only three times a day for meals. The worst thing of all was not knowing what would happen to us. Finally, they photographed each of us, making us hold a number plate across our chests and released us into the world, that is to say to a camp in a Berlin suburb.

I was given a bed with a straw mattress and, once assigned a "camp number," I could settle down in the designated room.

^{*)} Berlin.

The room held twenty tenants, which made it terribly stuffy at night. To make things worse, “our castle” (which is what we called our abode after “Schloss Schönholz”) included other much more numerous tenants: bed bugs. These unforgiving insects stole the precious time of our sleep, which was insufficient to begin with!

We got up before four in the morning to take a city train to work. The waking hours went like this: on our first working day, the so called Werkschutz barged into our room and pounded on a metal wardrobe door with a huge stick. The effect was instantaneous. We all jumped to our feet in terror. This procedure was repeated every morning of my long one-and-a-half-year stay there, and which in the case of others amounted to more than five years.

Every morning, regardless of whether there was rain, fog or high wind, we would invariably line up in a row to deliver our daily offering of labour. Every morning, the enormous munitions factory opened its gates for us. It wasn't until six in the evening that it would let us out again into fresh air ... Initially, I couldn't even think straight, overwhelmed by the rumble of hundreds of machines in a huge hall. The sight of a speeding machine churning out glistening rifle shells was constantly before my eyes. Our legs became swollen from the perpetual running and attending to the machines. We weren't allowed to sit down on a crate, not even for a moment's rest...

My dreams at night were monotonous and tiring, just like work in the factory during the day. I occasionally woke up only to realise it was still night. Since my sleep was always deficient, I told myself, “It is night now, this is not a factory, I don't have to operate the machines.”

The real suffering began after the promised^{*)} “eight weeks” of work were up and when I lost hope of returning home... They had lied to us and deceived us but to what end? Then came a long series of horrible days of torment which was beyond words... The yearning for home, which I had tried to keep in check for so long, now burst out with full vigour. On arriving at my room, I would imme-

^{*)} Promised by the Poznań Arbeitsamt before departure.

diately slip into my bed, cover my head with a blanket and struggle to suppress my weeping. It wasn't just me! Sooner or later, all of my mates did the same – this longing brought us closer together. Confiding in someone else brought us relief. Many friendships flourished and, with friends around, it was much easier to endure our sorrows! Slowly, the longing diminished and afflicted us less often. I then discovered another source of comfort in my banishment – poetry. My mind slowly grew accustomed to the rumble and roaring on the production floor. As the working hours dragged on, any method that helped us pass the time was welcome. We sang every song we knew, and recited poetry in our heads. But even that didn't speed up the passage of time. I filled these empty hours with dreams and sometimes created my own poetry. I remember this one poem I put together at a machine at a time I was overcome with dejection. I felt a presence stand by me and console me with these words:

*You're crying, child, you're crying, child,
Has your star waned in the sky?*

*Tears so sorrowful, oh, such sorrowful tears
Are running down your cheeks
Each as heavy as a pearl ...
Do not cry, oh child, do not cry, my dear
As your star may still well shine
Perhaps it is now obscured by mist
That keeps its light from reaching you.
I will check that for you, I will check that now
And see what has occurred.
Hold your wonderer's tears, my child
At least for a little while.
You poor child, you beloved child
Your star has broken today
Someone shattered it into a thousand shards
Took away its dazzling shine...
But don't cry, oh child, as I will now head for the sky
And collect the pieces of your star
I may still manage to put them all together
So do not despair quite yet!*

And despair I did not. I was comforted by letters from home and from my friends, and parcels that supplemented my modest diet. As discipline in the camp was later relaxed, I could go to town in the afternoon on non-working Sundays. Berlin turned out to be too big for me to ever be able to explore it thoroughly. Later, it actually became dangerous to venture far into town as there was always a threat of air raids. At times, we had to stay all night in a shop, sitting on a pile of potatoes or beetroots as there were no other shelters for Poles. Despite our fear, we found comfort in seeing how upset our tormentors became in the shop, and that they showed up for work on the following morning just as exhausted as ourselves. On other occasions, when bombs exploded nearby, I felt sorry for myself thinking I would die so far away from the people I loved...

However, this particular misfortune steered clear of our camp. There were other miseries, though, far more ominous, that slowly crept in. One of them was tuberculosis. The disease first attacked the youngest and weakest of the girls. Some of the victims ended up dying in this foreign land while others, who managed to recover partially, were sent back home to their families, their sadness combined with joy. There were girls who forgot all about their disease, thrilled about going home. But then they died before they even set out on their journey...

One day, I too was struck by the scourge. A violent pulmonary haemorrhage knocked me off my feet. I was immediately taken to hospital where I spent an entire two months haunted by the bleakest of thoughts. I did not believe at the time that I would recover and find the energy to return to work and nice preoccupations. No, when death looked me in the eye, my heart filled with despair and protested against my fate. The thought of dying in solitude and being buried away from my loved ones drove me insane. But time heals all wounds. The disease subsided and soon became a blessing in disguise. After being banished from home for one and a half years, I was now able to return ...

*Marian Wikiera**born 06.08.1923 in Ubieszyn, Przeworsk County**During the occupation resided in Ostrów Wlkp. (from 23.09.1943) and, from 24.09.1943 to 22.11.1944, in Essen, Gelsenkirchen, Duisburg, Hamburg, Moers, in this order.**Currently: ul. Gorzycka, Ostrów Wlkp.**Student of State Boys' High School in Ostrów Wlkp.,
Year 3b of Junior High School*

...In one of the transports in 1943, myself and 120 other people were moved from Ostrów and Kalisz. We were taken to Berlin and, a few days later, on to Essen in Westphalia. We maintained high spirits. We didn't worry much about the air raids, even though one of them burned our barracks down. Several months later, we were sent near the Dutch border to rebuild a local refinery. The living conditions there were much better than in Essen and, most importantly, we were afforded more freedom. We even got Sundays off. This changed after a few weeks, after which we had to work every second Sunday.

But, as the Polish proverb rightfully puts it, nobody gets rich by working Sundays. We saw evidence of that on the Sunday of 27 August 1944. We showed up at work in the morning, as usual. Around 3.30pm, an alarm sounded. We didn't have a shelter to go to and so we dispersed all over the place. After a few minutes, exploding anti-aircraft missiles made it clear that the raids were approaching our plant. This was terrible. They dropped phosphorous, setting several warehouses on fire. This was immediately followed by large calibre bombs which made all hell break loose. You could hear the terrifying ominous swish of falling bombs, then a deafening bang and the whirring of shrapnel. We felt the ground we were lying on move in waves like a rough sea during a storm. In my mind, I said farewell to the world and my family, and took shelter in God. Several bombs fell very close to me and it was only by a miracle that I escaped unscathed.

Clouds of dust and smoke billowed over the factory. Dozens of petrol and tar tanks were set ablaze. Almost the entire plant was on fire. The sight was truly horrifying. It looked even worse after the raid was over. Fallen debris, smouldering ruins, human and animal corpses and wounded were scattered all over the place. Some torn horribly apart, no longer recognisable as human, reduced to a bloody, shapeless mass, some of them still quivering. Others, injured by shrapnel, their legs or arms torn off, wailing in pain and praying to God for a quick death, which for some of them was not entirely imminent. Others, although physically unharmed, ran about aimlessly with an insane look in their eyes, often getting in the way of the rescue effort.

This was just one air raid. We lived through over a dozen more, some of them even more terrifying. I will never forget the 14-15 October 1944, when a whole series of raids began that would then repeat every second day. After close to ten months, the memory of those days still sends chills down my spine.

6

Henryk Jakubowski

born 08.03.1925 in Ostrów Wlkp.

During the occupation, he resided in Ostrów Wlkp., since 1941 in Oranienburg (Heinkel-Lager).

Currently: ul. Brykczyńskiego 1, Ostrów Wlkp.

Student of State Municipal High School in Ostrów Wlkp., Year 3b of Junior High School

A fast train hurries down the Warsaw-Berlin route as quick as lightning. I sit with my colleagues on a comfortable bench in a Pullman carriage watching the beautiful landscapes pass by. We are enjoying ourselves, excited, even though there is no reason to be happy. We are travelling to an unknown land inhabited by foreign people. We aren't fooling ourselves about receiving a warm welcome from the locals, but being young means being carefree. A prolonged

startling whistle of the engine mixed with the rumble of carriage wheels warned us we were approaching Berlin. All of us observed the German capital curiously. The train rumbled through some minor stations and came to a halt at the main one. Large boards announced: "Berlin – Friedrichstrasse." Fatigued after the long journey, the engine gave out one final frightening whistle as if calling out to all Germans, "Die Polacken hab ich gebracht!" ("I have brought the Poles"). Indeed, we felt uneasy and forsaken in this foreign land. All one could hear around us was damn German. Our high spirits disappeared without a trace. Amidst the hustle and bustle, we transferred to a street train, the so called S-Bahn, which took us to Oranienburg 30km to the north. I think the name is recognisable to any Pole. Hundreds of our brothers died there in inhuman torment and suffering. Thank God the camp wasn't our destination. We were assigned to work in an airplane factory.

After resting for a month, there came the long-awaited day of going to the factory. Large black machines, like coffins for living people, sat in an airfield. We were fascinated by every detail and overjoyed at the prospect of working around these steel birds, which we would watch take to the air and soar in the sky above us. Exciting at first, the work became boring and repetitive. It wasn't until 12 April 1945 that our dull existence became interesting again.

We went to work as usual in the morning. It was a beautiful sunny spring day. The sun smiled down at us as if to tell us that our misery would soon be over. Indeed, we all felt joy in our hearts. The heat of the sun reawakened a zest for life. Around 1pm, an alarm siren wailed in the hall. Delighted, everyone left their workstations and hurried out of the plant. After a little while, we spotted tiny black spots in the sky. American warplanes. Their wings spread beautifully and proudly over the wretched earth below! We imagined what a formidable force was moving up there in the clouds. We were terrified of the bombing but also proud in our hearts, knowing that this huge airborne fleet holding sway over a territory occupied by our eternal enemy was our ally, our liberator, perhaps even carrying our countrymen. We revelled in the magnificent sight of the silver machines whose regular rhythmical engine noise drowned

out conversation. The machines' steel lungs breathed heavily, the propellers cut the air strenuously, hauling a heavy cargo.

Suddenly, the planes extended a white ribbon down towards the ground. We instantly realised the grave danger we were in. The fine-looking silvery eagles dropped a deadly load onto this vale of tears. The quiet whir of the engines grew stronger. Frantically, everyone searched for shelter which we knew could not be found. The whirring grew even louder. The earth seemed to tremble in fear. Finally, a massive boom, louder than thunder, tore through the air while the ground rocked under us. This supernatural bang, doubled by echo, faded into the distance. However, over the echo you could already hear another menacing whirr.

The explosions were endless. The deadly cargo sent to the ground by the "murderous hands of pirates" annihilated everything. Huge steel bars flew through the air like matchsticks. Everything on the ground seethed.

Finally, this hellish music faded. We all stood up and thanked God for having listened to our prayers. As far as the eye could see, there was one big glow of fire with a dense black layer of smoke hovering lazily above it.

A quiet drawn-out wailing of a siren rang out in the distance.

7

Henryk Konopacki

born 25.01.1925 in Wronki

*During the occupation, he resided in Wronki until 01.12.1942,
then in Dnipropetrovsk and Kremenchug (until 21.09.1943) and finally
in Berlin (until 01.12.1945).*

Currently: ul. Jadwigi 11, Wronki

Student of State Rev. P. Skarga High School in Szamotuły, Year 4

... When England launched regular bombing raids on Berlin, the capital city of Germany and the source of all Nazi venom, in 1943, I was transported there to try to repair the damage inflicted by the British ...

New Year's Eve, 1943. Berlin is having a relatively good time, there are crowds in the streets, tipsy fellows crying out, and every German sharing the same wish, "for the New Year to, perhaps finally, bring the long awaited victory." Meanwhile, all foreigners sense that 1944 could relieve their suffering and see the obliteration of Nazi Germany.

Suddenly, like a hurricane, a wild howling of sirens fills the air all across the city, announcing that the English are coming with their New Year's greetings.

A few minutes later, I reach a shelter entrance. A revelling Berlin instantly turns into a ghost town. The streets are deserted and it is only in front of the shelters that one can hear the screaming and moaning of a pushing crowd. I am one of the first ones to enter the shelter and before long can already hear the sound of the first bombs falling.

The explosions get closer, as do the sounds of collapsing buildings. Quiet. More explosions. Quiet again. Bombs hailing down – there seems to be no end.

A German gendarme comes over to me and asks, "Foreigner?" "Yes," "Polish?" "Yes!" "By what right are you, a member of an animal nation, here among German citizens?"

I remain silent. I have nothing to say in my defence as I know that, in the eyes of the Germans, being Polish makes me an animal destined for destruction. As the whizzing of a dropping bomb distracts the gendarme, I flee to the opposite end of the shelter.

We remain there for two hours until the sirens proclaim the raid over. I am the first to come out and what a sight I see. On the stairs to the shelter, people who moments ago were enjoying their life now lie crushed into a pulp.

The Germans gave up the inherent orderliness they are known for and trampled one another to death to save their lives. The sight was horrible. Severed body parts, all scattered around and trodden flat.

I remained indifferent to this sight, to this scene of death. I remembered all the harm received from the Germans, all the insults and verbal abuse and concluded that 1944 must be the year of retaliation, reprisal for all the crimes committed on all the nations of Europe ...

*Maciej Hoffman**born 28.05.1925 in Ostrzeszów**During the occupation, he resided at Kępno (until May 1940), Strzyżów near Wisłok (from 1940 to 1944) and the penal camp on the Prądnik Czarny in Kraków (from July to December 1944). He escaped and, captured by the Germans, was transported to Berlin-Lichterfelde-Süd, where he worked from May 1945 in the so called "Stoppkolonne."**Currently: ul. 17 Stycznia 17, Międzychód**Student of Municipal High School of Międzychód, Year 4 of Junior High School*

... The Berlin-Lichterfelde camp! My thoughts go out to you, my dear fellow prisoners. As I write these words trying to portray you the way you were during these memorable breakthrough moments of April 1945, your faces, weary, emaciated, and yet displaying re-markable will power and heroism, appear before my eyes. You are an integral part of my memories, it would therefore be difficult not to write about you.

Many of us never returned. They lie quiet, majestic in their tranquility, somewhere under the rubble of the capital of German evil and insolence. They are heroes! Thrown by fate, which governs all human lives, into this city of flames and rubble, this hell on earth, they departed with their home country on their minds. Praise and glory to them!

It is difficult to say more. As is often the case in life, no matter how hard you try to pour emotions into words, they come out as empty sounds failing to do justice to the anguish of the heart.

During my time as a forced labourer in Berlin, I acquired the ability not to let anything surprise me. If Americans had then dropped an atom bomb on this capital of the Reich, I would have remained unfazed. But when, one morning, a camp administrator told me that the Lagerführer had assigned me to the so-called Katastropheneinsatz (disaster duty), the news caught me off guard as a bad surprise. Until then, as a member of the railway repair team, I was exempt from the duty of clearing rubble in the city. This new assign-

ment must have been a mistake. But, in those days, there was no arguing with German administrators or contesting their decisions.

During this time, faced with an immense air offensive against Berlin and with the Allied forces closing in on both the east and the west, the city's Nazi masters were beginning to lose their composure. The perfect organisation for which Germans were known began to crumble, and contradictory decrees were not uncommon.

The best thing to do in such cases was to shrug it off. After all, what difference did it make. One had to stick it out somehow. To endure was the order of the day for all of us. That word was on everybody's lips – it made us forget hunger, lice and exhaustion. The imminence of liberation comforted our hearts. It was something above and beyond all suffering, whether physical or mental.

Endure! Endure at all costs!

My team was sent to Potsdam. On their most recent night mission, English bombers had turned this part of "Grand Berlin" into one big heap of rubble. Nothing in this once beautiful city, the pride of the Germans, the burial site of Frederick the Great, a symbol of German imperialism and militarism, would now remind one of the city's past glory. We rejoiced in watching the devastation, carefully concealing our feelings from our police escorts. We communicated with our eyes, brightened by joy and pride. The sudden sense of strength straightened our slightly slouching bodies. Our hearts beat in unison.

"That's the way! They're our guys, they're ours!!"

"Our guys" were Allied pilots. We loved them for the destruction they unleashed, despite being keenly aware that any single raid could leave us torn to pieces or turned into a red puddle of blood within a split second. It may seem paradoxical but the hatred we felt for the enemy was stronger than the fear for our lives. Our loathing of Berlin, whose magnificent buildings symbolised German pride, inhabited by the leaders of the nation we hated, which couldn't find in their hearts the will to shed the yoke of Nazism and which tolerated the acts of the SS. "Our guys" were now methodically destroying Berlin!

The police officer who led us along the rubble-covered streets of Potsdam must have noticed our sudden excitement, gave us an annoyed look a few times and snarled at us like a mad dog, "Quiet!"

I watched him, calm on the surface but with a raging hurricane of hatred in my soul. At one moment, I felt someone's hand touching me on the shoulder. My mate, Zygmunt, whispered in my ear, "Don't look at him like that, man! You have to grin and bear it. The time will come when we will make them "quiet." Zygmunt smiled – this was no ordinary smile. You could sense the hidden threat it contained. I warmly squeezed his delicate narrow hand, not used to manual labour. We understood each other perfectly!

When life becomes tough, people tend to forge friendships and develop a sense of brotherhood. Such friendships are lasting and genuine. We were all in the same boat of misery and humiliation, which made us one big family. During challenging moments, this gave us a sense of power.

Our work was gruelling. Our team was assigned to moving, ordering and sorting the metal bars which once formed parts of the framework of the Potsdam train station building. We were watched over by a high ranking German railway worker. We immediately felt a dislike for him which grew every time he mistreated one of us, until one day it reached a culmination point. A certain incident took place that sheds interesting light on this Nazi man and his treatment of non-German workers.

Since the metal bars were extremely heavy, each would be carried by a team of nine. Even so, we swayed on our feet from exhaustion as we hadn't had a bite to eat for twelve hours. The sun was beating down on us mercilessly, even though this was only mid-April. Oozing from the debris was the stench of the decomposing bodies buried underneath that could not be removed earlier. Needless to say, work under such conditions was real torture. And yet our foreman chose to reduce the number of workers carrying each bar down to six. We protested in vain. The German became even more violent and relentless. He generously dispensed blows with an elegant cane he held in his hand. Smiling mockingly, he watched the youngest of us, a boy of sixteen, sway under the weight of the

iron that sank deeply into his feeble shoulders. When the boy fell down to the ground gasping for air, the enormous German, smiling in a truly beastly way now, repeatedly kicked the Polish boy with German thoroughness yelling in his scratchy voice, “You damn lazy Polish dog!”

I couldn’t bear this sight. I felt my face turn red from the terrible embarrassment, bordering on physical pain, at the sight of such humiliation of a human being. I put my hot forehead to the cold metal surface while a half sob, half scream slipped out of my clenched lips, “You bloody bastard, you scoundrel!”

I was famished and so were my companions. This horrible sense of hunger drowned all other sensations. We felt a strange bitterness in our mouths and acute stomach pain accompanied by an overwhelming febleness.

For a week now, we hadn’t been eating breakfast as there was no bread and we would only have lunch after returning to camp in the evening. No wonder we spent our one-and-half-hour breaks at noon lying senseless on some rocks warming in the sun. We talked. At such moments, Zygmunt used to say, “You know, we definitely could use some lunch. I am as hungry as...” – he searched for the right expression that would convey the magnitude of his hunger. I laughed, assuring him I was not quite full myself. These dashes of gallows humour saved us from a mental breakdown.

Near us sat the boy who had just been so violently mistreated by the inhumane project manager. He listened attentively to our exchange and chimed in, “You’re complaining about not having had any food since yesterday. Image that I last ate two days ago! I have lost my lunch coupon and the Lagerführer refuses to issue a duplicate. “You’ve lost your coupon, then starve to death.” Damn German officiousness!

We looked at our young friend’s face with concern. It resembled that of an old man, devoid of the glow of youth. It was the ugly, withered face of a person who has experienced gruelling physical labour beyond his strength and even more devastating psychological ordeals.

At one point we heard a din of agitated voices from our companions. We jumped to our feet and soon found out what was causing the commotion. It turned out that Janek, also called Czarny due to his head of hair that was as black as a raven, had found an authentic bread coupon. I picked it up. It was a small green card. "Brotmarke," I read out loud, "for two kilograms of bread!"

Two kilograms of bread! We regarded Czarny now with admiration as the lucky owner of a huge fortune. As it turned out, the notion of a fortune is quite relative. What seems a trifle to one person may be a huge treasure to another. For Czarny, the treasure was the bread coupon, and it is hard to imagine the man who would have given it up for the benefit of another. And yet that is exactly what happened. Czarny presented the coupon to the poorest, that is the hungriest of us, the weak boy. He did just that in a manly fashion, "Here, buy yourself some bread," he said, kindly handing him the card. Enjoy! And remember to be brave! You have to stick it out! Remember that back in Poland, your mother is crying her eyes out awaiting your return. And me? I will be fine, I'll be just fine." He tried to smile but only a grimace of pain distorted his face, as he was ravenously hungry himself.

All beautiful words praising altruism are nothing if they are not followed by deeds. Even today, I can see the beaming joyful and thankful eyes of the boy gazing at Czarny and hear the delighted childish laughter and screaming, "Two kilograms of bread! My God, two kilograms of bread!"

Then the sirens wailed.

Alarm!

In the distance, we heard the nervous voice of a radio presenter, "Enemy terrorist aircraft have crossed into airspace over Hannover and are now headed for the Reich capital... Attention... I repeat... Enemy aircraft..."

I will never forget those moments. Hundreds of search lights pierced the star-studded sky. A monotonous drone of motors came from a distance, gradually picking up volume, growing stronger,

rumbling in the sky as if generating magical powerful music. They're coming! They're coming!

Phosphorous spilled onto the ground like pearl tears. The first deafening explosions rang out. The UK greets Berlin! "They're ours, ours!"

We didn't go down to the shelters not only because there was no space for us foreigners in them. We wanted to watch. To see the city of Berlin consumed by fire.

Hundreds of Polish, Italian and French hands reached up into the sky over ruins, fires and charred remains to welcome the steel birds that brought us freedom. Our eyes cast one collective accusation pointed at the city, all lips appeared to be saying one word even more powerful than the bangs of exploding bombs, "Die!"

9

Ireneusz Kamiński

born 01.03.1925 in Gniezno

During the occupation resided in Gniezno until 09.07.1942, then, until the end of April 1945 in Treuenbrietzen (Brandenburg), Werk Selterhof.

Currently: ul. Żwirki I Wigury 23, Gniezno

Student of State High School in Gniezno, Year 2, accelerated track of Junior High School

It was early July 1942. During one of numerous roundups which took place on the streets of Wielkopolska, I was captured by German police. Two days later, once they referred me to the Labour Office, I was sent from Gniezno on a large transport (of ca. 80 people) deep into Germany. I travelled into the unknown without as much as a chance to say good bye to my family, not knowing what tomorrow would bring and whether I would ever again see my home town or the faces of my loved ones.

After two days spent in cattle carriages, we disembarked in Potsdam and walked to the Potsdam Babelsberg Labour Office. There, we were split into two groups: the bigger one was assigned to the

Treuenbrietzen Werk Selterhof munitions factory outside Berlin, the smaller, which included me, to the Kruppa factory in Neu Kölln Berlin.

The work began. Work?! Is this the right word to describe a number of activities performed daily to the sound of insults interspersed with frequent beatings? No, this wasn't work but rather elaborate abuse targeted at people brought into this foreign land by ill fate, people deprived of sleep due to constant air raids, swaying on their feet from hunger and exhaustion.

During the early days, I thought I wouldn't be able to hold back and that I would throw myself at the foreman, this damn creature who kept repeating "Du verfluchter polnisher Hund!" ("You damn Polish dog!") at every opportunity, along with hundreds of other epithets, deriding everything that was Polish and mocking "the Polish God."

I stuck it out. Along with hundreds of my compatriots, I endured the 12-hour shifts, the bullying from the Germans and the horrifying, sleepless nights spent in bunkers, shops or outdoors in gardens amidst the banging of exploding bombs, thinking there couldn't be a worse place in the world than our camp. But I was wrong, and I found that out the hard way.

After a few months went by, the factory management resolved to move to the other "werk" ("plant") the most reluctant element, which used every opportunity to display their dislike for the Germans, i.e. the Poles. We were happy to leave, glad to finally change the scenery. Little did we know what a horrible surprise fate had in store for us.

We got off at a small suburban station and, after a brisk walk of a dozen or more minutes, saw the camp in which we would spend more than two years of our lives. We saw long rows of barracks guarded by barbed wire, Gestapo patrols with guns at the ready and police dogs at their heel, grey blocks of factory buildings, all surrounded by forest, nothing but forest.

Soon began the same torment we experienced in Neu-Kölln except that at the other Lager, there was no Gestapo while here, they

were ubiquitous, watching us day and night in the camp and the factory. We didn't only fear the bombs now, but also these sadists.

After returning from the factory, where most people work in a piece-work system 12 hours a day, we get a daily ration of food, i.e. one and a half litres of soup and 300g of bread. Three times a week, we are also given some marmalade.

Back at the camp, we can hardly stand on our feet and dream of lying down on our bunks, but the Gestapo have other ideas. They always have "extra" activities up their sleeve – they do room and personal searches and hold roll calls. Finally, after dark, we go to bed but can hardly sleep. We all think about our loved ones who remain far away in beloved Poland, and about what tomorrow will bring and how much longer we will endure?

Even the slightest rustle of footsteps by the barracks terrifies us greatly. Are they coming to get me? Has the foreman or the controller reported I have produced too few items or too many defective shells, or that I drag my feet on the job or have broken a machine? Each of these deeds is labelled "sabotage" and is punishable by death or by a much worse imprisonment. No one will defend the accused by pointing out that he could not possibly have met the quota as he was too weak and undernourished, and that the shells are flawed because the machine broke down and that machines do break down by themselves. Finally, fatigue shuts the eyes of the people tormented by these thoughts, only to open at 5am the following morning to start another day, one indistinguishable from any of the ones that came before.

Then came October 1944. Even in late September, our bread rations were reduced to 250g and soup rations to 1 litre a day (it was always either cabbage or fodder rape soup).

And finally our worst fears were realised. On October 2, two cases of typhus were detected, followed by another three on the fifth, with the toll adding up to 15 infected on the tenth.

The factory was shut down, all roads leading to the camp were blocked by the Gestapo, yellow flags visible from afar were flown from five posts. No one could enter or exit the camp, any approaching person would be shot dead from behind the wire. Five thou-

sand people, including three thousand women and dozens of children were sentenced to death. Yes, death, as we were not vaccinated and our medical care was limited to aspirin pills and temperature taking. The body of every patient who died was placed in a coffin, moved to a cemetery behind the camp and thrown out of the coffin and into a grave, while the coffin returned for the next body. "Ausländer" ("foreigners") could be buried without coffins, announced the factory manager.

An average of five people died every day. There were so many ill that they couldn't fit into the three special barracks. Therefore, as soon as one of them died, another would be placed in his or her bed before it cooled off, no matter whether they had typhus, flu or quinsy. After all, the treatment was always the same: aspirin... Needless to say, there were no special diets for the ill, they were given the same cabbage as us "healthy" ones. In the meantime, we patiently awaited our turn, having accepted our fate.

The Gestapo did not enter the camp any more, giving us some peace and quiet. We placed a cross under the central post with the yellow flag. Anyone who was still able to walk, no matter what nationality or language, would gather there every morning to pray, each in their own way. I will never forget praying with people driven here from all parts of Europe, raising my face towards the only One who could and did help us, when we all believed it.

I also fell sick. I don't know what miracle allowed my weary body to beat the disease. All I know is that I was able to get up from my bed again after a month. As I learned afterwards, the Swedish red cross sent typhus vaccines. After we were all vaccinated, the number of the sick dwindled and then the deaths ended with the final fatality recorded in mid-December. The total death toll in the epidemic was 150, including some from Gniezno.

We resumed work, as did the Gestapo. Their first job was to knock over the hated cross they were forced to look at when guarding the camp. They then arrested a few prisoners whom they considered to be instigators during "anti-German meetings," as they called our collective prayers. All of them were hanged in front of our eyes a few days later.

In January, when the Russians launched their offensive, all the roads were filled with fleeing “Volksdeutsche.” On seeing these endless rows and columns of our tormentors from the Poznań region, we regained confidence and knew that liberation was imminent. We hoped that nothing would stop it!

However, once they reached the Odra and Nysa line, the Russians did indeed stop their advance, while we looked to the west. Only when the Americans quickly approached the Łaba did the Russians launch their decisive march on Berlin. Pandemonium broke out in the narrow strip between the two front lines. Those who didn’t see the thousands of American planes bombing everything in their way can’t really say they know what war is. All the cities around us, as well as many forests, were set ablaze.

Needless to say, our little factory also got hit. We anticipated that though and hid in a nearby forest. Running from forest fires, we wandered for three days. After running into American patrols, we headed west. As I walked, I never turned back in the direction of the camp site where I had lived through horrible nightmares. Its name “Metallwarenfabrik Treuenbrietzen Werk Selterhof” will forever remain in my memory.

IN PRISONS AND CAMPS

VIII

1

Zdzisław Nadolski

born 23.05.1931 in Poznań

Currently residing at ul. Gruszkowa 12/2, Poznań

Student of State Marcinkowski High School, Year 1, Junior High School

...After seeing a performance in the Althof circus, I went to see its zoo. On exiting it, I noticed it was past curfew. Afraid to anger my dad or be caught by the police, I hid in a truck. But the police were watching me and they took me to a police station. They wrote a report and took me to a penal camp in the city of Łódź. Along with some others, I was placed in a prisoner carriage and transported out of Poznań in the morning. From there, I went to Toruń where the train I was on stopped on a bridge across the Vistula. There was an air raid alarm in Toruń at the time. One hundred and fourteen American planes went by. We were abandoned there to fend for ourselves. The whole train left, with the exception of our carriage filled entirely with Poles. After the alarm, we left Toruń. At night, we arrived in Łódź. At the station, twenty policemen were waiting for us with guns and dogs. They told us to hold hands and walk from Kalisz station to a tram stop. A prisoner tram was already waiting there. They loaded us on board and transported us to the “Kripo”^{*)}. There, they took away our luggage and recorded our names. Without any food, the police took us to a stinking cell occupied by fourteen men who were there for not showing up to Einsatz (labour duty). We spent one night there. They woke us up at 4.30 and gave us breakfast at five. After breakfast, we were told to undergo de-lousing. This took five hours. At 12, we got lunch, i.e. soup, which we had to eat without spoons. After lunch, at 2pm, a guard showed up and picked three boys and myself. They took us to an office and gave

^{*)} Kriminalpolizei, criminal police.

us our stuff back. Then a civilian arrived – he was a plain clothes policeman and a Volksdeutscher. His name was Stankiewicz. He took us to the Lager. Once there, I was issued Lager clothes.

During an exercise session at the evening roll call, they beat me for not knowing the marching drills. After three days, they took me to work in the kitchen. I worked there for two months. From dawn to dusk, I pumped water from 365-litre boilers. As I was too weak, they relieved me of that duty and put me in the peeling room. I peeled potatoes from seven in the morning to eight in the evening. Anyone who took a potato to their room would receive twenty lashes. The penalty for eating a few carrots was thirty lashes and three days confinement in the dark. I worked in the peeling room for three months.

In the Lager, it was customary to have night duty. One night it was my turn. However, I was sick that day and was running a high fever. I therefore asked my room manager to allow a substitution. He refused. As due to the fever I was about to faint, I was forced to ask him again. But, enraged by my waking him up again, he beat me up and denied my request. I had to go on with the duty.

One day, there was a general roll call in the yard. We were told that we would have our photo taken and that each family would get a copy from the Lagerführer. Those of us who were better dressed were told to stand in the front. The photograph shoot began as we marched around the camp. Once we had completed a full circle, I noticed they were dressing some guards up as doctors. One of them was examining our eyes. Another our teeth, and so on. They didn't send any pictures to our parents. As it turned out, they did this for propaganda to show the world how well off we were. The fact was that the doctors didn't take care of us at all.

One evening, at around 7pm, we were all undressed to wash. We noticed a bright glow all over Łódź. The boys said it was on fire. As it turned out, it was not a fire but missiles in the sky being dropped from Russian planes. The missiles went down with parachutes. When it got dark, we were told to go to the ditches. Some of the boys only had long johns and shirts on but no shoes. We had to stand in this freezing weather in those ditches for one and a half hours. Once

the alarm was called off, we were told to return to our rooms. The night was quiet. The date was 16 January 1945.

On the following day there was an alarm again at lunch time, at 1pm. Russian planes passed by very low. I could see that they were bombers and fighters. They circled over Łódź at one thousand metres. As one could expect, the German anti-aircraft artillery fired away like crazy but with little effect. When the alarm was lifted, we went to work. On the night of 17 January 1945, the sound of artillery shelling and heavy machine guns rang out. We usually woke up at six in the morning but on that day it was exceptionally 7.30. We had breakfast at nine. They told us they were out of bread and to peel potatoes for breakfast, lunch and supper. At ten, they issued our clothes to us. There was a rumour in the camp that we were to be shot at two and then burned, just as in Radogoszcz where they burned four thousand Poles alive.

I should add that I attended the funeral of the Poles burnt in Radogoszcz where eight hundred bodies were buried. But... they didn't manage to do that to us as they had to run. They loaded everything of value onto their trucks and horse-drawn wagons. They then got into their limousines and left. They left us unguarded and so we could walk away free.

As soon as I realised that, I fled the camp. Once I was out, I ended up on ul. Zgierska, where a woman approached me and took me in.

On the following day, at 2.30pm, the first patrol entered Łódź without a fight. It was Polish. The troops yelled: "Long live Poland! Poland has not perished yet!" and so on. When Soviet troops pulled in after this patrol, the people were very enthusiastic. They literally cried with joy. They immediately put up white-and-red and red flags after the five and a half years of German occupation.

After staying with the lady for three weeks, I set out on a journey towards Kutno and Poznań. On the seventh day, I moved from Kostrzyń to Poznań. I walked through Antoninek, Swarzędz, Warszawskie Osiedle, Śródka and finally reached Poznań. When I saw Poznań, I was sure there would be nothing left of my house. But it turned out it was not damaged! As I was passing through the Górna Wilda district, I could hardly walk from exhaustion. When I arrived home, I cried with joy.

*Eugenia Kamińska**born 20.09.1926 in Gniezno**Currently residing at ul. Żwirki i Wigury 23/4 in Gniezno**Student of a special course at St. John Grammar School 3 in Gniezno, Year 7*

In 1939, a war broke out with our biggest, eternal enemy – Germany, which took over the Polish lands and began to spread their vile and barbarian methods, such as murder, evictions of Poles from their own flats, deportations to the General Government or the Reich and the placement of innocent Poles in various prisons and places of torture.

Over the first three years, I was able to remain at home, for which I thanked God. But then came the day I was forced to leave Gniezno. There was a Pole by the name of Tysiąc who worked in the local Arbeitsamt and who sabotaged its work. He issued Beschäftigungskarten (employment cards) for Poles without entering them in the official register. As a consequence, there was a certain number of people in Gniezno who held employment cards without actually working. All this worked well for a few years, until one day they stopped issuing food coupons to anyone unable to present a new work certificate from an employer. This enabled them to capture any Poles who had not been working. Although an investigation into the sham employment cards failed to turn up the perpetrators, the Poles employed in the Arbeitsamt were fired and replaced by German women. The Reich must have been short on workers, as after July 1942, transports with “volunteer” workers, as the German media described them, left for Germany every week. I was among the people forced to leave Gniezno on one of them. We arrived in Poznań. They took us from the station to a temporary Lager in Górczyn. There, we were examined by doctors, bathed and placed in residential barracks. Food was scarce. We got a bit of cabbage and beetroot soup and, in the evening, 250 grams of bread to last us through the following day.

In the course of the week, a few transports from the Lager went to the Reich. As a dozen or more odd girls, including myself, were

left out after the last transport was filled, we remained in the Lager. After a week's stay, we were taken to a hall where German women who needed domestic help had gathered. They began trading as in an animal market. I was assigned to a German woman named Stappenbeck who lived at ul. Małeckiego 12. She was heartless. As a sworn enemy of the Poles, she did her best to abuse me and any other Pole who crossed her path every opportunity she got. Despite receiving a full set of food coupons for me, I never saw a single bit of meat, butter or cold cuts during my one-year-long stay at her place. She ran two kitchens, one for herself and her son and another for me. I was given plain bread or bread with marmalade. My lunches were in fact leftovers thinned out with water. In the autumn, she cooked soup for me from green tomatoes. I was beaten a lot. The woman's 15-year-old son, who belonged to the Hitler Youth, hit or kicked me like a dog at every opportunity. He was not only a Nazi thug, but also a thief. He forged bank checks which he used to withdraw money from his mother's account, he stole things at home and in the garden and blamed me for it. In February 1943, the woman bought a few cubic meters of fire wood. These were round logs ranging from 15 to 30cm in diameter. They would lock me up in the basement every morning over the space of a dozen or more days and ordered me to cut the wood with a hand saw. My arms would go numb but I had to go on or be flogged. Often, my punishment was to go hungry, as the woman declared that "the Polish pig hasn't earned her keep." The woman used to say: "Wir sind jetzt die Herren der Welt! und alle Völker – vor allem die Pollaken – unsere Knechte. Wir beherrschen die Erde, wir besiedeln, und wir rotten aus".^{*)}

My parents never knew how the German woman treated me as every letter sent home had to go through her hands. I have the impression that many of my letters never reached home.

I endured a year in this nasty captivity but then, unable to take it any more, I chose to flee.

I never tried to seek the help of the authorities, knowing they would not give me justice. Instead, I set out on foot from Poznań

^{*)} "We are masters of the world! And all peoples, particularly the Poles, are our servants. We rule, populate and cleanse the Earth."

to Gniezno. My journey lasted two days. My arrival at home surprised my parents a lot, as well as intrigued them. I remained at home for a little while but then a Gestapo official showed up to get me. I was interrogated, reports were written and then I was sent to the Soldier's House in Poznań. The Soldier's House was a beautiful building on ul. Ratajczaka whose cellars concealed horrible cells. The cells were furnished with nothing but a regular wooden bunk bed and a small barred window. In the hallway, one could hear German insults, the scolding and beating of defenceless Poles blamed for the truth. As is well known, the truth is painful. Poles had no rights during the occupation. They were punished with torture and sentenced to die as martyrs for speaking the truth. Only the dingy dungeons of the Soldier's House could tell us how many Poles died for their homeland, but unfortunately we will never know as the beautiful building was reduced to a pile of rubble. Parents were not allowed to defend their children. My father, for instance, put in a request with the Arbeitsamt to have me transferred, and for that, he was imprisoned in Gniezno as being "deutschfeindlich gesinnt" ("hostile to Germany"). Father also stood up for me with the German woman, but he only got an answer from her husband... As a result of a Gestapo intervention, my sick mother was forced to work hard on a horticulture farm while my twelve-year-old brother was sent to the countryside to work for a farmer.

From the Soldier's House, I was sent to a camp in Żabikowo near Poznań. During the nine weeks I spent there, I saw my share of bestiality meted out by the occupier. The Żabikowo camp comprised a huge courtyard surrounded with a double ring of barbed wire fencing. There were watch towers on four sides of the courtyard, as well as search lights that kept on shining continuously throughout the night. The courtyard itself was the site of many wooden barracks surrounded with barbed wire. The barracks were fitted with measly straw mattresses, a table and broken chairs. Heavy shutters had been installed on the windows. On arrival at the camp, we were given a collective shower and issued prison uniforms (made up of a pair of trousers and a linen jacket). We worked in all weathers, even in sweltering heat or freezing cold. We had to dig in the fields.

Sometimes when the ground was frozen, we had to break the earth with picks. We peeled potatoes in a barn whose interior was swept by freezing wind from all sides. We carried sand for no apparent purpose from one place to another. The poor quality of the food was beyond words. Black coffee in the morning, a litre of swede or cabbage soup at noon and 200 grams of dry bread in the evening. Even harder to bear than the work and the hunger was the mistreatment by the German tormenters. For even the slightest of transgressions, such as taking a carrot to satisfy hunger, exchanging some words with a friend, singing a Polish song or saying a prayer (we were watched through cracks in the shutters), the poor prisoners were punished severely, which they endured bravely, often with a smile on their faces. The punishments included being thrown into a dungeon and kept there without food or drink for days on end. The stronger of us survived it, but the weaker ones died of starvation. At times, we were forced to stand all night long in rain or sub-zero temperatures and then go straight to work on the following morning. Once, they brought a priest whom they forced to carry sand. Unaccustomed to such hard labour, the priest passed out from exhaustion. He was doused with water, beaten with truncheons and put into barbed wire. This was a roll of wire placed around a person to keep him from moving. The priest was ordered to remain there for seven days and seven nights without food or drink. We never found out if he survived the ordeal, as he was gone after three days. There was also a case of a boy, aged 18 or so, who was shot for an unknown reason. He was placed naked in a trough that was put in the doorway so that everyone had to step over him on their way to work. They said that each of us should die that way. Beatings and torture were a daily occurrence. Death was rampant.

I stayed in the camp from 30 December 1943 to 3 April 1944. On being released, I was told that if I ever spoke of what I saw in the camp, I would be brought back and that I would never leave it alive.

I got a different job. The German occupation lasted many long months afterwards. Finally, there came the happy days when Russian forces liberated Poland. Poles rejoiced at the sight of fear in the eyes of the German thugs.

The liberation of Poznań took a long time, wreaking havoc with the city. Eventually, though, it was all clear of the German invaders. I returned home in tattered clothing, and almost barefoot as all my other clothes got burnt, but I was happy at heart and hopeful for a better future in a free Poland.

3

Barbara Werwicka

born 20.08.1927 in Poznań

During the occupation, she resided at Osiedle Cegielskiego 33, Dębiec, Poznań.

Currently: ul. Mostowa 14a, Poznań

Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls' High School in Poznań, Year 1a

...One afternoon, we sat as usual around a small radio receiver listening to the words of the President of the Association of Poles in America when a truck pulled up in front of our house. A bunch of Gestapo men got out. A member of our household gave us a warning, but we had too little time to clear it all out. Five of us managed to escape into the garden through the rear stairwell. Three remained behind to destroy the evidence. The receiver was hidden in a pile of dirty laundry, everything else went into the pockets of the three young people who stayed behind. However, the tipoff was so detailed that the Gestapo conducted a thorough search. They found it all, including the receiver. Needless to say, the three youngsters were immediately arrested and moved to the Soldier's House. They received a generous share of threats and punches. One of them broke down and gave away the others.

They came for me on the following day, i.e. on Wednesday, 28 July 1944 at 10am. When a brownish grey truck stopped in front of my workplace, I knew they were coming for me. And I was right! They told me to get dressed and when I asked them if there was anything else I should bring, they replied, "Whatever you think."

When we arrived at the Soldier's House with a few other detainees, they told us to run up to the second floor where they violently shoved us into a large room in which an SS-man in black was sitting. The very sight of him was hideous and repulsive. There was something

animal-like about him, his entire face revealed he had no conscience or scruples. There were eight of us in there, including three women.

They interrogated us one by one in a room next door. I was the second to go. The room's windows was barred and faced a wall. The door was covered with metal hasps, the walls with paintings of forests, fields and flowers – how ironic. Above all that a portrait of the Führer hung majestically.

They began the interrogation by politely requesting the accused to take a seat in a comfortable armchair. Once they established the identity, they started asking questions. In my case, the Gestapo man was so cynical, he started by introducing himself to me as Sturmbannführer Leibnitz. After a few polite questions such as: Do you belong to the underground? Have you worked against the Germans? Do you know what punishment awaits you? How many members are there? Do you know them? Will you testify willingly? After I invariably replied “no” or “I don't know anything,” he moved on to threats. He even slapped me on the face so hard I had to hang on to my chair not to fall off. I didn't feel physical pain as I was too anxious and tense. Still, I felt the insult with my entire mind and barely stopped myself from saying something foolish. There was one thing I knew for sure – I would not give them away even if they abused me until I died. I remembered my brother who was sent to a concentration camp for refusing to give away his mates and that made me stronger and braver.

After two hours of interrogation, they walked me out of the other door into the hallway and three floors down to the basement, completely mentally exhausted. The basement was pitch dark and I couldn't tell if there was anyone else in there. I therefore said out loud, “Praise the Lord.” Three voices, including one female, responded – I was not alone. In an effort to picture the cell, I began to move slowly along the wall but gave that up after a few steps. The walls were soaking with damp, it was terribly stuffy and freezing as hell. There was no bench or stool to sit on and you had to stand without even leaning against the wall. The conversation was laboured, as each of us was engrossed in their own thoughts.

It was only then that I began to ponder my situation. It wasn't too rosy. After all, my testimony was one long string of lies. What if

the others spill the beans? Such thoughts afflicted me, and I braced myself for the worst. Time dragged on. After a while, which to me seemed like an eternity, they brought me back up for more questioning. I had thought it was morning but it was only nine in the evening. But I preferred the questioning to the horrible waiting in the terrifying “crypt.”

This time they took me to another room. All those who had been brought in with me were already there. The same Leibnitz asked me if I knew those present. I categorically denied it. He nodded and ordered me out of the room.

Despair! I returned to the same cell. I had to endure it until 7am. Never in my life will I ever forget this horrible night. They gave us breakfast at 7.30, my first meal since the preceding day. It consisted of a soup-like liquid and a piece of dry bread. The prisoners all ate together but weren't allowed to talk. After breakfast, they called me into an office where, to my surprise, I noticed my guv'nor^{*)}.

I learned that he had convinced them that what they were accusing me of was impossible, as I never went anywhere and that he vouched for me. I was thoroughly surprised and when they told me I would be released, I couldn't believe it. And yet, at 6pm, they did indeed let me go. When I stepped onto the street and took my first breath of fresh air, I staggered like a drunk. The first thing I did was to go to church and thank God for his mercy ...

4

Bożena Łukomska

born 10.09.1924 in Mogilno

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Małeckiego 3, Poznań. Arrested on 18.02.1944, brought to Żabikowo on 19.02.1944, released on 27.05.1944.

Currently: ul. Kossaka 19, Poznań

Student of Klaudyna Potocka IV State Girls' High School in Poznań, Year 4

“Kennen Sie das graue Haus?”^{**)}, asked the Gestapo man stepping out of a car. “Yes, I do”, I replied and inadvertently raised my

^{*)} I.e. the author's employer.

^{**)} “Do you know this grey house?” The question concerned the pre-war Soldier's House occupied by the Gestapo during the occupation.

gaze towards the building, known to me so well from pre-war times, now strangely odd and different, waiting for someone, despite the world being dark, empty, gradually covered with snow which was falling slowly, indifferently, paying little heed to what went on in the world. It is snowing. But does it snow the same way it snowed an hour ago when I was going home happily, when I was still free and myself?

The moment I was told I was arrested, and the moment the Gestapo man, seeking to assert his power over me, poked me on the forehead with his big fat finger and said, “Du dummes Mädel, du hast wohl gedacht, Polen kommt noch wieder?!” (“You dumb girl, you must have thought that Poland would come back again?!”), at which I transformed into an oddly numb and slow creature, no longer human, one of those “Stück” (“items”) that are counted three times a day and that can be beaten and pushed at will.

It is dark in the street and snowing. We enter the Soldier’s House, which deceptively appears to be sleepy and nice – but that is only an appearance! As soon as we step through the doorway, I am dazed by the bright lights and commotion – at eight in the evening! They were working “for the fatherland.” I was taken to the first floor. We walked down a long corridor lined with doors to no one knows what, to the sound of punches and moaning coming from behind them. One of the doors was ajar and I peeked in. A young man, aged around thirty, covered with blood, stood in front of the room surrounded by a ring of Gestapo men with rods in their hands. He was taking off his jacket. My legs trembled as I realised they could do whatever they wanted with any of us. Despite being strong, I didn’t want to be beaten! But then I thought about Krysia and Danuška and that they certainly wouldn’t be afraid of a beating, despite being weaker, and I felt ashamed that me, a girl scout, could be afraid even for a moment. Screaming and heavy assertive steps of Gestapo men resounded throughout the edifice. I wondered what God would hear first: the bashful moans and pleas or arrogant footsteps? And whether the footsteps would drown out the invocations raised to God? Or perhaps God only hears shy whispers?

They took down our personal details and escorted us to a basement cell. The grating sounds of a metal iron-clad door and then the bars seemed to be strange enemies. I didn't hate the person leading me to the cell but rather a peculiar bitterness towards the door and the bars for being there and keeping us confined so mercilessly. We were shoved into the cell. Nine of us in a tiny cell, but we all managed to find standing room. The prospect of a long night set us in a strange mood, each immersed in our thoughts, imagining we were caressing our loved ones.

I couldn't stand quietly. Too much has happened! I wanted to talk and talk! I didn't ask myself if anyone was listening, I was speaking more to myself and that felt good. I spoke to mummy, kissing her and stroking her silver hair. I felt her tears on my cheeks and, without knowing the reason, began to cry. I knew they were all still up at home and I wanted to feel their closeness. I didn't know if I would ever see mummy, daddy and my sisters again and I so wanted to be with them at home in that moment and cry with them! It was probably still snowing outside.

It was morning now. Turmoil in the hallway. Something is imminent but what? What could they want? How will it happen? Will they come and take me to "Maryśka"? I don't want it! God, how I don't want it to happen! A grating of a key in the lock, the sound of the bars being pulled aside. They are bringing somebody into our cell. What a rich harvest they had last night. Someone coughed. God, that sounded like Sabka. The door opens and in comes no other but my sister. What joy! We kissed endlessly until a guard looked at us in surprise. We were all summoned to step into the hallway. We faced a wall covered with laconic writings and names.

We boarded a truck and set off. I was lucky to end up close to a vent which allowed me to see the street without being seen from the outside. I don't know what time it was. The street was crowded with people pushing past one another and rushing to places, unaware that right by them went a truck filled with people who are no longer what they were yesterday or even earlier today. No, they are not people, they are "Häftlingen" ("detainees"). They are transported past the passers-by and past their own homes. They feel like

screaming and yelling out to at least catch a glimpse of someone close and finally realise that this is not a dream but reality.

We entered Fort VII. A crack of the iron-clad gate. The truck stopped. Out came the commanders. We were all counted, for I don't know which time. A few, the so called "Sonntagsjäger" remained. They were the lucky ones, they were going home on Monday. The others were packed back into the truck and on we went. "Nach Poggenburg," ordered the Gestapo man. "Poggenburg," said the engine. "Poggenburg," repeated the walls. The word "Poggenburg" squeezed in through the ears and penetrated deep into our heads.

5

Franciszek Leciejewski

born 30.04.1924 in Mrocza, Wyrzysk County

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Za Bramką 12b, Poznań, worked at a painting section in the D.W.M.

Currently: ul. Za Bramką 12b, Poznań

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 4 of Junior High School

On 16 June^{*)} at eight in the morning, I was on the roof of the so called P.Z.Halle at the D.W.M. and passed on the final instructions to the workers who arrived to start work at 7am. As soon as I was done, I heard the Vorarbeiter (foreman) call out, "Leczjeński! Sofort zum Renker" ("Report to Renker now"). Renker was my supervisor. Un-suspecting, I went to the office. As I entered, the supervisor said, "Das ist der" ("That's him"). At this, two uniformed SS men walked up to me with the telling gesture of holding their hands on their revolvers. They pushed me out of the office adding, "Vorwärts, du Schweinhund" ("Move, pig"). This sent chills of fear down my spine. I asked myself in my mind: What is it about? What do they want from me? Finally, they brought me to the guardhouse. My name was entered into the crime log and I was walked to a car where steel cuffs were placed on my wrists and ankles. My "concerned carers" took me to the courtyard

^{*)} 1944.

of the former Soldier's House, the infamous SS-Dienststelle. From the courtyard, they brought me to a basement and locked me up in a cramped dimly lit cell. A while passed before anyone showed up. Finally, at 3.16pm, as I managed to see on a Gestapo man's watch, I was taken to room 139. On entering, I was pounded over the head by one of them. A moment later, a fat administrator walked into the room. He leafed through the case file and suddenly asked, "Wo warst du am 6 Juni 8 Uhr Abends?" "Zu Hause." "Wer war bei dir?" "Zwei Kollegen" ("Where were you on 6 June at 8pm?" "At home". "Who was there with you?" "Two colleagues"). It only now dawned on my why they had brought me in. The administrator kept asking about what we did, what we talked about, etc. I said no to all of his questions. Finally, he waved to my guardians, who gave me a beating. Once they were done, he continued the interrogation, this time with the constant accompaniment of the muscle men.

A while later, a high ranking officer stepped in. He kicked the administrator and the thugs out the door and began talking to me in a friendly manner. He asked me about my working conditions until he skilfully mentioned the matter of the investigation. Luckily for me, I stuck with the same story I gave the others. Still courteous and well-mannered, he pressed a buzzer bringing in my tormentors. They now took me to the so called red cell, where I got another beating. A blow to the head knocked me out. When I came to, I was soaking wet. They took me to cell 29, where I immediately fell asleep. Suddenly, a Gestapo man dragged me out of my bunk and up the stairs. The old interrogation began anew. Dead tired, beaten up and deprived of sleep, I put my entire will power not to deviate from the previous answers. They wrote their final report.

Back to the basement, where I was given 60 lashes in four instalments. From there, they brought me back up again where they read the sentence to this effect:

"Witness Leciejewski attended a meeting of female teachers unknowingly. As they acted to the detriment of the state and as the acquaintances of the said witness were their messengers, the witness became an accessory. In view of the mitigating circumstances, we sentence him to flogging."

Broken completely, I went to get “justice” meted out. The torture began again. On the morning of the following day, I went to see a doctor. When I was brought to his office, he was bustling around with his assistant. There were more people waiting to see him. “Hemde runter!” (“Shirts off!”), he yelled. Our shirts were stuck to our wounds, but to avoid further beatings, we helped one another to tear them off. Following an inspection of our skin, we were divided into two groups. As I found out later, one of them was transported off to Fort VII. At 4.50pm, our group was placed in front of a high ranking officer who read out our release orders. Instead of a vow, we were to sign a declaration that we wouldn’t tell anyone about what happened there. No one believed their luck. At dawn on the following day, we were released and sent off to work.

6

Józef Klak

born 12.08.1928 in Poznań

*During the occupation, he resided at ul. Kilińskiego 7, Poznań,
working in German companies.*

Currently: ul. Kilińskiego 7, Poznań

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 1 of Junior High School

My job in a photography studio during the occupation gave me an opportunity to visit various German offices and other buildings.

I was frequently sent to one of the most infamous German institutions: the Gestapo building in the Soldier’s House. On some occasions, I brought them cameras, on others film rolls, etc. I usually deposited these with Mayor Schröder. The German was surprisingly kind to me and often treated me to candy or cigarettes.

One day^{*)}, shortly before quitting time, my boss sent me to deliver X-Ray films to the Gestapo. “Brandeilig” (“Hurry up”), he called to me, as was his custom. On arrival at the Soldier’s House, I gave

^{*)} In the summer of 1944 (the author cannot remember the exact date).

my personal fingerprint and received a slip stating my time of entry. The mayor's duty, as I left his office, was to enter the time of departure as proof that I didn't see too much. However, I didn't find the mayor in his room on that day. A fat German explained to me that Mayor Schröder was in room 14. I went off to find him. This way, I ended up at the cells. None of them had any numbers on their doors though. To inquire about room 14, I knocked on one of them. As there was no answer, I walked in myself. The room was all empty and dark with a bunk of sorts in one corner and a small barred window high under the ceiling. As there was no one there, I started searching in other rooms. All were furnished in the same way, not a soul in any of them.

I was just about to head back to the front desk when I heard some rude voices, one of the doors opened suddenly and a few Gestapo men came out followed by a young handcuffed woman. There was a German with a leather strap in his hand who pushed the woman forward every now and then. She followed them obediently. Her face showed horrible anguish but she didn't make a sound. They passed right by me without noticing I was there. I followed them out of curiosity. They disappeared behind a door which had been left ajar by accident. I peered inside. The room looked like a doctor's office. The woman sat by a wall on a low stool. A few Gestapo men tried to use various tricks to get her to confess something but she remained silent.

Finally, enraged, one of the oppressors grabbed a thick strap and started hitting her on the back. Every time he struck her, he would yell: "Sagst du, oder nein? Du polnisches Schwein!" ("Will you talk or not? You Polish pig!") The woman screamed twice but didn't say a word. One of the Gestapo men called out in German: "We'll see if you won't talk!" and moved towards the door. I jumped back frightened, looked around the hallways and politely asked him to point me towards room 14. He looked at me menacingly but nevertheless told me where to go. I deposited the films and left the building with a heavy heart.

Łucja Tomaszewska

*Born 16.11.1928 in Ostrów Wlkp. During the occupation, she resided
and still resides at ul. Starokaliska 41, Ostrów Wlkp.*

*Student of E. Szaniecka State High School 2 in Ostrów Wlkp.,
Year 1 of Junior High School*

On Wednesday night^{*)} at 12 midnight, as we later concluded, the Gestapo surrounded our house. We were sound asleep and therefore didn't hear what was happening around us. It wasn't until a lock fell to the ground that we woke up. The Germans used various devices to make sure that their thoroughly prepared plan would be well executed. Our father immediately realised our situation, as this wasn't the first time he had experienced such things. He had a radio receiver by his bedside which he used to cheer us all up when we began doubting if we would ever regain our freedom. He grabbed it and threw it into a wardrobe while he himself ran out and towards them.

Father's precautions were pointless as a policeman beat him through the door frame, barging in with a rifle at the ready in case of resistance. At that moment, we heard him bark in German, "Hände hoch!" ("Hands up!"). My father was immediately handcuffed as if he were a dangerous criminal. The policeman was followed by three civilians. They came from the Łódź Gestapo. One of them was an Ostrów man, formerly Polish, then active in the German Gestapo. They started to search the flat. In one of the two additional rooms in another part of the house slept my brother, whom they also decided to arrest. They didn't search those rooms and only broke a painting there that depicted Kazimierz Pułaski and some other paintings of great sentimental value which our father had received for excellence at work.

One of the Gestapo men looked at the map on the wall and the antenna of our radio which father didn't manage to hide. The Gestapo man must have known about such wires. He stepped towards

^{*)} I.e. the night of 5 June 1944.

father and asked him three times: “Wo ist der Apparat?” (“Where is the receiver?”). My father denied there was one. For that, the German slapped him on the face. Painful marks appeared on father’s pale face. Seeing that father wasn’t about to answer his question satisfactorily, he took a mahogany staff with a silver handle from the wardrobe and took him out of the room. Knowing their methods, I realised what my poor dad was in for. My brother stood motionlessly next to our beds, unaware of what was going on.

After a short while, the tormentor brought father back. He was still holding the staff, broken from hitting father. Dad must have been in terrible pain as his face got even paler, his head hanging down low on his chest, his eyes half-shut. Nevertheless, the Gestapo man didn’t get his answer and so he kept pressing, “Wo ist der Apparat?” Our father suffered badly in these last moments and now, in a trembling voice, he quietly and sadly replied, “Im Schrank” (“In the wardrobe”). Delighted to hear the answer, the German first broke the wardrobe door open and then triumphantly produced his loot with the uncontained joy of a wild animal. Our father, who could hardly stand from the previous blows, was now forced to demonstrate the secret of his design. In his nervousness, he was unable to show or explain anything coherently. The Gestapo knew fully well that they wouldn’t learn much here and so they started to act.

They ordered father and brother to get dressed, which they did promptly. Both of them obediently walked out ahead of the police. My brother carried the radio while father walked handcuffed by his side. We had to part without a good bye. We didn’t even request it, not to risk any further torture in retaliation. Father only turned his pale wrinkled face towards us with an expression of profound suffering. My brother uttered his final “good bye” in the doorway in a composed tone of voice. They were soon gone with only an echo hanging in the air. The scene has remained vivid in my mind for ever, making me hate the enemy even more...

I personally witnessed all of the things that happened in our house, as I’ve described them. The rest is based on accounts by my father who survived them and told them to us after he happily returned home, as if reciting the history of Poland.

A taxicab pulled over in front of our house and took them to the police station. On the way, one of the Gestapo men promised to free my father as long as he would get involved in Gestapo work. At that, my father refused categorically, saying he would rather die than make such a huge mistake.

The interrogation in Ostrów police station was brief, but the renewed torture rendered my father unconscious. As soon as the questioning was over, they were taken away in a truck that Poles called “the coffin.” The vehicle did indeed resemble a coffin – its interior was sealed tight, without so much as a crack, making it difficult to breathe. At the time, none of us had any idea where they were taking him and for what purpose. The transport went to a political prison in Łódź. There, the prisoners were placed in their cells. My father’s cell held 30 other people.

After 24 hours, they were given their first meal, made up of black coffee and a slice of bread, which had to last them for the next day. Their lunches comprised boiled water with a sprinkle of bran or chaff. Every tenth spoonful, one would fish out a tiny piece of potato. Once a month, the soup would contain a piece of horse meat. All orders had to be followed briskly, at the double. Those who failed to meet the standard would be punished by the guards, who were notorious for their cruel treatment of Polish prisoners. The nights were spent on cement. The inmates used shoes for pillows, trousers for mattresses and jackets for blankets. For lack of space, they slept on one side until midnight and on the other until morning. They were interrogated daily, accompanied by horrible torture. Innocent people were victimised.

The hands of the prisoners were tied with barbed wire which sank into their flesh as they were beaten. In this way, they themselves contributed to their own torture. The tyrants’ blows were so powerful they knocked out Polish prisoners. They would then be drowsed with water to bring them to and beaten again with no heed paid to their groaning and the pain they were suffering. The perpetrators watched the agonising deaths of their victims with jeering grins. Many withstood the torture and, with fists and teeth clenched, resisted their despicable enemy. Those who fought the

torment were unlikely to return from the questioning unaided. All prisoners tensely awaited their end.

Some admitted their guilt only to escape further anguish at the hands of their oppressors and be sent to a concentration camp. There, things have improved of late. Instead of major tortures there were only some minor ones and hard labour. As arduous as it was, the work helped people forget about their uncertain future. The delightful natural setting assuaged the pain in their hearts.

Many prisoners, wearied psychologically and physically, died of disease and injuries. Despite the agony, all the Poles maintained the unyielding Polish spirit. Prisoners cheered each other up in moments of despair.

Despite the interrogations, neither father nor brother ever gave up. Father didn't let the threats and cruel beatings break his resolve. The Germans never managed to prove he organised armed forces or listened to foreign radio. He baffled them and they bought his story.

Eventually, therefore, the Germans decided to release them. They let my brother go two days before they freed my father. Before they did, they made them swear they wouldn't disclose their experiences on pain of death.

After three months in captivity, our father and brother saw a golden freedom, albeit not complete as they were still in an occupied country. Father couldn't walk by himself. His face was pale and haggard, his body in pain from the blows and injuries he had received. His gait was slow and laboured, showing difficulty in controlling his legs.

On their release, they headed straight for home but unfortunately, it had been repossessed by German settlers...

Clandestine schooling

The German occupier turned us, Poles, into slaves. All of us repeated the word "slavery," which echoed far into the grey, unknown distance. I didn't really know what it meant as, at my young age, I had never had any experience that would explain the concept. This

was the first time the echoes of the word struck my ears. Nevertheless, what I imagined wasn't that far from the truth, as the slavery that our enemy imposed on us had a purpose. They set about obliterating the spirit of our nation.

Our living conditions changed immediately. The slavery was felt the most by Polish youths, whose hearts beat for their homeland. They have always worked enthusiastically for the future of Poland and for the Polish nation. The worst pain inflicted on us by the enemy resulted from banning the education that would have allowed us to reach our desired goals in the future. Yet some of our teachers dedicated themselves to the continued pursuit of their profession, this time in a "clandestine" setting. It was only after two years in this bondage that I found an opportunity to attend classes. All that time, I had waited for this desired moment and finally here it was.

I attended classes with three other girls named Jadzia, Ula and Basia. We were taught weekly by a stranger, of whom we knew nothing. This was paramount under the conditions of occupation we were in. The classes were held in our homes – each of the girls taking her turn on a different week, not to raise suspicions on the part of the enemy. Especially as neither our dear teacher nor ourselves worked, despite the occupier's desire. On the agreed day and at the agreed time, we sneaked through the streets and, like shadows, disappeared at the destination.

Once there, we would sigh heavily with relief, as if we had just overcome a major obstacle. We then pulled out our precious notebooks from under our aprons, dresses and coats. They were our most prized possessions. As soon as the teacher arrived, we said a prayer and eagerly started our lessons. Time flew incredibly fast, and soon it was time for us to leave. We always took home with us a recollection of happy times. This was the only place where we weren't afraid to talk freely about anything. We waited for this with joy in our hearts. Our Polish hearts matured in time, we got rid of our fears and anxieties and dreamed of a more glorious and brighter future.

A white frosty winter went by followed by a beautiful sunny hot summer. Our secret work has already lasted a year. We all graduated to the sixth grade, which was somewhat harder. The school year began with trouble. The Germans conducted searches. As a result, our books were hidden away, and we were forced to suspend school while our teacher went into hiding. One July morning we experienced an incident. I ran to Jadzia's, where our classes were supposed to take place. The subject was meridians and parallels. Just when it got really interesting, Jadzia's mum rushed into our room in terror and told us that the Germans were searching flats and were heading our way. We were petrified. I pictured camps, prisons and the like. Yet our teacher saw a glimmer of hope and took action. She grabbed all of our books and shoved them under a quilt on a nearby bed. By then all of us were responding instinctively and swiftly.

Ula ran out of the room with Basia and myself following suit. In the doorway, we ran into a German who demanded that Ula tell him, "Warum sind hier so viel Kinder?" ("Why are there so many children here?") He then stopped Basia and yelled, "Kinder zurück!" ("Come back children!"). We ignored his command and rushed down the stairs and into our house, which wasn't very far. The incident didn't trigger any horrible consequences and we never fell into the German trap.

For our safety, that is to keep us from ending up in a camp or prison, we had to watch our every move. The closer we were to liberation, the more cautious we had to be. We never completed the sixth grade as the conditions became increasingly more difficult and much changed. Jadzia left the city and passed away soon afterwards, leaving us with many memories of our time together. Basia and Ula were forced to work. I was deported to the Sudety Mountains.

I remained there until the end of the occupation remembering the happy times with my dearest friends, amidst textbooks and notebooks. Today, I can study again in a free, independent Poland.

Zdzisław Chudziński

born 11.12.1922 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Grunwaldzka 43, Poznań, working manually as a digger. He then stayed in Germany in forced labour until his arrest. He spent the remainder of the war in Poznań.

Currently: ul. Grunwaldzka 43, Poznań

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 1 of High School

...I have scores of recollections from a great number of experiences. I think the most interesting ones come from my time in various prisons. There, knowing they were dealing with people who were condemned to certain death, the invaders hesitated the least to show their true face. This is where the souls and instincts of the Germans were most exposed. We saw them unveiled and bared. My most vivid prison memory was from the three months I spent in Fort VII in Poznań. During this relatively brief period, I saw, heard and experienced enough to fill an entire book. I witnessed the agony and torture of Polish priests, peasants, workers and intelligentsia as there, at the concentration camp known throughout Wielkopolska, all of their paths crossed, they all suffered. The torment didn't spare children, old people or women. They bullied men regardless of their religion or social status. Being Polish was sufficient reason to torture a person. Out of my countless memories, I have picked the one that, for some unknown reason, has stuck the strongest in my mind. The events unfolded on the final night of my stay in Fort VII on the Sunday of 13 October 1940. Although I had lived through many other nights like this, this one proved to be more sinister, tragic and cruel than any other. Even though the savage horde of Nazis maltreated defenceless Poles quite routinely, this last night turned out to be the most memorable. Perhaps it was because it was my last.

For days, we knew there was considerable progress in our cases. There were about 300 of us, arrestees, scattered in various cells throughout the Fort to keep us from communicating. They herded

us all together now and locked us up in two cells, about 150 people each. Every day, we anticipated they would transport us away somewhere as life, or the vegetating that we experienced, crammed in such great numbers, was impossible. We were jam-packed into the cell to the limit, hardly able to breathe as the cell was windowless and offered no ventilation. We had been used to the worst conditions imaginable. Being kept in a Fort cell with only a handful of straw on a concrete floor crawling with all kinds of bugs that ate us alive, in constant darkness, without a bit of fresh air would be unthinkable for any mortal. Nevertheless, the conditions we were in during these final days were beyond all belief. Especially as they stopped dispensing our very meagre rations of food (previously, we had received 200g of bread and a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a litre of diluted groats for lunch, with the exception of Fridays, when the true Catholics were told to fast completely).

By all indications, Fort VII was slowly filling up, and that would have to move us out to make space for new victims. We all believed that – what we didn't know though was what the specific fate that awaited us was. We therefore sat there, depressed and resigned, quietly saying, “Those who seek the Lord's protection!” (“Kto się w opiekę”) “Beneath Thy Protection” (“Pod Twoją obronę”) and repeating a litany to our Holy Lady.

Finally, that final night came around. The bullies unlocked our cell and, amidst beatings and insults, lined us up facing the walls along the Fort's long dark corridors, lit only with dim lamps. Our “carers” didn't stint on alcohol. Apparently, they got paid well for the heads of 300 Cossacks who were sentenced to death. Wearing only their shirts and trousers but still toting guns, they ran among us generously dispensing blows with rifle butts and fists, and kicking us with their steel-reinforced boots. Then they began returning possessions and personal documents to the prisoners. Each of us walked up to a table at which two known Nazi oppressors, Rost and Lange, were seated. Once we completed the formalities, we would return to our place at the wall to again fall victim to the savage merrymaking and maltreatment from the inebriated horde.

Finally, it was my turn. They returned my personal documents, my prayer book and my empty wallet. "For safekeeping," they took my pen, pencil and about 50 marks in cash. Although I knew those belongings were as good as lost, something tempted me and I bashfully remarked that another pen and pencil were missing. The two SS "dignitaries" looked up at me crossly and made a show of conducting a quick search. Moments later, they both announced I must have never turned such items in as they weren't there. Instead of accepting the reply and keeping my mouth shut, I spoke up again and noted I also had more money. As it turned out, this time I pushed the drunk Nazis too far and I soon felt their anger on my skin, and quite painfully too. They made me sign a form then, that said I was leaving Fort VII in Poznań and that I would never tell anyone about what I had seen, heard and experienced in this camp. If I ever broke this condition, I would be returned to Fort VII, this time for good.

Once they processed us all, the bandits, who were now drunk, nearly unconscious, engaged in drunken revelries. They began by firing their guns at the lamps that lit the corridors. The whole cellar was soon shrouded in pitch darkness. Nevertheless, this didn't make them stop shooting. We all braced for death and awaited the bullet that would snuff out our young but sad and mangled lives. I was going mad, as I couldn't move without risking certain death. Therefore I just stood there, pressing my face against a cold wet wall, tense, my every muscle and nerve cell quivering. Finally, after a few minutes which seemed like an eternity to us, the gruesome game was over, although the horrifying night continued.

We were herded up to ground level and onto the fortress grounds for so-called "drill" or "gymnastics." There, amidst the moats and hills and search light beams, we were abused and tortured until morning. Although this was not our first time to experience abuse, once we were outside wearing only our shirts despite the cold of the night, and after the weaker of us even passed out and the rest ended up panting heavily like animals hunted down, we felt that this night went beyond any previous revelries and feats by our "carers." A very popular event was held in Fort VII every Friday. It was the "savages ball," and involved Nazi dignitaries, who had just received

their pay, getting drunk losing their mask of civilised people and showing their real faces. Dressed in horrid costumes, they banged on empty food cans to a rhythm, creating a caterwauling music with paste boxes, pans and pot lids. They went from cell to cell with ever more horrible ideas for fun and maltreatment, such as having prisoners punch each other on the face, perform priestly choir singing, staging parodies of the holy mass and sermons, and many others.

As mentioned earlier, our final night exceeded whatever came before. When, by morning, utterly exhausted, we were sure that we wouldn't be able to get up again after another "get down!" command or make another jump or run, they finally allowed us to return to our cells. Then, at long last, at 9am, trucks arrived to take us to another destination. Although none of us knew what was in store, and that two thirds of us would die under a guillotine, in a prison or a concentration camp and that we would suffer the most cruel punishments, cold and further persecution, we all sighed with relief passing the grim gates of Fort VII, deluding ourselves that there could not possibly be a place worse than this. Little did we know that, unfortunately, we would end up, on the same day, in the "tomb for the living," as the Wronki prison was popularly known. There, in addition to the famine, cold, beatings and other maltreatment, we suffered psychologically by remaining in solitary confinement for six months in a row in a tiny cell, faced with our thoughts only and with no one to talk to. But that is a whole other set of memories.

9

Franciszek Banasiewicz

born 30.03.1924 in Sulmierzyce

During the occupation, he resided at Sulmierzyce (1931-41), then, between 1941 and 1944, in Poznań, Frankfurt am Main, Bremen, Vienna and Metz, in this order. From 1944 to the end of the occupation, he was kept in the Krotoszyn, Wrocław and Żabikowo prisons.

Currently: ul. Klonowicza 54, Sulmierzyce

Student of State Coeducational High School in Krotoszyn,

Year 4 of Junior High School

...It is Sunday, 1 October 1944. A glorious sunny day, apparently like any other, but in fact one that I will never forget. I was sitting with my family, telling them stories from my life when an "Amtskomissar" (SS) walked in and ordered me to get dressed and follow him. I had no choice but to obey his "command." The despair of my mother and siblings was beyond words. I wasn't even allowed to say good bye. I was taken to the police station. For what? What have I done? I ask in vain – my only reply is a few punches in the face. Then, they cuff me and lock me up in a cell.

The last rays of the setting sun fall in through the barred window. I kneel on a bare cement floor, still handcuffed, and begin to pray to God fervently. I don't know how long I knelt there as I fell asleep, crouched and crying. Suddenly, a clinking of keys and the rattle of a lock being opened woke me up. One of the oppressors entered the cell and asked me, with an ironic grin on his face, whether I would like to have a bite as he had brought a delicious breakfast. I looked at it with disdain and declined (it was a pitcher of water and a slice of dry bread). On the following morning, I was called in by the chief of police. He wanted to know if I was aware why they had arrested me. My negative reply got me two slaps in the face. "Let me tell you then," said the chief of police, "just like any other Pole, you wanted and wished that we, the Germans, lost the war and died at your hands. You loathsome Polish pigs, you will rot as we take our revenge. This is only the start, he continued (so angry he was foaming at the mouth), you will soon have more of you there to keep you company. The more the merrier."

There was no chance to explain. Any attempt to open one's mouth elicited blows with a rubber cosh. On the third day, that is on the Tuesday, I was moved to the Krotoszyn prison. My main occupation there was to make wicker baskets or weave rope. After 14 days, a prison truck took me to Wrocław where I spent six days in the Police Headquarters, from where they transported me to Poznań. On 23 October 1944, at twelve midnight, we entered the central train station. Escorted by the police, I was driven to the Soldier's House on ul. F. Ratajczaka. The escorts prodded us into our cells with rifle butts. We lay there on bare cement until morning. Although the cell

was very small, they packed 36 other prisoners into it. You can only imagine being there without even a window. On the following morning, me and a number of other fellow prisoners (a total of 23) were taken by prison truck to the Żabikowo penal camp outside Poznań.

It was dark by the time we reached the camp. The gate opened and the prison truck pulled into one of the yards. The prison was perfectly quiet, as if there wasn't a soul in it and as if nothing was taking place there. As we disembarked, we were greeted by the sneers of the SS men, among them "Lagerführer" Walter (the biggest torturer, responsible for murdering thousands of people). Powerful, blinding search light beams were directed at us. We were lined up in pairs, facing a wall. Even the slightest turn of the head was punished with a beating. After standing there for an hour with no roof over our heads (it was raining), we were taken to one of the barracks to deposit our personal effects. There, we also got our "welcome gift," which depended on a visual assessment by an SS man. Mine was only 15 blows to the kidneys. We then went to the latrines, where we surrendered our clothes. The next step was delousing.

The "ceremony" involved certain "honours." The first was a haircut, often reduced to having entire clumps of hair pulled out of one's scalp. Then came a hot shower, followed by being placed in a corner and doused with a jet of freezing water for several minutes. Afterwards we were bathed in Lysol and sulphur, which burned our skin horribly. Having passed through this ceremony, we were pushed naked into another toilet block, where, trembling cold, we were made to stand for hours on icy cement. When they finally took us out, we were issued prison clothes, bowls, spoons, etc. and surrounded by SS men, pushing us around. Finally, we were shoved into one of the cells with long poles. There, we were in for another surprise as the room was pitch dark. We were made to run into it and fall over upside-down stools deliberately placed at the entrance. This was at about 1am.

From then on we were no longer considered human. Each of us was given a slip with a number – we became numbers. Mine was 38764.

We were woken up at five the following morning. After a round together through the toilets and wash basins, wearing only our trousers, we were lined up in the yard with a pot to get our coffee or bitter oak bark tea. The ration was only a half a litre. We got bread once a day (in the evening) – one small loaf for every four to five people. Our lunch was made up of three quarters of a litre of soup (about as thick as water) cooked from whatever grew in the ditches, sometimes turnip, swede and cabbage, rarely carrots. Sunday dinner was our “premium” meal: it was “goulash.” Not the kind you would expect to have at home, they just boiled the bread that people brought for the prisoners (which we didn’t sniff at). We got a quarter of a litre of such goulash, plus three potatoes, which were mostly rotten.

We worked from dawn to dusk doing all kinds of jobs. The most common task was crushing large stones into pieces – we were made to pound at them with hammers endlessly. Every time we stopped, we were beaten. On other days, we carried bricks, weighing approximately seven pounds each, running from one end of the camp to the other. Anyone caught wincing at the weight or slowing down short of the required speed would immediately be beaten unconscious with sticks. He would then be doused with a bucket of cold water and either beaten again or put back on the brick trail. Even the slightest reason was good enough to beat us with rods or sticks. They also set dogs on us that were specially trained for this job.

Any delay in getting up, washing or performing our work would land us in one of their little “punishment” turrets. We stayed there crouched, five per turret, with no space to move, for three days and three nights on coffee alone. I was placed there from the 1st to the 3rd of November. Another “penal” facility was by the entrance. It was used for a greater number of prisoners at a time. They were all chained together lying down. For one to stand up, all of the others had to get up too. There were no windows, and so the room was deprived of daylight. There was also a high voltage net at head level which was kept live. Another punishment involved being placed in a so-called “basket” made of barbed wire which prevented the victim from leaning or sitting

down. The basket was set out outdoors. I stood in it for three days and three nights for having broken off a chair leg while moving the house of one of the Gestapo men.

After a week, I got my first call for interrogation in the Soldier's House. They were telling me I belonged to the Home Army and had committed hostile acts against the Germans. Whatever abuse and torment they subjected me to, I took it in silence for God and my country. I was interrogated five times in this way. Almost every ten days. Unable to get me to admit anything, they took me to the so-called "Maryśka" (a basement cell with a table 60cm high and 70cm wide). I had to lie down on the table with my arms and legs tied to its legs and my head tied town separately. Then the torture began. I lost consciousness after a few blows. They poured a bucket of cold water over me and started over. They put a sheet under my head with a complete confession. All I had to do was to sign it. The torture resumed. I refused categorically. When that didn't help, I was sent back to Żabikowo.

There, I went through the same routine I have already described. Those who attempted to escape and were shot dead in the process would have their bodies placed in a trough for all the prisoners to see, with the inscription: "This is what you get if you try to run."

Human life had no value there. Every day, 15 to 20 corpses were removed from the cell. I myself served as the so-called "Totkommando" for 2 weeks. My job was to remove the bodies every day.

I must note that bunny hops were a popular game in the camp. The way it worked, we were driven out to the "exercise" yard, sometimes at night, and made to run, get down, get up, jump, crawl, etc. while the Germans beat us with sticks. Under such circumstances, I stayed in cell G2 until 20 December 1944. In the evening on that day, I was picked out in the roll call and, on the following day, 21 December 1944, I was released by some unknown miracle. Before the release, I had to sign my name several times committing not to disclose what I saw in the camp to anyone. With hardly any strength left in my body, I made it to Poznań in the evening. As soon as I did, I went to St. Lazarus church to thank God for saving me ...

*Seweryn Stachowiak**born 25.11.1925 in Poznań**During the occupation, he resided at ul. Sosnowa 5, Poznań, where he was arrested by the Germans.**Currently: ul. Sosnowa 5, Poznań**Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 3 of Junior High School*

The Gestapo arrested me before noon on 18 December 1944. Together with Lieutenant Colonel Pawlicki and Untermännern, I was taken to the Soldier's House. Once we had been processed, i.e. had our personal details taken, had been made to listen to a litany of verbal abuse and insults, and provided with a close encounter with Gestapo men's fists and boots, we were locked up in the cellars. I stood in the hallway there for two hours facing the wall and looking at the numerous blood stains. This was Polish blood from faces maimed by the Gestapo. For us, this was only the beginning.

After dark, they took me to the Żabikowo camp with a sizeable group of new arrivals. After a roll call, they moved us to a building that served as an office, a changing room, a bathroom and a delousing facility. I think a fitting name for it would be "a modern-style torture chamber." We went through the same formalities as at the "headquarters." I entered the baths at around six. Stark naked, needless to say, as the clothes all went to delousing. We stood on a concrete floor in the wash room. The temperature on that day was way below freezing. The only window was heavily frosted over in various patterns. After an hour, a barber came and began to go over our heads with his blunt shaver, literally pulling our hair out. Every now and then, Gestapo men would come around to see if we were sufficiently blue. Finally, they decided we were good for a bath. After a cold and then warm shower, followed by a Lysol bath, we were driven into a freezing toilet. There, we dried for another one and a half hours on a cement floor. It wasn't until 10.30 that we got our deloused clothes back. The political prisoners, me included, received their own clothes while the criminal ones were issued prison

uniforms. Finally, they lined us up in front of the building and assigned us to individual barracks.

I was taken to cell L. As I stepped over the threshold, I looked around. Two thirds of the barrack were filled with bunk beds. Here and there, a pale face on an emaciated body raised from the bed to take a curious look at the novices. The rest of the barrack was a workshop, which, as I found out the following morning, was filled with loom-like machines. The prisoners used them to make 25-meter-long belts from waste rubber. My viewing of the new place was stopped abruptly by a jailer, who switched off the lights. Someone in the dark walked me to a vacant bunk. Despite my fatigue, I couldn't sleep. The hard boards pressed against my body, there was nothing to put one's head on. Despite being all dressed, including a coat, and covered with a thin blanket, I couldn't stop shivering. Finally, the lights went on. Wake up time. Within three minutes, we all had to line up in front of our bunks. A metal bar being pushed aside made a grating sound. The door opened. The first fifty of us ran out to wash – my mates had warned me not to wear any shirts or sweaters in the morning. At best, you could wear a jacket over bare skin. After marching for ten minutes around the yard, there was a signal indicating the wash basins were free. We ran out through an opening in the fence (the political prisoner camp was surrounded by an additional fence) and headed for a washroom about 150m from cell L. There, we checked with the Gestapo man on duty and had our one minute to wash. Before we even managed to get our bodies wet, we have to run out or risk a flogging. They beat us frequently and generously. We only got to dry our bodies once we were outside.

On returning to the barrack, we would get dressed hurriedly. It was then breakfast time. The meal comprised a half a litre of a thin liquid they called coffee. A Gestapo man would then come along and pick some men. The poor souls were taken for interrogation. I would soon find out what that meant.

After breakfast, some of us walked to the workshop in our barrack while the others would go to cell I. I ended up with the former. Suddenly, I realised that someone was watching me. I looked closer. It was Czesław Szypura. We said hello. God, he looked terrible. His

horribly undernourished pale face revealed pain. His black eyes showed horror, nearly madness. Having learned later what he had been through, I was no longer surprised by the appearance of this one of many thousands of sufferers. He flooded me with questions. I told him whatever I could. I noticed his words didn't all make sense, which was the result of Nazi education. And he had only been there for three weeks. After work, he told me about some of his experience. He was also pulled out of work, charged with being a member of a secret organisation. They kept him in the Soldier's House for five days. He was tortured horribly but denied all accusations. The prisoner knew the so-called "Maryśka." It was a kind of a bench on which the victim was placed. His arms and legs were tied to the legs of the bench, his head was covered with a mask. Three thugs would take turns beating him with long whips. The most skilful and the strongest of them was the Poznań German named Gerhard, also called the Blacksmith. Woe betide those who got the Blacksmith as a translator. The words of the accused were always twisted in his disfavour. A dreadful torture instrument were bracelets with inwardly pointing spikes. They were placed on the victim's wrists after which the hapless fellow was hung from the ceiling by the bracelets attached to a chain. While he was hanging, he would often be beaten on the belly. When the tortured person passed out, he was doused with water until he came to. Then, they would start over. Many died in the process. It wasn't surprising that a colleague of mine, although totally innocent, admitted his guilt in the pain.

Our work was not arduous but rather tedious and unhealthy. We toiled from dawn to dusk in clouds of dust on a daily ration of thin soup and a bit of bread. The lucky ones would sometimes get their hands on a bunch of peelings. They would use them immediately to make soup. Hunger was one of the worst things in the camp. It never left us, often waking us up in our sleep. I remember a Christmas Eve when, after having a bowl of soup and a bit of bread, I had nothing to eat until the afternoon of Christmas Day. I kept thinking about my family. I will never forget the "Holy Night." After a brief, but moving speech, Judge Oluszyński shared the holy wafer with us. The eyes of many of us welled up with tears. Some jaws clenched

tight. And then we all wished one another one thing, the most precious of all: freedom. We embraced and kissed. We were all moved. Then, in candlelight, we heard a speech from the Rev. Jordan who finished with singing “Bóg się rodzi” (“God is born”). Picked up by 170 voices, despite all our precautions, the song was heard by a Nazi guard. A loud bang on the shutter made us all hurriedly return to our bunks. I couldn’t sleep for a long time that night.

Holidays were regular work days for us. As soon as we finished working, they turned off the lights. Besides hunger, we were pestered by lice. They were all over the place. There wasn’t a man who could brag he didn’t have them. They troubled us day and night. Despite the daily killing, they were always there. In fact, the camp was full of its little pleasures. At times, as soon as we washed, with our skin still wet and our heads bare, we ran around our yard for an hour in a dozen or more degrees below freezing. The “running” actually involved more lying down than running itself. Our tormentor, named Beutler, delighted in using the command “hinlegen” (“lie down”) and seeing our helplessness. On many occasions, I saw the thug beat completely innocent people unconscious.

Mornings were always nerve-racking. The ones who heard their names announced by a Gestapo man would go pale. No one could be sure if they’d return here again and in what condition. The last of those summoned who never saw us again were Dr Kasztelan, Judge Muszyński, Lewandowski, Chołdys, Palinkiewicz, Runowski, Gerard, Wenz, Tazanowski, Napierała and Madajewski. I remember the time they left our cell. Moved, they hurriedly said their good byes to friends and colleagues. They sensed they would never come back.

I was interrogated on 21 December. The charge was membership of a secret organisation and harbouring suspicious people. I immediately realised that, despite having some information, the Gestapo knew very little. I therefore picked what later turned out to be a good strategy of denying everything, no matter what means these criminals used. It was evening when I ended up in the cellars, with wishes of a good Christmas in the camp from a cynical brute.

One of the meanest things done by the degenerate Gestapo was to steal the food that was sent to us. They began to pilfer the pack-

ages in November 1944. These ravenously famished people would be overcome by a helpless rage when, on opening a large package with a list of all the delicacies it contained, they would only see a bit of dry bread and occasionally a few potatoes and some peas at the bottom. The rest went onto the table of the damned Gestapo men and their families. The bread they didn't manage to eat would be thrown to the pigs.

When I had a free moment, I sat by the "camp old-timers." These martyrs accused the Nazi scoundrels and told blood curdling stories. How much Polish blood was spilled here, how many children they orphaned and wives widowed. God only knows what tortures were suffered by all those who are no longer among us. He knows how many millions of human lives were lost to the German "destruction craze." When forced to flee like cowards, the base murderers didn't hesitate at turning dozens of ill people to ashes. The Rev. Jordan, Kaczmarek the lawyer, Kobiela, Dąbrowski, Szauffer and many of my other friends removed from the Żabikowo camp never saw the ultimate defeat of the Nazis. I was one of the lucky ones who managed to break out of the camp a few days before the Germans took flight. None of my friends and acquaintances other than Sayna ever got back. I hope to God that some of them are still alive. May those who are no longer with us rest in peace.

11

Stanisław Sternal

born 07.07.1928 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Mostowa 26, Poznań. In 1944, he dug ditches in Skrzetusz, Czarnków County and was then imprisoned in a labour camp near Płock.

Currently: ul. Mostowa 26, Poznań

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 2 of Junior High School

On 11 October 1944, I broke out of a hard labour camp^{*)} and headed for Toruń. Having endured many dangers and difficulties,

^{*)} Near Płock.

I travelled by horse-drawn wagon and even by rail and reached my destination on the same day. On the following evening, I sneaked through the central railway station and boarded a train using a ticket that my aunt had purchased. I was happy at the prospect of reaching Poznań that very night. Unexpectedly, my daydreaming was rudely interrupted by a scream, “Bitte, Reisegenehmigung” (“travel permit please”). I was petrified as I didn’t have any, being a fugitive. The sad reality was that I was arrested on the memorable day of 13 October 1944.

I was taken off the train in Gniezno, where I spent the first night as a prisoner in a cell of the Polizeipraesidium. There, in this ancient Polish town, I was handcuffed for the first time. On the morning of 14 October, armed Schupo men escorted me to the Kriminalpolizei building for interrogation. After being questioned for a few hours, I was confined to a cell. It wasn’t solitary, and it gave me a chance to talk to the other inmates. Much like myself, some of them had been caught for not having a driving license, while others were in for “serious political crimes.” I remember one of them particularly, Father Jordan. The charges against him were especially serious. He was interrogated day after day, with beatings intended to force a confession. I had cheerful conversations with a young Russian who had escaped from Berlin and was only captured near Gniezno. For days, which seemed like months, I wondered what would happen to me. I worried about my family back home who knew nothing about my fate. Hardest of all was my craving for a hearty meal. Whenever I heard the steps of our Cerberus, with the face of the god of crime and drunkenness, I would immediately jump to my feet thinking he was bringing us food. This is how I spent six days amidst hunger and uncertainty.

On 18 October 1944, I learned that we would be moved. Around 4pm, shackled like a criminal, I was escorted to a platform at Gniezno train station. Kicked into a tight compartment on a prisoner carriage, I fell heavily onto a bench, feeling devastated. I was in the company of another escapee and a Warsaw man. The former had taken part in the uprising and was placed in a camp after the surrender. He escaped but was recaptured near Gniezno. We reached

Poznań around 7pm. As soon as we did, I realised where I was being taken. But we were still far from Żabikowo. Thrown off the train, we huddled up, were clubbed by a legion of policemen while waiting for our ride. They crammed so many of us into the tight truck that you literally couldn't move an arm or a leg. They drove us to the Polizeipraesidium on December 27. Prodded on, beaten and screamed at, we were quickly sorted for our next transport.

We soon ended up in the Soldier's House, whose infamy had spread throughout the country. Instead of supper, we were treated to a bunch of kicks and slaps to the face. Then, after a lengthy registration procedure, we retired for the night. My cell had no windows and could only fit two people lying down. However, concerned for our thermal comfort, the Gestapo threw in another fourteen. The stale air, with the stench of an iron trash bin in the corner, became intolerable. I will remember the night as long as I live. With frequent interruptions, I endured until morning. At 10am, I went to work in the fresh air. What a delight it was to breath in pure air, free of any odours. The weather was glorious but, when I realised I was only a 10-minute walk from my parents' house, whom I haven't seen for so long, I found it difficult to appreciate the beauty of nature. It wasn't the time for idle thoughts either. I pulled weeds until lunch. This was my first meal in two days. The greediness I felt as I dug into the food can only be understood by those who have experienced real hunger. Again, I was forced to wait in a stuffy dark cell.

That afternoon, I was moved to the "educational camp" in Żabikowo. The gate closed behind me, and I had no idea how long I would stay there. I might well have thought I would never leave this camp. It was on 19 October 1944. What immediately caught my eye was the emaciated figures of prisoners walking around weakly, and the insolent fat SS-men, as well as the ramshackle buildings made of boards and surrounded with barbed wire. All of this made a terrible impression on me. The occasional scream of a victim being beaten gave me a foretaste of what was to come. I was about to get to know the educational methods of the "Herrenvolk" ("master race"). Once we were booked and had our clothes confiscated, we took a bath. Doused with cold and then warm water, we were herd-

ed naked onto the freezing cement floor of the drafty cell where we remained for a few hours, our teeth chattering. Finally, they threw old work clothes to us and moved us out of the building, with bare heads. Then, after a brief inspection, we rested in our beds. I ended up in a cell marked “FH.” To the curses of awakened prisoners, I and another detainee lay down on a narrow wooden bed of broken boards.

At 6am, the day began with a wake up call, roll call and wash. Half naked, I ran towards a washbasin. Once washed, I realised the shirt and sweater I had placed next to me were gone. I searched for them in vain. On the advice of my mates, I walked from barrack to barrack, unaware of the ban on moving freely around the camp. This brought a beating upon me. I passed out after a few blows from a thick club. The world whirled before my eyes – I didn’t know where I was. The pain and bruises remained for the next few days. After the roll call, we scrubbed our cells, which had to be cleaned daily because of an epidemic that broke out in the camp. If any deficiency was discovered, we would have to run around the yard, squatting frequently, for several hours. After a short but “lavish” lunch, we were assigned to removing human excrement with buckets. This was revolting work. In the evening, having had a slice of dry bread, I immediately lay down. I found it difficult to sleep though. The blows that hit my bones made it impossible to make even the slightest move without feeling pain. The cold also kept us awake. The experience of the first day in the “educational camp” has been etched into my memory for ever. After that, we performed hard labour day in day out, abused by the Germans. It was only in evenings, after the work was over, that we could relax, but even that couldn’t be relied on. Quite often, we were taken to the yard, made to jump in various ways and fall into the mud. Our oppressors’ favourite game was called “bunny hops.” It involved the prisoners leaping around the yard in a squatting position, often until they passed out. Our “carers” showed the most cruelty to Russian prisoners. They would beat them unconscious at the slightest excuse, bring them to by pouring a bucket of water over their heads and start the beating all over. The beatings were most common during work. We were made

to run swiftly with a heavy load of sand on our backs. Those who could not manage would soon have one of the “informers” (German prisoners) on their backs, pounding them with a thick club until they’d lose consciousness.

In evenings, we were frisked. Those of us found to conceal a bit of swede or carrot would get a clobbering and would then be thrown into “the bunker” for four days. Those who emerged from that torture chamber looked like the living dead. The prisoners sat on the bunker’s cold, wet cement floors in three rows, shackled with iron chains by their necks and arms, huddled together. A high voltage metal net hung low above them prevented them from standing up. Many died of electrocution by rising heedlessly. The bunker was filled with people from all over Poland. 60 per cent of them would be executed. Their only food was a slice of bread and occasionally a bit of soup. Blows and kicks were dispensed much more frequently. The prison was escape-proof, guarded by alert guards perched on three high towers.

Filled with anticipation for a roll call after a short meal, the evenings dragged on and on. At times, we spent long hours in fearful expectation. I couldn’t bear the idleness, constantly afflicted by thoughts of home, my friends and studies. Even when all of us returned to our beds, we still couldn’t sleep. Stories from prisoners from all parts of Poland, from Vilnius to Lublin, Warsaw and Inowroclaw, kept us awake. The most interesting ones were the tales of the fighting in Warsaw. You could never sleep through the night anyway, due to the cold which penetrated deep into our bones.

The worst of all of our tormentors in the educational camp was the inhuman officer Beutler. Like a vampire, he lived off the pain of the prisoners he tortured. At every roll call, he kept us standing in the yard half naked, with our bare heads, as long as he pleased. The others weren’t better at all. All of them ruthlessly adhered to the policy of “eradicating” Poles. And the means they used were sufficient to do just that. However, they derived a certain pleasure from personally becoming instruments of torture. The culture of the German invaders revealed itself fully. They enjoyed watching prisoners forced to beat one another, laughing and prodding them

to move faster. They punished their victims by placing them in electric wire cages, or a bunker so narrow you could only stand straight up in it.

It was horrible to watch a tortured mate return to his barrack. The unceasing groaning could drive you mad. Every day, I grew less hopeful of ever coming out of this terrible place alive. Until something unexpected happened. It was 9 November. In the morning, I went to work as was my usual routine. At around 3pm, after lunch, I was suddenly called upon by the duty officer: "Alle Sachen mitnehmen!" ("Bring all your belongings!") This meant I was leaving Żabikowo. Overjoyed, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. In the rush, I forgot to bring my shoes and towel, but the anticipation of freedom was so joyous, the loss of a towel didn't really matter. After a regulation bath, I got dressed and awaited my documents. I spent what seemed to be my longest night in Żabikowo beset by uncertainty. I didn't know whether I was being set free or moved to another "Straflager." But then at 8.35 (I remember this distinctly), I crossed the threshold of the educational camp in Żabikowo.

I didn't walk free, as they took me to a "Durchgangslager" ("transition camp") in Górczyn. I was to wait there for a work assignment. In the evening of the same day, on 10 November, I jumped the fence and made my way into the street. I headed for home where my parents were anxiously awaiting my return having learned about it from the Gestapo. On the following day, I returned to the camp. On 14 November, I was completely free, assigned to work in Poznań. My new workplace was the Ogehei automobile tyre factory. I worked there until military operations began in Poznań ...

12

Henryk Paluszkiewicz

born 27.01.1925 in Radgoszcz, Międzychód County

Deported to Włoszczowa, Jędrzejów County

Currently: ul. Paderewskiego 5, Chodzież

Student of St. Barbara State High School in Chodzież,

Year 2b of Junior High School

This is the story of my father who was in a camp in Piła^{*)}

Although classified as a temporary facility, the Piła camp can easily rank as one of the worst German camps in which Nazi criminals tortured and abused their Polish prisoners, including clergymen. The Piła camp was located in an old airport which had long been the site of barracks. In the initial months of the German occupation, innocent Poles were brought there daily, by truck or on foot, first to a prison. After interrogation and torture, they were moved to the camp. On arrival, they were brought to an office and seated against a wall with their arms raised. They were made to stand there, facing the wall, until they would drop on the floor exhausted. Then, the blood-thirsty bullies began brutalising the poor people, and especially the priests, with no regard for grey hair or advanced age. Beaten up and covered in blood beyond recognition, they were gathered in a single barrack which housed some 1,500 Poles. The conditions within were horrifying. Emaciated Poles, who hardly resembled human beings any more, lay next to one another on old, fetid straw crawling with lice. To make them look even less dignified and more ridiculous, they were not allowed to shave, and given very short haircuts. At roll call, the Gestapo men used every opportunity to kick them and punch them in the face. After the assignments were over, they were all herded into the barrack. They were given a supper of a half a litre of water and a few potatoes and told to lie on the straw. They had to wake up at 4.30 in the morning. After a breakfast of 300g of bread, they moved out, escorted by the Nazis, to spend their entire day working. When the group passed through the city, the German population mocked them and spat in the face of the exhausted and unresponsive Poles. Young Nazi bandits even threw stones at them.

They were assigned to a starch room, where they performed very hard work. Weakened, withered and famished, they had to carry 100kg starch-filled bags on their backs and load them onto rail car-

^{*)} He remained in the camp from 09.10.1939 to 02.12.1939, including the first three weeks in the camp prison.

riages. After quitting time at 6pm, they would march back to the barracks. There, scenes of cruel torment would be played out again.

On some evenings, the camp commandant, also called “Polizeirat,” staged spectacles. He lined up several men and made them reach the ground without bending their legs at the knees. He then picked some of the healthy and strong ones and made them kick their weak compatriots who, bending down, could barely maintain their position. At his fancy, Poles were to kick other Poles and make them bleed. Those who refused or kicked others very lightly would immediately be taken to the side where, in the presence of all the high-ranking torturers of the camp, were hideously beaten and kicked by the commandant himself. Once he got tired, he would sit down panting and tell the bloodied victim to kick the bent prisoners in the same way. Under such coercion and nearly crazy from the pain, the victim would then do as he was told. Meanwhile, the Nazi bandits, their arms folded, occasionally using their whips, laughed at the defenceless innocent Poles.

13

Janusz Kamiński

born 22.03.1925 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Św. Wojciecha 31, Poznań

Currently: Al. Marcinkowskiego 26, Poznań

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 3

On the 18th of November 1944, I was assigned to the Einsatz for over three months. Those days were very cold, frequent rain would soak us in our summer clothes.

I decided to take a leave of absence myself, as they denied my application, so that I could go home and bring back some warm underwear and clothing. On that day, two of my colleagues unexpectedly received their pass to leave, and I chose to join them without one. As we approached Kutno, a police officer entered our carriage to check for passes. Since I didn't have one, I was arrested. I got very nervous when they took me to a railway police station. This

was my first encounter with the German police. The report writing didn't take long, as everyone had to admit whatever they were told. After a thorough search, I was locked up in a dirty cell packed with people. This night in jail was truly horrible. There was no space on the long benches and only a little left on the floor. I sat there all night, crouched and anxious.

At around five in the morning some activity began. Some of the detainees were taken to the Gestapo while others went to interrogations. Around noon, I too was called in for questioning. They checked my personal details in one room, after which a policeman took me to the district chief. The fat German sat behind a desk in the company of two of his subordinates. The chief asked me why I had escaped from the labour. I replied I wasn't escaping and only wanted to go home to get my winter underwear and return. "That is not true! You are lying!", he screamed at my reply. I was then led to a cell without a chance to explain.

A little later, all of the detainees, me included, were lined up in pairs, handcuffed and taken to a prison. There, they greeted us hideously. They checked our pockets, after which the jailer commanded his helpers to undress us down to our shirts and go through our pockets again. He then pushed me into a cell with two others. I remained in this damp, cold pit for three days.

On the third day, I was called out of the cell and, together with a few other prisoners, taken to the prison yard, where each of us was handcuffed separately and escorted to the railway station by SS men. They put us on a train which carried us to Płock. We got there around two in the afternoon. At the station, we were lined up in pairs and driven to the Gestapo building about 750 metres away. Once there, they locked us up in a cell.

On the following day, the interrogations started again. This time, they were quite brief. We were then taken to work in the courtyard, watched by an SS man with two trained dogs. When I stopped at some point to straighten my back, the two dogs jumped at me and began biting my legs. At this, the SS man walked in and began to pound my head and face with a fist. He concluded the barrage with a kick and pointed me to the spade I had dropped. After this "mas-

sage,” I had to resume work immediately, despite blood spewing out of my broken nose and horrible pain from my bitten legs.

A little later, they lined us up in pairs again and walked us to the street. Escorted by two SS men on bicycles and a dog, we were made to run to the penal camp 7km away. We covered the distance in 20 minutes. There, they placed us in a shed guarded by the SS. Not even there were we given any food for the rest of the day. Dead tired, we lay down on the straw with a cover. The rules were very strict. We woke up at five, had coffee at half past five and moved out to work at a quarter to six. During the day, we got a ten minute break at noon. We would quit at five and return to the camp. Only then would we get a meal, which consisted of a thin soup. We usually covered the distance to our work running. Sometimes, we had to run two or more kilometres. Our job was to dig snipers’ ditches. Each of us, healthy or not, had to dig and finish five meters of ditch in hard, clayish ground. Whoever failed to meet his quota was beaten unconscious by the Polish “Leistungs” and deprived of his bread ration which, although minuscule, constituted the main meal other than the soup. I stayed at this camp for 29 days.

When they finally released me, I couldn’t believe my luck and I cried like a baby. To this day, I have torn tendons in my left arm from overexertion at digging, and a crooked nose from a beating by Gestapo people.

14

Alfons Juraszek

born 13.07.1933 in Gniezno

He currently resides at ul. Dąbrówki 11/9 in Gniezno.

Student of Boleslaw the Brave State High School in Gniezno,

Year 4 of Junior High School

...One Sunday in late October or early November^{*)}, all the Poles in Penkun, a town in Greifenhagen County to the west of Szczecin,

^{*)} 1941.

were summoned to sign a highly fraudulent statement. I can't remember its entire contents, but I do know that it concerned wearing the letter "P," observing the 7pm curfew, and not leaving your village without a pass. In the end, they announced to us that we were free Polish workers who had *volunteered* to work in the Reich. We knew very well how this voluntary recruitment worked.

We didn't sign the statement. A few days later, the Gestapo showed up and did what they were known for, i.e. they beat us up (all over our bodies with rubber cords, fists and feet), after which they took us to the Pölitz (Police) camp, a "universal sanatorium" within a factory district by the same name, some 30km from Szczecin.

Our welcome committee greeted us with 20 lashes on the kidneys with rubber cords and checked us in to join other guests. On the following day, we were assigned to various types of work.

I ended up loading bricks. Whoever has done the job knows what it means to handle bricks without gloves, especially in freezing weather. I was dressed lightly in a threadbare coutil summer uniform, a dress shirt, thin longjohns, footwraps, shoes and a summer cap. Dressed in this way, I stood from dawn to dusk on a narrow footbridge connecting a barge and a pier and moved my arms to a rhythm, passing on thousands upon thousands of bricks. The wind penetrated the threadbare, tattered clothes I was wearing. My hunger hadn't reached its zenith yet, but it was way up there (I was more famished in the Szczecin prison where I spent a half a year). My feet and ears were frost-bitten. As for my hands, God have mercy on me, the skin was cracked and worn to the point of bleeding. Every part of my body was a problem – I couldn't even tell any more which pain was more severe.

There was no camaraderie, everyone was focused on himself, turned inwards. It was scary to live and scary to die. The time we all waited for was the evening. After all, there was supper and a packed lunch for the next day waiting for us in the barrack: a half, maybe even three quarters of a litre of watery soup, roughly 400g of bread and some 10g of spread per day. In addition to dinner, we had to exercise on some evenings. On command, we jumped, got down, got up

and ran, of course not without some of us getting hit over the head with a rubber cosh.

Days and weeks passed by and in time, I again felt I was a “free” Polish worker in the Reich. Of course, I was a volunteer, as you had to agree to it all eventually.

15

Henryk Przybylski

born 05.12.1923 in Bukowiec, Nowy Tomyśl County

During the occupation, until September 1944, worked on the farm owned by Bremermann in Bramkamp, Nienburg County (near Bremen).

Later: Arbeitslager Liebenau, Nienburg County

Currently: ul. Lecha 2, Gniezno

Student of Bolesław the Brave State High School in Gniezno, Year 4

I immediately think of 1940, the year I left for Germany, and 1944, the time I stayed in the harsh concentration camp in Liebenau, Nienburg County.

On the fateful day of 18 November 1943, the Gestapo arrested me and threw me into a dungeon. On arrival, they took me to a small cell where they told me to undress. Then, three Gestapo men wielding copper wire drove me into a corner of the cell and took turns beating me. I don't know how long the beating lasted as I passed out after a dozen or more lashes. I woke up exhausted and bruised in the same cell. This welcome put me in the infirmary for two days.

On the third day, the 4am wake up call summoned me to morning exercise, which the Gestapo arranged for us. They thrashed us at every opportunity, every time one ran into one of those bandits. Death collected a heavy toll, starting with the gymnastics. Our only nourishment was coffee and bread. The arduous labour in the sewage system sucked all the strength out of people. We ate grass, leaves, whatever we could get our hands on. It was simply nasty and horrific. People grew weaker by the day, disease was rampant. The grim reaper got the better of ever more of us.

I couldn't bear the hunger any more. Once, as I passed a trash bin, I was tempted by a rotten potato. To my misfortune, I was

caught in the act by a Ukrainian, a Gestapo collaborator, who beat me up terribly. Once he was done, the bastard announced that my sentence would be extended by 21 days. This disheartened me utterly. I could hardly move my feet and this dreadful savage Nazi brute announced to me indifferently that he would add 21 days to my sentence.

Believe me, I would not have lasted another week in such conditions. My poor health forced our Lagerführer to leave me behind in the camp. That relieved me of the sewage repair duty. Instead, I had to do the most awful work in the camp. God... I can hardly find words to describe my suffering.

I was assigned to putting up and removing gallows ropes. It was horrible... I can still picture myself having to install the ropes. A number of convicts stood at the gallows waiting resignedly for their death. A Nazi executioner would then perform his atrocious act in the presence of the prisoners held hostage and forced to circle the yard repeatedly, all the while watching the execution. God forbid if they dared to look away, as this would immediately elicit a violent reaction of a Gestapo man, treading upon them with his boots, nearly killing his victim before everyone's eyes. This is how they murdered people. 15 to 30 people were bestially killed in this barbaric way.

The monsters used even more cruel methods in their special bunkers. My eyes still well up with tears every time I think of my colleagues and companions of misfortune who may have long left this world...

The Liebenau bunkers are soaked in human blood. Countless people were brutally murdered there! Originally designed as baths, the bunkers contained many cabins in which Gestapo men tortured their victims. Some were regular cubes one meter long, one meter wide and one meter high. A 20 cm opening was used to pump water inside. To save himself from drowning, the prisoner had to bail the water out with a 1 litre container. As this was nearly impossible, his suffering would be over in an hour.

Cells 22 and 23 were connected together. The temperature there was adjusted between hot and cold. My closest companion ended

up in them to serve his 24 hour sentence. The scene was ghastly. The poor soul had to walk naked from one cell to the other until he dropped to the floor from exhaustion. I kept a close eye on him and immediately notified Lagerführer that prisoner 113 in cabin 22-23 was dead. We were ordered to clean it up. But what did we find on arrival? The blood-covered human body still gave faint signs of life. On the Lagerführer's command, we took him to the infirmary. I was very upset to see a man in this condition.

Two days after this horrific scene, I couldn't believe my eyes as I passed the infirmary at noon. I saw my companion who, barely able to stand on his feet, was already being abused by one of the Gestapo men. After a brief harsh talk, the brute kicked him with all of his strength. The result was terrible. I saw him fall, face first onto the barbed wire and die on the spot...

Many people died that way. There wasn't a quiet day. Everyone had to reckon with dying by one of the many methods that the Gestapo kept inventing with fiendish creativity. Although this may seem incredulous to many, I had the ill fortune of witnessing these Nazi tortures, some of them as a victim. The German occupation left an indelible mark in my memory.

I pay homage to the heroes who lost their innocent lives for their homeland.

16

Edmund Hundert

born 10.04.1919 in Kolsk, Zielona Góra County

During the occupation, he resided and currently resides at ul. Mickiewicza 3 in Żabikowo near Poznań. Arrested by the Germans on 17.05.1941 in Żabikowo, he was brought to a gathering site in Luboń and transported to Fort VII in Poznań.

He was transferred to the Dachau concentration camp on 23/24 May 1941.

Student of State Building High School, Section III for Road Building

Together with dozens of others, I was brought to Fort VII in Poznań in a delivery van. I was among hundreds of Poles brought to the gathering site from all counties of the Poznań Region. A number

of them were my friends and acquaintances. Everyone's eyes were sad, distant, waiting for what was to ensue. I didn't despair and accepted my fate. Although I was terrified by the endless moaning and screaming, I managed to shut it out and clear my mind.

I remained in the Fort for a week. On the night of 23 May 1940, the Germans drove us with whips – like cattle – into box carriages, one hundred people per carriage. I was among the 1,500 people who left that day, 600 of whom were priests. Before I boarded, I heard a blaring “herdsman,” a whip in his hand, inform us, “You are going to work in Germany – the ones who behave well will be allowed to return – I will see to that” (translated from German).

It was Corpus Christi. Our procession in the company of so many clergymen went across Germany. We were told not to look through the barred window at the stations at which we stopped, and there were plenty such stations. I knew German and therefore understood the words with which we were greeted. We were facing a large gate shaped like an arch of triumph. Behind it, a huge elongated courtyard surrounded by a high wall and buildings. Each corner had a tower adorned with machine guns. I felt a chill go down my spine. I realised that once I crossed that threshold, I would be lost to the free world. I knew I was starting a new life and that was precisely what happened.

As we went through the gate, we were greeted with whips, like wayward cattle. As soon as I entered the yard, I saw a huge building in front of me shaped like an open rectangle. Ten camp commandments were painted on its roof with letters that were two to three meters high:

There is another road to freedom. It leads through: 1. discipline, 2. cleanliness, 3. blind obedience, 4. orderliness, etc. and 10. love for the homeland.

Dachau was a showcase camp. This is where I tasted camp life. Many died there during my stay – they didn't go any further and will never return.

My fate was to move on. I got on another transport and was transported to the penal camp of Mauthausen, located in a quarry. Only there did I find out what a concentration camp was. We were

considered Polish deviants and bandits (as the convoy guards told us themselves). I must note that the transport contained the *crème de la crème* of the Polish intelligentsia.

On the following day, I reached Munich, from which I travelled to Dachau. The word Dachau was known to nearly everyone. I immediately lost my spirit and saw myself standing on the edge of a cliff unable to turn back. We were supposed to go to work not to a camp. I keep hearing people saying “that is a lie,” “how can they.” For me, this was the first time I heard of Dachau. I dismissed it all and began fantasising. I found a simple way out by believing that “everything would be just fine,” and that, “there’s always hope as long as you’re alive.”

Surprisingly, the train station was filled with grey uniforms bearing skull signs, and a forest of bayonets and machine guns, like a guard of honour. I heard voices that resembled the roaring of cattle, “all aboard!” Many fell or remained in the carriages out of exhaustion and thirst. They were finished off right there with bayonets. And how many were killed during the march? Our column was endless, it stretched for miles.

Our first stop was in the large yard. I arrived there at night. The whole distance from the train station to the camp, we were herded in a tight pack, beaten mercilessly with rods and whips. Many died in the process.

Oddly, I myself was relatively unscathed. I arrived at the camp with only a bruise on my face from a whip lash.

My stay in this camp was even shorter. After three months, I was moved 8km up north to the camp of Gusen, which was being built at the time. This proved to be hell on earth. Up until then, I hoped to return home, counting on the war to end within a year. Now though, I lost the resolve to fight for a quick return home as there seemed to be no hope of that happening. I slept on bare ground, with no roof over my head, covered with a wet blanket. This went on for a month. The only way out to freedom led through a crematorium chimney.

I have learned from hindsight that the most difficult moments in a person’s life have a way of offering solutions. One only needs to

apply them and never give up despite occasional wavering. I have survived such difficult moments and today revel in my recovered freedom with everyone else.

I would like to provide a brief account of what life was like in the camp. There was work there for everyone, and all kinds of work were represented. The worst kind was collective work – the moving of rocks, heavy stone or iron girders, hole digging, road building, all “spade and wheelbarrow” labour. Those who performed it were abused the most, as every oppressor could easily have an opinion on how to best loosen ground and how much of a load to put in a wheelbarrow. The least persecution was suffered by those involved in specific crafts or specialised work, as the overlords had no idea how it should be done. I was assigned to measurements, which fell into this latter category.

Resting in any form and, God forbid, sitting, while on the job, was strictly prohibited. Any attempts to violate the ban were punished by beatings on the spot with whips or iron rods. Those who had multiple penalty reports to their name would be interrogated and beaten unconscious.

As is common knowledge, no machine, and especially no human living in such wretched conditions, can work without at least short interruptions. The bandits didn't really care about the output, but about pushing the prisoners to the limit.

They often competed in their creativity. They gave people 100 to 150 lashes, set dogs on them, hanged them and threw rope nooses over their necks lasso style. At times, for their own entertainment, they told prisoners to run in a certain direction and then shot them claiming they were attempting to escape.

The food was miserable: water and a bit of bread with a bitter herbal infusion. This caused many diseases, the most prevalent of which were diarrhoea and typhus, the two most common causes of death. An average of 50 to 75 people died every day. Their bodies were burnt in the crematoria.

The most barbaric idea of the 20th century was to establish a brothel in the camp. Everyone without exception was to use it. The women came from the women's camp. I won't say more – the

rest is quite obvious. I was protected by fate from that pleasure, as I was relieved.

I can barely describe the day I returned to freedom. Even though this was mock freedom, I nevertheless found myself outside the camp walls. As I was leaving the sanatorium, as our barbarians called it, I had to sign my name under ten guidelines. I could write much more, but will limit myself to two distinctive scenes from life in the camp.

To this day, I can see an old man coming over, young at heart and in spirit, but completely ruined physically. He walked over to a window and asked his mate for a piece of bread, saying, "Give me a piece of bread so that I can taste this divine bread before I die tomorrow." Then came the answer, "Since you are dying, what do you need bread for, leave it to another who can still live."

And so the young, "old" man walked away. Barely had he walked a few steps down the path of the lager when he collapsed, prostrate, departing this world. Hundreds of people died in a similar way.

Here is another scene. The camp was being decontaminated. A crowd of camp martyrs, fully undressed, was being herded up to an assembly point, without food, hungry and cold, for two days and two nights. The scene included it all, with agony in the foreground. Somewhere on the side, a man writhed from stomach pain. He clearly used to be a well-built, healthy man before his capture.

On that day, he was dying of hunger despite his healthy lungs and heart.

As if out of nowhere, our lord and master, the Gusen Camp Commander Bogdan Chmielewski appeared among us. As he spotted the poor soul, he crushed his neck with his boot, letting him die a martyr's death under the foot of the tyrant.

Both of these descriptions are noteworthy. I could not bring myself to continue, although there are dozens, even hundreds such examples that I could cite. If I did, many would end up thinking I have quite an imagination and that I am oversensitive. I often hear people say casually, "It couldn't have been that bad. You are alive and you have come back in good health." The fact is, only I will ever know what price spending one and a half years in German camps

cost me. The crowning moment of my ordeal was the announcement I heard in the Soldier's House on ul. Niezłomnych in Poznań, which is now in ruin. "The only reason you are back is that we had found your imprisonment was a mistake. After one and a half years, we have reached the conclusion that you were innocent and shouldn't have been in the camp. As you can see, as the chief administrators of the German Reich headed by our leader, we strive for justice. Return home quietly now and work for the benefit of the great German state ..."

17

Józef Kamiński

born 25.02.1923 in Bydgoszcz

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Pocztowa 16, Poznań.

He currently resides at ul. Podlaska 25, Poznań.

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 4 of Junior High School

It was Sunday, 20 April 1940. The spring used all the means at its disposal to embrace the world. Feeling obliged to contribute, the sun doubled its efforts and sent its life-sustaining heat down to earth awakening all life and restoring hope. It seemed that nothing could change this course of events, that the evening would pass peacefully, followed by a quiet night and that life would carry on as usual, allowing hopes to be realised.

The evening descended. In the west, the sun dipped below the horizon, leaving a fiery glow in its track. It was past nine. The moon majestically glided onto the firmament, painting peculiar shadows on building walls with its silvery light.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps in hobnailed boots could be heard beating against cobblestones. They're coming. The front door slammed open... Heavy footsteps on the steps... Jarring, single German words. Coming still closer... Knocking on the door... "A student?"... "Walk with us."

After the formalities in the Soldier's House and a three-day stay in Fort VII^{*)}, during which the cell filled to the brim with companions in misfortune, we were packed into rail carriages. Thus began our journey into the unknown. The transport comprised some 600 people. I felt much better the moment I saw some of my work colleagues. We confided in one another and shared a youthful belief in a better future, which helped us view our situation with optimism. Even the one and a half day journey in horrible conditions didn't undermine our confidence. The whole time, the guards wouldn't let us put as much as our noses out of the carriage, and only gave us three buckets of water for the fifty of us. We didn't learn about our destination until we got there. When we did, we saw a station building with the letters Dachau inscribed on a wall. The cruel four-kilometre march to the camp shattered our optimism and made us realise the true purpose of the entire trip. We moved at a breakneck pace and the exhaustion of the journey quickly caught up with us, especially the older ones. As we got closer, we saw more and more bundles, coats and suitcases discarded along the way. The column grew ever longer. We, the young ones, took the weak ones between ourselves, making sure that, God forbid, they didn't fall. The ones who fell attracted the mockery of the Hitler Youth as well as rifle butt blows and kicks from SS men.

After the camp formalities were carried out for each newly arrived transport, we were placed in blocks. There, we luckily survived five weeks.

Each day was as identical as two drops of water. We spent the mornings and afternoon exercising. After five weeks, our transport was split into two groups: the intelligentsia were moved to Mauthausen, the craftsman and worker group, to which I was assigned, remained in Dachau.

I can't think of any single event that has left a particular imprint on me during my stay in Dachau that ended on April 1941. All that happened there blurred together in the monotony of daily life, becoming the norm. Every happy thought, whether prompt-

^{*)} A concentration camp in Poznań.

ed by a holiday, a letter from home or good news, was instantly snuffed out by the uncertainty of the future, hard labour, poor food and growing physical exhaustion. Just as heavy grey clouds plunge the world into melancholy on a drizzly autumn day, so did our thoughts cast their shadow of uncertainty on our lives. In time, once I figured out how the camp worked, I was lucky enough to get one of the best jobs there, in the camp hospital. After that, my self confidence grew, and that was essential to stay afloat. My desperate thoughts subsided, replaced by confidence and trust in a better future.

To describe the camp itself, Dachau was believed to be one of the least harsh facilities, milder than Gusen and Mauthausen. The sick from other camps were sent here to recover and return to work. Meanwhile, the healthiest prisoners were exported to other camps. The standing Dachau crew comprised mostly of craftsmen assigned to carpentry shops and large plantation workers. Large cobbler's and tailor's sweatshops supplied footwear and clothing to a number of camps. It is certainly due to the qualified labour force and vast profits that relations in the camp were initially bearable. Needless to say, though, everyone grew weak over time.

In early May 1941, I joined a group of orderlies being transported to Auschwitz. The two-day trip left a lasting impression on me. We travelled via Salzburg, Linz and along the foothills of the Alps. I will never forget the sight of bare rocky Alpine peaks covered with permanent snow. There – unlimited freedom, here – confinement within a few square meters of space. Freedom! Those whose view was limited to a two-meter-high wall and watch towers will learn to appreciate that most precious of treasures which they may never have thought even existed: freedom.

Once in the Auschwitz camp hospital, I quickly befriended the local orderlies. Camp life took its course. But what a different course that was! Only there did I learn the full extent of the Germans' sophisticated and cruel policies. Wretched sleeping conditions, poor hygiene, sparse food rations, gruelling labour combined with maltreatment and torture, was brought upon all who walked past the camp gate. Only a handful ever made it out of this hellhole in good

health. The majority who left it only got as far as the nearby crematorium.

After one and a half years in operation, the prisoner population of the camp was a mere 10,000 despite having admitted some 30,000. Every Jew's fate was sealed – none of them ever survived more than a few days. The majority of the Jews were simply clobbered to death or shot like rabbits. Some of the scenes were truly macabre but in time even we, the carers, began to consider them as completely normal. As we endured our lives boldly, we got to view the tall crematorium chimney as fate. As is well known, the main purpose of the camp was to kill people. The particular methods of exterminating people adopted in Auschwitz deserve a mention. Every time the commanders found the camp hospital to have got overcrowded, they would order a thinning of the population. To that end, they arranged, for instance, transports of 300-400 people who were told they were going to a sanatorium. Those people were never seen again, as the camp bunker was converted to a gas chamber. In the spring of 1942, a new camp was built a few miles from Auschwitz capable of accommodating thousands of prisoners. The ill and the exhausted who were still capable of making it there on foot were placed there. I had a chance to see the living conditions arranged for the sick. The horror exceeded my wildest expectations. Only individuals deprived of the smallest shred of humanity could do this to others, only Germans could have done this to Poles.

There were dead bodies scattered in a barrack, or rather a barn. Yes, dead bodies, as out of a thousand people brought there, only two hundred remained alive after a mere two days. They were searched for among the dead.

Countless examples could be given for the bestiality of the Nazis. I only want to recall one other.

One afternoon, a colleague of mine was summoned by the Lagerführer to complete some formalities, or at least this is what he was told. He was well liked, as he entertained us in the evenings by wonderfully playing the violin. Unsuspecting, we parted in merry moods. This was three hours before the evening roll call. An hour passed and we almost forgot about the incident. We all thought he

was back. Then, out of the blue, we began to hear things. Everywhere, in hallways and rooms, clusters of colleagues heatedly debated something. “From this block too... and two from that one... what for... it’s impossible – during the roll call...”

At 6pm, prisoners from each block lined up in the yard, like every evening. Myself and my teammates all gathered in the “care section.” We were silent... Everyone tried to stifle a helpless protest. We gazed far into the distance. Our thoughts went out to our friends. Our nerves as tight as can be... Suddenly – a dull bang of a gun salvo tore through the air, bounced against the walls, penetrated through windows and felt as if it hit our heads, followed by dry sounds of isolated pistol shots... One more image of the figure of our dear friend appeared and floated away, carried by the echo of the shots... Where? The next ones who follow tomorrow will know...

18

Mieczysław Malinowski

born on 09.07.1923 in Rogoźno

Resided in Rogoźno until the war and during the occupation. Assigned to ditch digging duty on 27 August 1944, he was arrested and moved to Żabikowo, where he remained in a cell for political prisoners until 10.09.1944.

Currently: ul. Wielka Poznańska 53, Rogoźno

Student of Przemysław High School in Rogoźno Wlkp., Year 4

During the morning roll call^{*)}, the labour camp commandant (Lagerführer) told me not to go to work on that day as I had got a registered letter and should pick it up in person in the office. The news surprised me and made me nervous. No wonder, as I had only been assigned to ditch digging duty for ten days and my mother was the only one who knew where to find me. How could I get a registered letter? This was a mere ruse. Warned by kind Poles, I expected something unusual. Soon, the sight of a German gendarme in a high helmet explained it all.

^{*)} On Sunday, 27 August 1944.

Someone pointed me out to him.

He walked over and violently shoved me into the office. I then lived through the worst moment in my life, which was being handcuffed. Although I knew I was no criminal, the cold steel penetrated me, the cuffs confined my movements and the thought of being treated that way was excruciating. I barely kept the tears which welled up trembling under my eyelids from rolling down my cheeks. I silenced a scream with my tightly closed lips.

I learned right there that a Gestapo order had been sent overnight by telephone to arrest me and move me to Poznań. I was searched thoroughly in the barn next to my bed, but it didn't produce the expected results. They didn't let me bring anything and, dressed lightly, told me to take turns running and marching in front of the gendarme's bicycle. I ran and walked, the handcuffs clanked, weighing down my wrists.

Why did the dear sun also have to be so ruthless on that day, and beat down on me mercilessly?

I didn't beg for pity, I didn't ask for anything! I valued the pride of a Pole very highly. None of the passing Germans saw pain or emotion in my face. With my eyes, I thanked every passing compatriot for their gestures of kindness and sympathy.

Covered with dust, sweaty and with numbness in my cuffed hands, I reached our first stop: a gendarmerie station in Biedrusko. There, another gendarme took me over. He acted more "super-human" than the previous one, as he tied my arms tighter, gave me more kicks and punches and called me more names such as, "you Polish dog."

His treatment dulled my senses and made me unresponsive. I lost all feeling in my hands, which swelled to a huge size and turned purple. I was placed in a prison cell where they removed the cuffs which by then no longer protruded above my skin.

In the cell, I was left alone to my thoughts. There was a wooden bed in a corner, icy stone walls and floors around me and, up above, close to the ceiling, a small barred window boarded up from the outside so as not to allow a single ray of sunshine, that makes free people happy, to penetrate.

I sat down on the bed. In the darkness that surrounded me, I could hardly make out my hands resting on my knees. I touched them with my lips and kissed them affectionately. Although this might have looked ridiculous, there were horrible things happening inside me, a sea of pent-up tears trembled under my eyelids, my soul was wild with emotions which smothered me. I bit into my lips to prevent a scream from tearing out of my chest.

What had happened to justice? Where is God? What have I done to deserve this? came the questions to which there were no answers.

After a few moments, I overcame my weakness and mental breakdown, ran my fingers through my hair, which for all I knew might be shaved off in a few hours, and immersed myself in memories.

Various scenes from my life flashed before my eyes as if on a movie screen. They spanned from earliest childhood to the present day. In my mind's eye, I saw my loved ones: my sick mother, who was disabled and who made the sign of the cross over me when we parted only ten days ago. Poor mum! She had suffered so much in her life, and the news of my arrest may be her death blow. I pictured my dad, whom I hadn't seen for five years. He fought against Germany in the Polish army until his capture by the Germans in the battle of Raszyn. He suffered all of the misery that was commonly experienced by Polish prisoners in German camps. He wrote to me from those camps until his last moments, in letters which were filled with yearning and fatherly love. I saw my sister, whom the German serpent tore out of our mother's arms four years ago, at the age of 16, and sent off to toil in his capital. I remembered my brother, who was taken to ditch digging duty at a different location one week before my departure. Will I ever see them again? Will I ever hear my mother's sweet voice? Will my father ever lay his toilworn hand on my head again? Will I ever again see my siblings? Will we ever remember the childhood games we used to play together? These, and other similar thoughts, whirled around in my head on this Sunday afternoon and throughout the sleepless night which seemed to last an eternity. All this time, no

one checked on me or interrupted my solitude with either a kind or a nasty word.

On the following morning, I heard the clatter of heavy soldier's shoes, the rattle of a key in a lock and the grating of a door bolt, after which a gendarme walked in. I left the cell feeling icy steel around my wrists again. They sat me on an open lorry bed and tied me down to it. Next to me, an SS man sat down in a chair. Within a half an hour, I ended up in the former Soldier's House in Poznań, which is now Gestapo headquarters.

I stood before a political officer, a woman, who ordered my handcuffs removed and let me know that she was being merciful. "What have you gobbled down?" ("Was hast du ausgefressen?"), came her first question. "I don't know," I reply. Very ironically, she adds: "Innocent, aren't you? Innocent?" Followed by the yell, "Get lost! Go! Against the wall!"

They put me against a wall, handcuffed me again and told me to stand facing it at attention. At my eye level, there was a portrait of the world's and humanity's basest criminal: Himmler. They made me stare at him without lowering my gaze. I stood there for five hours or so. Again there were many questions, which one could only shrug off. Then, they walked me down an array of galleries and stairwells to an underground dungeon. Once there, my tormentors placed me on a small bench in their torture chamber (as I later learned in the cell, it was called "Maryśka"). They used it to test the endurance of their rubber coshes on the back of my body, as a result of which I could no longer sleep on my back or sit down.

After this greeting, accompanied by punches, kicks and insults, they put me in a small cellar room (3m x 3m) without access to fresh air or daylight. This was also my first encounter with my companions. There were a total of 19 of us there, me included. None of us knew anyone else and no one spoke. The only sound that disturbed the silence of the dungeon was that of breathing, which due to the lack of air seemed more like snoring. After a few hours, in the night, we were all driven out into the courtyard where we saw the van that had brought us there. As I left the cell, I struggled to catch my breath. I hadn't had a single bite to eat for two days and, with

high fever, I felt as if I were drunk. Some 65 of us, including seven women, were jam-packed into the van, which took us behind the barbed wire of the Żabikowo camp. On the way, five of us, including three women, passed out. Only when we began disembarking was there enough room for them to sink senseless to the ground. I saw how they were being revived, with beatings and kicks. They took us out, while I never saw those people again.

Naturally, they keep everything neat, tidy and clean, and so we went through a bath where, in addition to washing, each of us had a chance to inspect their bruises, or see the healthy skin that was to provide space for future bruises. This was also where we were freed of “all” of our lice, which we didn’t have, and of our long and well-groomed hair.

Needless to say, every encounter with “the skulls” added to our bruises.

Around midnight, myself and two other inmates were pushed into a large cell. (On the following day, I learned this was cell L, whose capacity was 314 prisoners). Hastened by the thugs, we ran into the cell, trampling on our friends-to-be who were sleeping on the floor. Despite the pain, none of them uttered a complaint or as much as a whimper or moan, knowing the oppressors and how they could silence such voices with a whip or, in the worst case scenario, a bullet. It was nearly morning and I spent another night sleeplessly and on an empty stomach.

In the morning – what a delight! My new companions included my high school colleague Tol Müller, as well as Bronek Erdman, Ed Nowak, second lieutenant Mańczak, Skrzypczak and many other respectable citizens of Rogoźno. We received a hearty welcome and were asked lots of questions, which I could hardly answer as it has been a while since I left Rogoźno.

Although I felt rather weak, I wasn’t bothered by hunger. At noon on Tuesday, I was given my first food: less than a litre of soup made of old whole, undercooked and hard kohlrabi leaves, which tasted bitter. Speaking of food, it goes without saying that hunger was our most faithful companion. We received a half a litre of black coffee in the morning, under a litre of soup at noon, a quarter of

a litre of coffee and 1.5kg of bread for every four men. In the prison lingo, a single person's bread ration was referred to as a "pajda" or a large hunk, divided into "pajdka", or little hunks. Every Thursday, each of us was given an extra 1.5cm thick slice, which we called "caritas." Every Tuesday, we got a spoonful of either liquid cottage cheese, or of something that resembled marmalade. One Sunday, there were leftover potatoes from dinner, and our cell got an extra treat of four bucketfuls of mashed potatoes. This amounted to one spoonful per person. No one passed on the potatoes, despite just having had lunch, which is the best proof of what condition our stomachs were in.

Political prisoners were not sent to work outside the cells. We suffocated all day long in the stuffy, stinky and dusty air. By day two of my stay, I caught 12 lice on my body. I think this paints a complete picture. My cellmates were very friendly. Despite personality differences, we understood one another. During my stay, the cell commandant was Captain Krupik from Środa. Fate surprised him one day, as his 21-year-old son was placed in our cell, arrested two years after his father.

It is difficult to describe the mood in the cell. People could talk to each other freely but few took advantage of this possibility. For a hungry exhausted man, talking represents quite an effort. We made string out of paper all day – our daily quota being a 10m long belt for every two of us. Although the work wasn't very difficult, we found it fairly hard. The mood in the cell was strangely melancholic, no one could bring themselves to speak loud – when we did speak, we whispered. We slept one next to another on hard ground. We were woken up at 5am by a guard hitting on the wall from outside with his rifle butt. The cell commandant would loudly announce the date, e.g. "8 September! Wake up! Get up! Good morning, colleagues!" "Good morning, Mr. Commandant!" we replied. Then it was roll call, a prisoner tally, off to the washbasin and back to work in the cell. My biggest pleasure was to sit down by a wall with Tol and Bronek and recollect our happy times together. The memories were so different from our terrifying reality that we thought of them as of blissful dreams.

I saw some of the weaker inmates put up prolonged struggles with death. Gosh, what a horrible sight they were. We, even the doctors among us, were helpless – there was nothing we could do, no way we could relieve their suffering. They would lie on their bedding, sweating profusely, shaken by a horrific ante-mortem fever, incomprehensibly calling the names of their loved ones, their souls leaving their bodies to take their complaints all the way to God. Inadvertently, they clenched their fists and teeth and cursed the “super-humans,” whose degenerate acts are beyond any words found in the dictionaries of the world.

One time, after an old man tripped and fell over, and the ones who were running behind him stopped, they pushed us into a pool with rifle butts and whips. I was surprised that the pool was only 1.5m deep. Its steep banks of smooth concrete protruded above water level, which was an “ingenious” feature of the bath. Those who couldn’t make their way out of the pool, the majority of whom were old people, were assisted by red German dogs. As a result of such assistance, many of us didn’t make it back to the cell that day.

On another occasion, the “rats” (“kapusie”) in the cell (which is what we called the Germans who were also serving a sentence but whose racial superiority entitled them to oppress others) announced that the cell hadn’t done enough work on that day, which wasn’t true. We were placed in front of the barrack, lined up in a column and forced to run until exhaustion under cracking whips and to the sound of inhuman yelling of the “skulls.” On pain of getting hit with rifle butts, we were not allowed to pass those who fell while running, which happened quite often. Instead, we had to trample over them with our feet. We were out of breath, our leg muscles defying our control. We nevertheless continued this mad run, stumbling, slipping on the bodies of our fallen colleagues, falling ourselves, getting trampled upon, getting up and continuing to run... Only when the majority of us were down, lying strewn all across the yard were we allowed to go back to our cell. As extra punishment, we were given no food on that day and only a half of our ration on the following three days.

Every morning and evening, our numbers were reduced, soon to be supplemented by new arrivals in the night.

Many long gruelling days went by. And then, one Friday, at the evening roll call, my name came up, pronounced in a distorted manner. I shuddered at the thought of another devilish idea. I was pulled out of the ranks and placed in the middle of the yard. Thoughts whirled crazily in my head. What would they do to me? I considered all the options, the least likely of which was freedom, as I knew such a release was too rare to count on. I was made to stand by barbed wire from 7pm to 11pm. On this cold September night, I was only wearing a measly shirt and sports shorts. I was shivering, my hands went numb, my teeth clattered incessantly.

Finally, they took me to the baths and the damn thugs used me as a toy for their savage entertainment. They put me under a shower, tied my legs and hands to the nearest water pipes and alternated steamy hot and cold water. I tensed my muscles in pain as hard as I could and hardly uttered a hiss through my clenched teeth. They could not tell my tears from the flowing water. To make things worse, they repeatedly dipped my body, covered with open wounds and scabs from bug bites, in Lysol. Without a doubt, the Lysol killed all the pests preying on my body but what pain... what pain that was...

Once they got tired of torturing me, they took my clothes for delousing, leaving me behind. I stood there stark naked on a concrete floor in a drafty room with burnt shoulders and burning wounds for some 1.5 hours, which seemed like an eternity.

Finally, as high fever made me shiver violently, they brought back my clothes but – may God make them pay for this – completely wet. I wrung water out of each article of clothing and got dressed.

In this condition, they left me in a drafty pre-release cell made of boards. Through cracks in between the boards, I could see the round face of the full moon, which appeared to laugh at my prison misery. To make things worse, the wind was wailing on the outside, blowing icy air into my cell. I couldn't sit down as that felt even colder. Walking made my wet clothes stick to my body, which was so unpleasant that I decided to stay put, feeling waves of hot flushes followed by

bouts of cold. My dry tongue and burning lips indicated a high fever. One thing was certain to me: unless I could snuggle under a warm quilt and receive tender care, I would not survive this ordeal and would soon meet my end.

Despite having had no supper, I didn't feel hungry. I felt a strange taste in my mouth that was sweet and bland. I didn't sleep a wink until morning. In the morning, they came for me, dragged me out of the shed and put me in a row next to some colleagues who were in similar shape. Walking was difficult and painful. Suddenly, I felt my legs buckle under me, my eyes getting misty and... fell unconscious to the ground.

I don't know how long it took until painful kicks from a red-headed thug brought me to. I was placed in a van and moved to the Gestapo headquarters in Poznań.

The same entrance, the same faces, the same dungeons – even a repeated session in the Maryńska, the only difference being I didn't feel the pain that much any more, being only half-conscious.

I was taken upstairs to see a commissioner. He made me stand at attention and spoke to me. I realised that he was talking but couldn't understand a word. Although he spoke slowly, his words blended into an incomprehensible blur. I tried to focus but to no avail. I heard isolated words which I still cannot combine into a logical whole.

Espionage... sabotage... deliberately slow work... inciting others... concentration camp... for ever...

Finally, God, is this for real? I hear him say the word release (Entlassungsschein): I couldn't believe it, I collect my scattered thoughts in a last-ditch effort. He repeats the word, then again, sits down and begins to write.

A spasm of joy grabs my throat, I want to scream, yell, I bite my lips making them bleed to keep down the storm raging within.

He finishes, puts a slip of paper in front of me and points me to the door.

Shivering all over my body, I pick up the slip with difficulty with my numb hand and walk out. I search for the way out in a maze of passages and stairways. I find a large door with glass panes through

which I see free people. I try to join them but the door is locked. My feverish mind cannot accept that they are free out there and that I am also free but that the door remains locked. Without thinking, I begin to yank at it but they are not yielding. Two thugs jump on me and punch me a few times (for the last time). They read the slip and let me out.

What I didn't realise was that in order to leave, you had to go to a window and present the release papers. The guard then pressed a button making it possible to open the door.

I stood on the street, dirty, in a jacket without buttons. The moving crowd carried me on without will or purpose. I reached the outskirts and then came to, realising I needed to go back. I turned back then, pushed around by the rushing crowd. It is a large town and no one pays any attention. Perhaps that's for the better, as the stench of my stinky wet jacket irritated people. I feel a gnawing hunger. I can't see any friends, I don't feel like visiting them either, nor have the courage to do so, and especially don't want to beg for a piece of bread. I choose to stick it out. I go to a train station and find out that a train to Rogoźno will leave in three hours. Freezing through and through, I want to rest and hide from the cold in some corner of the waiting room, but a big sign over the door which says "Nur für Deutsche" ("Germans only") bars the entrance. I go to the platform and crouch on a corner of a bench whose back rest and side protect me from the wind. I sit there until departure time and then take the tightly packed train to Rogoźno. Two of my travel companions escorted me home from the train station, as I would never have made it without their help.

At home – tears of joy...

THE LIBERATION

IX

Jerzy Krasuski

born 28.12.1930 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided in Dąbrowa Tarnowska, Kraków Region.

Currently: ul. Kręta 7, Poznań

Student of State Mary Magdalene High School in Poznań,

Year 2a of High School

... In June 1944, we received the happy news of the liberation of Lviv. Several weeks later, we saw the front line approach Mielec, 40km from us. We could hear the endless, grim rumble of artillery fire. At night, flashes of shots could be seen in the east. The roads filled with cars, trucks, tanks and wagons. German airplanes constantly circled overhead. Afraid of street fighting and the exploits of the local Nazis, the civilian population abandoned the city. It would have resembled a ghost town were it not for the massive military presence. A few days later, the frontline drew closer and then came to a stop 16km from Dąbrowa. Despite German counterattacks, it remained there until the great Soviet offensive. On 17 August, two Soviet planes dropped the first bombs, inflicting heavy damage on the city streets. This became a signal for a massive flight.

Although we lived on the outskirts, we chose to move and seek safety in the nearby village of Oleśnica. There, we were nearly cut off from the world. We slept in a barn, which is only pleasurable in normal times. In the evenings, we saw a glow in the eastern sky, anti-aircraft artillery and air raids in Tarnów. Searchlights frequently scanned the starry sky. The sight was both menacing and majestic. Things calmed down after a week. There were no more major military operations on the frontline, no more German airplanes overhead. The army was also gone, with only 20 or so troops remaining in Dąbrowa. However, round-ups became frequent, their purpose being to capture workers needed to build fortifications. I too was grabbed by a gendarme once but was let go due to my young

age. The Soviet airplanes, called "Ivans," kept flying around. Their gloomy whirr disheartened my father. An exuberantly cheerful person before the famous Gestapo arrests in 1944, father had grown completely listless. The "Ivans" were not dangerous, as they neither shot bullets nor dropped bombs. Their only job was to do aerial acrobatics and drop leaflets. This is how the summer passed by and then the autumn, which was particularly beautiful and sunny that year.

In December, things began to get worse. Workers to build fortifications were now sought more desperately. The "Ivans" began to shoot at the city quite often. On top of this, the artillery shelling grew more powerful and frequent. Christmas was sad and accompanied by a growing threat of fighting.

The events that unfolded then were severely disastrous: entire villages were evicted, property was seized, the German police bullied the Poles. Long cavalcades of desperate deported people made their way along the roads. The Germans photographed them and later showed them in newspapers as an example of panicky flights from Bolshevism. Before this wave of deportations reached us, the Soviets began their offensive, which we had awaited for six months. It began with Soviet air strikes targeted at roads, trains and bridges.

On 15 January, the 15th SS Armoured Division reached Dąbrowa. German airplanes also made their first appearance in five months. At 10am on 16 January, we heard powerful bangs of artillery. Fierce air fighting began, which involved anti-aircraft artillery.

I have particularly vivid recollections of two incidents. A formation of Soviet planes bombarded a bridge on the Dunajec. Anti-aircraft artillery put up a powerful response which was nevertheless ineffective. The sky filled with gun smoke, the earth shattered with exploding bombs. I then saw that the artillery fire focused mainly on a single plane. It instantly caught fire and soon disappeared. Then, a plane covered in a cloud of smoke came from behind the forest shooting its machine gun. Then it fell, almost entirely charred. On colliding with the ground, its remains scattered far and wide across the fields. A few hours later, five Soviet machines appeared over the city, with two German aircraft showing up at the same moment. The Germans immediately gained altitude, while the Soviets remained down below. Machine guns clattered. A moment later, two

Soviet planes dropped down in our village. The shelling on the front-line grew more intense.

At night, we saw German troops retreating. On the Sunday of the following morning, we heard the last German message. It said that the Soviet offensive had begun at Baranowo by the Vistula River. All the men in Dąbrowa were told to leave town. My father left too, and hasn't come back to this day. The fire ceased at noon on Sunday. There was complete silence and the Germans were gone from the town. Suddenly, in the evening, we saw a train carrying German miners. At night, we heard powerful booms and then saw a glow in the sky. It was the German bandits blowing up railways and burning down the station. Suddenly we saw a huge plume of fire and a bang that shattered the air. The bridges exploded. What a horrible and unforgettable night. The booms moved further away then and finally disappeared. An eerie silence descended again. On Monday afternoon, Soviet troops entered Dąbrowa and received a warm welcome. Then, at 5pm, powerful explosions shattered the air. The whizz of bullets curdled our blood. Two German Tiger tanks pulled onto the hilltop. Strangely though, after a single salvo, the tanks retreated. A terrifying night began. There was an air raid by German planes. They dropped phosphorus munitions which burned the ground for 15 minutes. Ever stronger explosions rang out from the west. Only later did we learn that if it hadn't been for the swift arrival of reinforcements, the Germans would have been back.

2

Hanna Słonińska

born 11.07.1934 in Poznań

*During the occupation, she resided at ul. Łucznicza 17 in the Poznań,
district of Rataje.*

Currently: ul. Grunwaldzka 58, Poznań

Student of Public Grammar School in Poznań, Year 6

... As the Russians drew closer, the Germans evacuated us into the city^{*)}. We found shelter on ul. Franciszka Ratajczaka. The Rus-

^{*)} From the Rataje District into the centre of Poznań.

sians surrounded the city. It was bombardment day. An attack began to conquer Poznań. A bomb struck the house in which we were staying. There was panic in the shelter, and people began to flee. We made it to building number 18 next door through a hole in a wall. We only stayed there for an hour, as that house too was hit by a bomb.

The building caught fire. We left all of our things behind in the shelter and ran ahead, despite the German soldiers telling us not to. We found shelter on ul. Św. Marcin. We remained there for four days without water, food or daylight. We quenched our thirst with snow, washed down with fruit wine or nothing at all.

Yet, this house also caught fire. We then moved to an old laundry on the Zygmunt Embankments and stayed there for a few days. When the Russians captured the Embankments, we returned to our cherished villa. This was the end of my misery.

3

Antoni Muszyński

born 06.06.1931 in Rogowo, Żnin County

During the occupation, he resided in Poznań.

Currently: ul. Emilii Szanieckiej 2/13, Poznań

Student of Grammar School 33 in Poznań, Year 6a

...We worked hard until German news unwillingly announced that the Red Army had advanced across the Vistula and captured Warsaw. What a time that was! People stood in front of shops and bakeries and bought whatever they could. Finally, all the bread was sold out and we had to do without.

The Germans made a mad run towards the west.^{*)} Until nearly the last moment, the trams filled with German refugees. Convoys of sledges, bicycles, horse-drawn wagons filled with all kinds of bundles proceeded along the streets. Horrible scenes unfolded at the train station, where crowds of Germans awaited their trains. Every now and then, a baby, smothered to death, was brought out, that

^{*)} This account takes place in Poznań.

no one paid any attention to, other than its crying mother. Once all the Germans were evacuated and Poznań was almost fully surrounded by the Russians, the German commanders ordered all the Poles to leave town on foot immediately, as it had been chosen to be a fortress. Yet, no Poles left the city. We soon had to go down to the shelters as shelling began. When I came out onto the street for a moment, I saw German soldiers putting up barricades in the street and getting ready for street combat.

I returned to the shelter and was playing chess with a colleague, when suddenly a lady ran in and cried: "You're all just sitting here while the Russians are already on the street." I jumped to my feet and ran out. I looked and saw two Russian officers right in front of our gate surrounded by a crowd. There were tanks on the corner and the soldiers were already pulling in field cannons. I was overjoyed. At first, I was too overwhelmed with joy to even say a word. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling fear, as the war was not over yet. Every now and then, a missile flew over our house. We were also without food and didn't have any bread for three days. Finally though, I ran over to say hello to the "comrades" and forgot all my worries. The bodies of the German troops who had just been building the barricade were lying on the corner.

I returned to the shelter and, the moment I did, a shattering bang nearly floored me. It turned out that a German missile had hit the roof of our house. An inferno ensued. Notified that the Russians had captured the edge of the Wilda District, the Germans began to fire entire salvos of incendiary shells from across the Warta. Only when the Germans were pushed to the Citadel did we dare to leave the shelter again.

4

Tadeusz Bąkowski

born 15.02.1929 in Sieraków Wlkp.

During the occupation, he resided at Górna Wilda 84, Poznań.

Currently: ul. Kościuszki 9, Chodzież

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 1 of Junior High School

While on my way to work on 20 January 1945, I noticed an unusual commotion in the city. This was the Germans getting ready to flee. On the evening of January 22, we heard the first explosions. They got more powerful by the day. I stopped going to work, as the German organisation fell apart. My house is on ul. Górna Wilda on the corner of ul. Wybickiego and provided a great vantage point. On the other hand, we feared that our house, which could be seen from afar like a castle, was vulnerable to shelling. As a result, there was great anxiety in the shelter. Across the street from our house was a post office, which the Germans hurriedly converted to a hospital. Lots of German soldiers dressed in white, with rifles and machine guns scurried all around.

We suspected that the Russian army must be approaching, as the soldiers lay on the ground and prepared to shoot. That day, the 27, was the scariest but also the most jubilant. The worst moment happened when five shells hit our house in quick succession. Down in the shelter, we were sure we were about to die. The Germans began to barricade houses to set them on fire with all of their occupiers. They failed to complete this cruel deed as the Russian military advanced rapidly, forcing them to flee. All this time, there was dead silence in the shelter. No one dared to peek into the street to see what was happening. Suddenly, we heard screams of joy. Russian troops have taken our street! Ignoring the bullets still flying overhead, we ran onto the street to find out for ourselves. Everyone in the shelter was overjoyed, even though some of us had lost their flats. I was one of them. My flat had been hit by two missiles. Nevertheless, the joy was enormous –after five and a half years of Nazi occupation, we were free at last.

5

Aleksander Wtorkowski

born 29.12.1930 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Strzelecka 22/24, Poznań.

Currently: ul. Kantaka 5, Poznań

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 1a of Junior High School

The horrible torment of war was coming to a close. The Germans fled Poznań in panic. As German civilians made themselves scarce, posters were put up calling on Poles to leave the city as well “weil das ein Feind ist, der keine Rücksichten kennt” (“because this enemy knows no mercy”). However, Poles hid in dark, damp, low cellars, some with a loaf of bread, uncertain what the future would bring. The fat proud “Kulturträgers” (“carriers of culture”) proclaimed additionally that the civilian population that remained in Poznań would be given no more food rations. Meanwhile, the Citadel was stocked up on food to the brim. How come? The fat Germans had to fight to win, and to do that they needed to eat well. Since October, day in day out, wagons and trucks had brought flour, sugar, buckwheat, peas, potatoes and various other products by the ton, disappearing behind the Citadel walls. After Poznań was proclaimed to be a fortress, it was manned by 18,000 troops, some 2,000 Germans civilians and hundreds of Poles captured by force.

Dawn broke. It was Tuesday, 23 January. Every day, the cannonade began regularly at seven. Missiles came from all sides. This was also the time of day when the small tight cellar would come to life. On the mornings on which there was still water left over from the previous day, Henryk (my shop colleague) and I would wash ourselves to the accompaniment of the shelling and our carefree whistling. The dampness of the cellar didn't bother us at all, we enjoyed splashing in the cold water and stretched out like cats, straightening our limbs that hurt from a night spent on little chairs. Sleeping on chairs was part of the ground rules, with only seven beds in our shop for 24 women with children. What did the men do? They made do with a board on the moist floor and a pillow under their heads. Most of the nights were spent chatting. We caught up on our sleep during the day. Still, the average was three hours of sleep per day. After washing, we would run to the water pump, anxiously ducking roaring shrapnel. Later, amidst the fiercest gun fire, Henryk and I queued for the bread which bakers made despite the prohibition. Only when the shrapnel began to whistle loud, our reason, which trumps appetite, told us to run and abandon the bread, which we hadn't had in a while. In the cellar, women cooked food on small

field stoves. The kids screamed in the corners while others talked or hummed quietly. In the evenings, we would say a prayer together very solemnly. This was our unvarying daily routine.

Two weeks passed in this manner. The glow of burning houses painted the sky purple day and night. Carried by the wind, sparks often started new fires. The Germans seemed to love the colour red, which reminded them of the blood they had spilled. Therefore, they set a few houses on fire every day.

Henryk's father assumed command over the men and put up guards for the night, two men for every hour. Their job was to make sure no sparks fell on our house and prevent fires.

On Tuesday, 30 January, a fire broke out in the adjacent house at ul. Strzelecka 22. A spark fell in through a window and ignited a sofa, which soon burst into flames. An alarm was sounded but, completely disorganised and with nothing to put the fire out with, they were unable to extinguish it. The flames grew bigger. Henryk's father and a few other men hurried to the rescue, quickly took control of the operation and assigned tasks to people. Two men poured what water they had and threw sand on the sofa and other furnishings which had also caught fire. Others passed the water and sand down the line. You could only remain in the room where the fire was blazing for up to two minutes. On leaving there, the men would sway as if drunk. After fighting the fire for half an hour, they managed to put it out. The sofa and the other burning furnishings were thrown out of the window.

On Friday, 2 February, an accident occurred in our tenement. A few men were standing in front of the front gate of the building at ul. Strzelecka 22 when suddenly a missile struck. The men ran for safety but then another missile hit the courtyard. Two people perished on the spot, three sustained heavy injuries. They had to be carried to a nearby hospital which was in operation, run by a Polish doctor. The artillery fire continued and the injured needed help. Some men, including myself and Henryk, made stretchers out of blankets and sticks. Barely conscious, the victims of their own recklessness were then carried to the hospital. Getting there was horrible. We proceeded, weighed down by a disturbingly moaning man, amidst the whizzing of shrapnel, over the mounds formed from col-

lapsed buildings. On the way, we ran into a policeman guarding a post on the corner of Plac Świętokrzyski. At the sound of our footsteps, he fired his gun in the air and only then asked, “Wer da?” (“Who’s there?”) Despite the seriousness of the situation, we found the terrified face of the German quite funny. One of the men mocked, “Bald kommen die Russen?” (“The Russians will soon be here, won’t they?”) The German made a long face and said nothing.

The Prussian soldiers who popped into our building for a five-minute layover wore distinctive papakhas. Their horses were steaming. They had funny grins on their faces – mocking, it might seem, but somewhat different, unfitting for the proud “masters of the world.” They treated everyone around to cigarettes, suddenly forgetting that only a few days ago, one of them devoured bread with cold cuts, sadistically watching people eat dry potatoes. When he was finished, he crushed candy with his boots in front of some poor children to show his “superiority” over the Poles.

We saw ever more cavalcades traveling from Dębina towards the Citadel. On Sunday the fourth, we were finally free. Victory!

6

Grzegorz Chmielewski

born 09.05.1929 in Radom

During the occupation, he resided at ul. Św. Marcin 20 in Poznań.

Currently residing at the same address.

Student of Berger State High School in Poznań, Year 1 of Junior High School

I couldn’t sleep. Probably because of the heavy stuffy air poisoned with the breath of a dozen plus people occupying the shelter. The shelter, a cellar rather, was moist and confined. Because of the crowdedness, not everyone could sleep comfortably. Even though each bed was used by a handful of people, there weren’t enough beds and floor space to accommodate everyone. Some men had to settle for sleeping on chairs. Next to me, or actually on top of me, slept my brother on one side and my father on the other. People groaned and sighed as if some nightmare was crushing their chests. The nightmare was the constant uncertainty and fear for your life, having to

stay underground for more than a dozen days, and the poor food. I lay there in my clothes, as did everyone else. I could distinctly hear the banging of exploding shells and handgun shots. Suddenly someone tugged on the door and I heard the familiar voice of Mr. Osiński, which sobered me up instantly, "Fire! All men upstairs!" We scrambled from our beddings and were about to leave, when a German thug stood in our way and forced us to stay, at gunpoint. A moment later, two more came around. They soon walked away and we stepped up onto the street.

A horrible sight emerged: walls of flames on all sides. A rain of crackling sparks falling to the ground filled the air. Although it was night, it was bright as daylight. I saw a few men dropping burning beams and boards down to the ground from one of the burning buildings. Others were dismantling a blazing barricade in the street that was built of furniture and posed a threat to one of the houses. Even our house was in danger of catching fire. I was assigned to making sure that the flames from house 58 did not jump over to our roof. I stood guard for four hours amidst the constant whistle of bullets.

Suddenly, over the whizzing of rounds and the explosions of missiles, I heard the whirring of powerful motors. I moved over to the edge of the roof and looked down. Two tanks followed by several Soviet troops were moving down the street. They walked bravely, and people waved to them friendlily. All of a sudden, a missile, followed by others, hit next to the tanks, which responded with a series of shots aimed at St. Martin's Church where, as I suspected (and as it turned out later), a German cannon was placed. Unexpectedly, a missile struck in the middle of the Soviet soldiers. I saw a flash of light, the boom deafened me temporarily, and only after a while did I begin to hear groaning. The tanks began to retreat slowly without interrupting their fire. However, a missile caught up with one of them, causing its petrol tank to explode. I couldn't see the rest of the fight as, despite our enormous effort, our tenement did catch fire. The flames entered through an opening made by a bomb. We used underground passages to reach safety on ul. 27 Grudnia. The magnificent tenement at ul. Św. Marcina 57, in which we experienced so many tragic moments on the night of 4 February, was reduced to a bunch of crumbling walls surrounded by a pile of bricks.

ALL EVENTS

X

VIII/1

Maria Kolankówna

born 20.09.1931 in Gniezno

Deported to Kielce. Father lost. Five orphaned children remain, of which Maria is the eldest. She is currently residing at ul. Chociszewskiego 28, Gniezno with her grandfather, Stanisław Żółtowski.

Student of Public Grammar School 6 in Gniezno, Year 6

...Our dad joined others to fight in the war. We were left behind by ourselves, i.e. my mum and my four sisters. When enemy planes flew over and began to drop bombs, mum packed our underwear and bed sheets and we fled to my uncle's in the countryside. We stayed there for four weeks. I was eight at the time, but even at that age I noticed and felt that the Poles became very sad. Christmas came. Mum shared the wafer with us and wished we would be able to celebrate the next Christmas in a free country. On Christmas day, we were suddenly very happy, as daddy came back from captivity. And so we lived on anxiously from one day to the next. Our enemy didn't sleep, and more and more Poles were arrested. They even transported people away, some of them to the General Government. This happened to us as well...

One evening, after mum washed us and undressed us for bed, a bunch of Gestapo men barged in and told us to leave the flat and leave behind all possessions. They drove us to a camp. After two horrible weeks in the camp, they transported us to Kielce. It was very hard to live among strangers. There were seven of us crammed into a single room on ul. Domaszowska. My dad worked in a Spółem factory, my sisters and I went to school. Mummy did some sewing in a tailor's shop, and every now and then we sold something to survive, as the rations we got from the enemy weren't nearly enough to live on. Later, my mum's family sent us packages. We lived like this for four years awaiting a better fate, hoping for a better future, while our enemy never ceased to abuse us... After the Warsaw up-

rising, there were mass arrests of men and women. Dad was picked up in the street on his way to the factory and sent to Austria.

Mummy was desperate, and we prayed for dad's happy return. The wretched Germans wouldn't be happy much longer though, as we kept hearing that Soviet troops were approaching to set us free. We were overjoyed at the prospect of returning to our loved ones in Gniezno. It didn't take much longer. In January 1945, there was bloody revenge. The Russian forces bravely defeated the enemy. Civilians hid in cellars and shelters from the horrible shootouts. Our mum was delighted at the thought of returning to grandma soon.

Unfortunately, God had other plans. When the artillery shelling was ending, a missile fell into our home and killed mummy. Oh, how terrible that was! After two days of terrible suffering, mum left us forever, leaving us – five orphans – among strangers. We cried hard over our loss. Our friends buried mum's body in a Kielce cemetery, while we helplessly returned to our flat, all alone. There, the hostess reproved us, stole from us and one day kicked us out of her house.

Oh, what a hard fate it is to be an orphan. We missed mum so much. Then a man came from the Społem factory and took us to the Dominican sisters. We stayed there for a month, until finally our dear granny came. Together with granny, we went to the cemetery to bid our farewell to mum and then left for Gniezno. Soon afterwards daddy came back. The news of mummy's death upset him very much. Yes, dear friends, love and respect your mothers, as mothers are a treasure, while being an orphan is very sad.

2

Krystyna Zielińska

born 29.03.1933 in Poznań

During the occupation, she resided at ul. Wrocławska 15, Poznań.

Currently: ul. Wrocławska 30, Poznań

Student of Public Grammar School 37 in Poznań, Year 5

After the Germans conquered Poznań, I lived in constant fear. I didn't know what the Germans were like yet, as no one told me

about them. I was still little – only six years old. Only after I first saw them up close did I begin to think about them and getting to know them better. They treated Poles very badly, which made me hate them and detest them as savages. They moved Poles to barracks, to the General Government and locked them up in prisons and camps where they murdered them. I was concerned for my dad, who joined the Polish army and then died for his homeland near Warsaw. I lived in constant fear, as dad was gone and mum had to work and leave me home with my little sister. Mum kept telling us, and I heard this from others too, that things would change and that the Germans would lose the war, and so I hoped we would be all right one day.

I took charge of getting our rations and did all the shopping for mum. I grew braver and wasn't so terrified of the Germans any more. Every day I gained more confidence and courage. Mum always cheered me up and encouraged me to study and work. There was a man who visited us in the evenings to teach us in Polish. I learned a lot, as the Polish language attracted me very much. On the streets I only heard German, and couldn't understand anything. At the time, I was preparing for my first communion, learning about God and took first communion in 1944. Since I began to study in Polish, I was no longer afraid of the Germans, as I wasn't focused on them – I was busy studying.

Towards the end of 1944, when I learned to think for myself and heard from older people that the Germans had to flee and would soon be gone, I was very happy and couldn't wait to see that happen. They deserved it, I said, as they transported Poles and Polish children in the winter as well. One day, we heard shooting – it was so loud that it scared not only myself but also mum and the others. So we all hid in a shelter. My God! The things that were happening – they were shooting very hard and fires broke out around us and we cried and prayed to be saved, and God did save us. The Poles and the Soviets drove the Germans away not only from our city of Poznań, but also from all of Poland. We welcomed our troops warmly and they fed us, as we were hungry after more than three weeks in the shelter. They had been shooting all day and all night and so we couldn't cook.

When I finally left the shelter and saw our city liberated, I cried at the sight of the damage. I thought of our schools, which were burnt down, and wondered where we would study and who would teach us, as so many teachers were wasted away by the Germans. I lived to see those long-awaited days, see our classes begin and our teachers return, although not all of them made it. Since I studied diligently during the war, I was admitted to the fifth grade and was very happy to see that my hard work and studies during the occupation didn't go to waste – being placed in the fifth year was my reward.

3

Tadeusz Kaliszan

born 21.01.1930 in Poznań

Currently: ul. Karmelicka 1/24, Poznań

Student of Grammar School 36, Year 6

When the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, I didn't quite understand the significance of that moment, as I was only nine. Only later did I realise how horrible it was. As I walked through the Stary Rynek with my mum, I noticed her stop and turn pale in the face as she looked at the top of the city hall. I followed her gaze and we both cried to see the Polish eagle being knocked down. This was only the beginning. Then came the days and nights of anxiously awaiting deportation. We gazed out of a window in the evening, looked at the trucks and wondered which of them would carry us into exile. The sight was horrible. We saw mothers cuddle their freezing children, for whom they weren't even allowed to bring warm quilts, while the temperatures were way below freezing. We prayed to God and we were spared that time. The hardest thing for me was not to be able to study. There were no schools for Polish children. Mum began to teach me and a few girls in the evenings, as she was forced to work in a factory during the day.

We lived like this until March 1940 when they rudely knocked on our door and told us to vacate the flat within six hours. We wandered around various parts of the city looking for shelter. We found a small flat and remained there for a year. Then they made us move to a basement and mum was forced to become a janitor. Dad had to work in the city, while mum and I had the job of keeping three five-storey tenements, a courtyard and a big section of the street clean and tidy. We suffered a lot of abuse from our German tenants. Then, they began to take Polish children to schools and, from there, to labour in the countryside. Mum put her foot down and said, "You will not go to school and become a German farmhand." Since mum didn't have the time to teach me, she found a Polish teacher and I began my wandering classes, held in a different house each time. Since the Germans kept rounding people up in the streets and houses, you had to hide not to fall into their hands. Mum taught me some German, which caused her some trouble, as the police kept coming to us with a *Blokleiter* (building manager) tormenting us to sign the *Volkliste* as our German was so good. Mum replied, "The same way that you aren't Polish but can speak the language, so will we never be German – you can't change your nationality like a pair of gloves." He agreed, but then some time later, the Gestapo came and took daddy away. They kept daddy in *Żabikowo* from February to April 1943. On 26 April, they moved him to *Gross-Rosen* and on 3 May, they finished him off. They burned him to death, most likely, for being, as they claimed, "ein harter Pole" ("a hardened Pole"). Now the Germans began to object to my not going to school. Afraid that I might be moved away, my mum tried to find some light work for me. I ended up in an office in the City Hall, which was an ordeal, as a German woman there abused me at every opportunity. But this passed and we were overjoyed to welcome the first Polish flag. The Germans were gone and we survived. Unfortunately, not all of us. We will never bring back to life all those who died a martyr's death. We salute them all!

*Marian Wiśniewski**born 12.03.1924 in Poznań**During the 1944/45 school year, he was a student of State High School
in Leszno, Year 4d.**He left at the end of the school year.**Currently: ul. Kapłańska 6, Szamotuły*

I could not come to terms with the thought that it was all over, that for Poles, freedom and prosperity were now gone, never to be enjoyed again...

Had I lacked anything? I had parents, a home, friends. I had my father, in whom I took pride at every opportunity (after all, he was the chief of the state police in Leszno). Even though I was fifteen and attended the third year of junior high school, I was accustomed to a carefree life and thought it would never end.

Oh, what a shock the September defeat was for me, when I returned to my home town after the evacuation!

Our fortunes worked in strange ways then! Far away, to the east of the River Bug, some miracle allowed me to run into mother and my 9-year-old sister. I had to take care of them then, and I did, ineptly at first. We fled together past Łuck. It then turned out that all of our efforts were futile... The Polish state was no more. We decided to visit our friends in Lublin. As fate would have it, Lublin had been conquered by the Germans at the time, while Piaski Lubelskie was held by the Russians. When we stopped in Piaski Lubelskie undecided, the Russians retreated, leaving the town to the Germans. This was the first time I saw Nazi troops. It was on 4 October 1939.

Lublin wasn't very far. The journey itself was quite light, but the terrorist air raids on a defenceless Polish civilian population made us lose all of our luggage. I don't even know how we managed to get out of there alive...

In Lublin, by a wonderful coincidence, I met up with father who, being an officer, had ended up in German captivity at Lublin Airport. He managed to escape and had since been hiding in the homes

of his friends. We joined all the other returning refugees and set out on the long trip home to Leszno.

Unfortunately, we weren't fated to get there. We learned that the Germans were waiting for the return of my father, and therefore kept running until 25 October 1939, when we stopped in Szamotuly to settle down in the home of our relatives.

Only then did I see the Germans unmasked. Whenever they could, they made it known they were the victors and that we had been defeated. I witnessed their bestial rule there until 1 June 1940 - the constant roundups of men and women, the incessant trampling upon our holiest religious and national sentiments with their soldier's boots.

They removed all roadside crosses, figures and chapels with their godless hands. They sent priests off to concentration camps, evicted people from flats (which happened to us as well) and shot countless "hostages" in front of crowds. It is difficult to recall all of the evil they caused.

We ended up out on the street, on the snow, to be exact, homeless, with only a few bundles to our name, which our relatives left behind in the general commotion of being deported to the General Government, in which we were completely forgotten. Some strangers took us in and offered us shelter. It was dangerous at the time to even go out on the street. The conceited and proud "nation of masters" demanded that we bow down before them and fawn over them. Any Poles who failed to comply were beaten, abused and had their hair shaved off. And yet, and I say this with pride, despite being insulted and beaten for that reason on multiple occasions, I never took my hat off to them. I found a way, I walked with my head bare, avoiding any encounters with the "greens," the "stangrets" or the "blacks," which were our code names for the SA police and the SS.

A number of secret newspapers lifted our spirits. However, some of my friends lost their lives for the possession or distribution of leaflets.

My father was in hiding at the time. He wasted away, lost weight and changed beyond recognition... Later, left with no other alternative, he took advantage of a fortunate opportunity and accepted

a job as an insurance agent in the Poznań-based insurance company Vesta (Posensche Feuer-Versicherungs-Sozietät). After all, you had to make a living! This didn't work as expected though. Someone must have said too much, and in January 1943, he was taken to Poznań and imprisoned in Fort VII.

We found a clever way to have letters from him smuggled to us, and those were very informative. We learned he was in cell 39 on 20.01.1943, in the ul. Młyńska prison on 12.03.1943, back in Fort VII on 16.04.1943, in cell 1 on 25.05.1943, and in the ul. Daniłowiczowska 7 prison in Warsaw on 06.06.1943. He later wrote from Lublin (ul. Pole 4, Majdanek) on 06.07.1943. And that was it. On 14 November 1944, we received an official notice of his death on 1 October 1943.

After this tragedy, mother was forced to work in a rag workshop making belts out of scraps of fabric. During that time, my sister attended clandestine classes in Polish, history, geography, religion and arithmetic taught by Mrs. Fasińska, a former teacher of the Szamotyły grammar school. She was preparing my sister for year 6 but then had to quit as the Germans began to suspect her, and her job as a clandestine teacher became too dangerous.

As for me, I was sent to the Reich on 1 June 1940, literally by force. A huge transport took me deep into Germany. In Berlin, we were given badges with the letter P, which all of us were to wear on the right side of our chests, sewn onto our clothing. We were given IDs with a fingerprint and a photograph bearing a large "prisoner" number. They read out to us a circular with regulations for Poles, ordering us not to reveal any of its contents.

More than anything else, they banned all types of gatherings. They warned us that under no circumstances were we to leave our places of residence, use any means of transport, visit restaurants, cinemas, theatres and even, as it turned out later, churches. They even prohibited us to make demands or claims of any kind... Sluggishness at work, or leaving the workplace without permission would be considered an act of sabotage. The most severe punishments would result from contacts with prisoners of war, whether of Polish or any other nationality, German includ-

ed. We were also warned of punishments for failures to observe the curfew.

From Berlin, they sent us into various parts of Germany. I ended up in Spreewald, in Schönwalde near the town of Lüben (the site of international camps). I worked there for a farmer named Klausch for three and a half months. Unaccustomed to manual labour and unfamiliar with farm work, I was constantly insulted. Once, they flogged me and then I was moved to Kaden, in the same county, on 19.09.1940. I was employed there on 14.10.1941 as a hand on the farm of another farmer named Mrose. The constant abuse, blaming and humiliation of my Polish dignity by my “bosses” who, blinded by Nazi propaganda, kept talking of the “Polish pigs who murdered 60,000 Germans in Bydgoszcz,” could drive a person mad, especially as I speak good German, and every word felt to me like a dagger stabbing my heart. Wherever one went, or whenever one needed anything, there was always the heavy air of hatred for Poles who, as the story went, “murdered 60,000 Germans in Bydgoszcz and were degenerates deprived of honour and conscience, thieves,” and, again, “the murderers of 60,000 Germans in Bydgoszcz.”

How could one stand such abuse and bravely bear the letter P on one’s chest in the face of such insults from crazed, damned Nazi fanatics? ... No one was ashamed to wear this “sign” or embarrassed to be Polish. One of my friends said out loud, “I am not ashamed to be Polish – in fact, I am proud of it. You, however, will one day be ashamed to have been born German!” He was punished for those words: they took him to a penal camp and I never saw him again.

God always protected me one way or another. On several occasions, I tried to fight back, but this always brought upon me a policeman who would punch me in the face and warn me that if this happened again, I would end up in a camp.

My treatment by my “bosses” became even more unbearable. I went to the Arbeitsamt to ask for a relocation. They fined me for having left my workplace without permission. I decided to work so poorly that they would send me either to a penal camp or another town. I lost my inhibitions... Every time they complained about me, I complained about something back. I performed every task way

below standard. This was all I could do. I took risks, hoping for the best.

They recognised me as an obstinate Pole. “Der polnische Student,” they called me ironically. As a result, they cut my rations to a minimum for a few days, but then transferred me elsewhere.

God seems to have watched over me! As of 15 October 1941, I was to start work for a farmer called Haschke in Gossmar, Luckau Nieder/Lausitz County. He learned about me, though, and after 24 hours, told me to look for a job elsewhere. They then assigned me to a farmer named Klinkmühler in Luckau. He only kept me there for less than a month, unable to accept that I spoke German and understood everything that the Germans talked about. My constant reading of Polish literature was a thorn in his flesh. Noticing that I could communicate with the French, Ukrainians, Czechs, Yugoslavians and Russians, and that I often engaged in lengthy debates with members of these nations, while he couldn’t understand a word, he fired me on 17 November 1941 handing me over to the authorities.

Unable to find evidence for any crime that I had committed, the authorities sent me to Falkenhain, Luckau County, where I was to be watched by a wealthy farmer named Kretschmann. I was often approached by people who, as I sensed, were trying to test me and find out what I thought about the Nazi regime. For that entire year, I remained as meek as a lamb, watching my every word and step to the point I totally fooled the German informers. On the other hand, I must admit I was treated decently and I gradually regained my inner balance. I wasn’t there alone, I had a Polish workmate. Then came another worker, a Ukrainian and finally, a certain Polish family deported from the Przemyśl area.

As soon as I realised that no one was paying much attention to me any more, I took up secret “work.” All 38 Poles in the village liked me and trusted me too. They anxiously read “The Knights of the Cross” by Henryk Sienkiewicz and “Master Thaddeus” by Adam Mickiewicz. Both books were my private property and remained in constant circulation. One of the mothers requested that I teach her 8-year-old daughter to read and write. I taught her Polish and arith-

metic for nearly half a year. I was often visited by colleagues, who were mostly lower class Poles. I enjoyed their respect, and therefore was asked to resolve disputes and translate to them the English, American and Russian leaflets that were printed in German. My single room in an attic became the site of secret meetings.

However, always on their toes, my watchful “bosses” began to scrutinise me again. Frequent police raids never worked, as I was clever and organised well enough never to let them catch us off guard: all of us always managed to sneak out and reach home.

Nevertheless, the Germans became more hostile towards me and tried to find something on me. Whatever work I did, whether heavy or light, they always considered my performance imperfect. One day, on 6 March 1944, my “boss” criticised me in various ways. He then insulted me in his German way and hit me on the face repeatedly.

I protested and didn’t show up at work. The police took me to prison in Jetsch, Luckau County. For the first three days, they starved me, then gave me microscopic servings, all the while beating and shoving me around.

After eight days, they sent me to Luckau where, due to the lack of German labour, they employed Poles from various penal camps (in Frankfurt am Oder, Breetz and other towns) in the Fimag power generating plant. The Poles were prisoners who had not yet redeemed themselves for such “transgressions” as attempted escape, careless talk, beating up a German, “sabotage,” etc. These Poles were assigned to the hardest work in the so called “yard gang.” I became one of them. We were made to lift heavy weights, even in rain or hot weather, with hardly any rest, weekdays or Sundays. Our morale remained high, even though not a day went by without the factory police taking someone to their special toilet for a “rubber-cosh beating.”

I worked in such conditions for three months. I got to know camp life and the rigour of absolute obedience. You had to get used to the measly food rations. I was under constant surveillance, but felt better being part of a group. I quickly adjusted to the new life and was well-liked by all the members of our gang.

Suddenly, the main Fimag reflector, radiator and 24, 40 and 80 kW power generator plant in Finsterwalde requisitioned workers from our facility. They picked the best performers and, probably by mistake, me also.

Our posts were given to German political prisoners. On 06.06.1944, I began working in Finsterwalde, where I felt almost free. My first job was in an electrical welding shop, then a painting, drilling and cutting shop and ultimately in the radiator section.

The plant employed over 2,000 Polish workers, about a thousand French, and a great deal of Ukrainian, Italian, Russian, Hungarian, Dutch, Belgian, Czech, Serbian and German men and women. We worked around the clock in two shifts. Despite the wretched food in the Lager, as well as fleas, lice and bedbugs, which kept us awake at night, I felt more free.

On 10 December 1944, together with my colleagues, Krajewski from Zamość and Strzelczyk from Łódź, I organised what we called the Polish Amateur Drama Club. We overcame all the obstacles in record time, “softened up” our Lagerführer and all by ourselves built a stage in the Lager community centre. Krajewski took the job of the manager, Strzelczyk that of the director, while I was in charge of set design. Our project attracted a group of young people and, on 25 December 1944, we staged our first performance, a four act comedy entitled “Muchy Kleparskie” (“Kleparz Flies”), similar to Joseph Conrad’s comedy “Majster i czeladnik” (“The Master and Apprentice”) for the Polish workers of Fimag. The show brought together an audience of roughly a thousand. Even this first performance earned us respect from the Germans. They didn’t expect Poles, the “subhumans,” the “work cattle,” to be able to put up and arrange anything within 14 days. The stage, its design, the decorations, orchestra, costumes, and the talented artists in make-up, who made a well-tuned team, left me speechless...

Encouraged by our initial success, and hoping to lift the spirits of Polish refugees, we staged a few revues, avoiding political topics. On 21.02.1945, we put on “Okrężne” by Joseph Conrad followed by a few other revues. In the final one, on 6 March 1945, we had four pairs dance the krakowiak in national costume.

This proved to be more than the Germans were willing to tolerate. On 17 March 1945, they dissolved our troupe and sent all of the “artists,” without exception, to Senftenberg, Calau County. Once we got there, they held us under guard and made us dig ditches and build barricades.

Our food rations were reduced to a minimum again, while we slept on the floor of a former theatre. What accommodation that was! Each of us was busy all night picking insects out of our clothes. This fate was shared by men and women of various nationalities.

This is how I spent my time until 11:30 on 21 April 1945, when I took advantage of the sudden advance of Russian patrols and tanks... My quick reflexes and presence of mind allowed me to make it across the front line.

Today, I am back in Leszno, a town I so often remembered during my forced stay in a foreign land. I often think back to this time in Germany. The experience has left an indelible mark in my heart.

5

Jerzy Topuszek

born 05.03.1926 in Poznań

During the occupation, he resided in Poznań, then in Orzechowo, Września.

County. Currently back to Poznań, ul. Żnińska 7

Student of St. Mary Magdalene High School of Poznań

Year 1, accelerated track

The year was 1939. The war struck us like a bolt from the blue! A terrifying Teutonic storm rolled over us. After a short fight, the Germans established their rule of the land with an iron fist. The German serpent revealed its high culture. We felt as if a coffin lid shut over us. This ended two decades of freedom. No help or rescue from anywhere. Reduced to the lowest caste of pariah, we were treated as beasts of burden that were not even entitled to their place on earth and that should be eradicated. Would our fates ever improve?

At the time the war broke out, I lived in Poznań. I took events in my stride. After all, we had our own armed forces that would push back and shatter the enemy. The only thing that bothered me was what would happen to my father, who, being a military man, joined the ranks of the defenders. Would he return home safe and sound? Mother and I joined the evacuation into the heart of Poland. I thought we would wait it out there until the confusion was over. But then one day, we were bombarded and shot at by German planes which spotted the nearby army. Luckily, they only injured five soldiers and one woman.

Several days later, both Polish and German troops advanced towards us. We ended up caught between two lines. Artillery shells began whirring and shrieking overhead. What could we do? We grabbed a few bundles and plunged into a forest. The fighting lasted all night. In the morning, when the sound of the battle died down, we chose to return home. As we emerged out of the forest, we noticed a small unit on the road. Angular helmets, grim faces. Germans. I understood we had lost the one thing that is the dearest to any man: freedom.

I am back in my lovely old Poznań. It hasn't suffered much during the wartime operations. I can see a massive military presence in the streets, lots of German flags. For now, it is peaceful. This is only temporary though. There are still goods in the shops. You can pay with Polish currency and still buy things. Several days later, the city is taken over by the police. Germans descend in droves to what they call the ancient German city of Poznań. The situation is getting worse. We are promoted to the rank of "Polish pigs." We face maltreatment and slaps on the face at every turn. Can we be a match for the nation of masters? To make things worse, mass evictions of Poles from their apartments are starting. They are moved to the protectorate, condemned to famine, mistreatment, perhaps even death. When I wake up at night to the sound of a truck engine, I get the chills of fear. Perhaps they are coming for us and will throw us out somewhere without any belongings. They are setting up enormous death camps. Isn't there punishment for such vileness and madness? Revenge, revenge!

One night, I got arrested. To this day, I don't know why. Me, a kid of fourteen – a dangerous political criminal, posing a threat to the German state? They took me to the Soldier's House, the infamous headquarters of the Gestapo. After a brief interrogation and a few blows to the head, they moved me to Fort VII. A few more whacks later, I was standing in front of the door of cell 34. A powerful kick helped me "slide" into the cell. I saw some thirty pale shadows of people on bedding along the walls. I understood I was in deep trouble and that it would take a miracle for me to get out. I was devastated. They took me to the Gestapo twice for interrogation. I was beaten violently on both occasions. Nevertheless, they couldn't prove anything. Two months later, they finally let me out of the grim Fort VII. I made a mad dash home. The farther I could get from that place, the better.

I worked in a woodworking plant. Twelve hour days of relatively hard work exhausted me utterly. They kept rushing us to do more and more. Years passed without a change. The Germans grew more powerful and successful. Meanwhile, Poland continued to bleed under the boot of the occupiers. Many sons of the Polish land perished. Oh, my home land! Will you never throw off the disgraceful shackles?

I often thought about whether this desired and anxiously awaited freedom would ever come. I cheered myself up with the news I was hearing. When I learned that the German offensive in the east had suffered a failure and that an invasion had begun in the west, I regained my zest for life. There is an ally capable of restraining and annihilating our oppressor. After that, the Germans suffered one failure after another. No more fairy-tale feats. They were having the ground cut from under their feet. Despite that, they came up with ever more slogans, ever more incitements. I now know that Poland will survive, it will rise from its lethargy. I know it now. I expect liberation.

The long awaited day has come finally. The invaders are gone, the laws designed to oppress us have been lifted. We are alive! I can hardly believe it: it seems to be a dream, an illusion. The town is covered in white-and-red flags. So it is true! We are free!

*Sabina Kotlarkówna**born 27.07.1928 in Wielichowo, Kościan County**During the occupation, after a period of deportation in Ostrów Wlkp., she was recruited for the so called Einsatz. Currently: ul. Kościuszki 4, Kępno
Student of State High School in Kępno, Year 3b of Junior High School*

3 September 1939. It has been three days since the horrifying war broke out...

I stand, leaning against a wall of our coal wagon and look down with interest. Riding in coal wagons, sleeping in the rough, strings of refugees making their way down roads, hauling their belongings, previously unseen parts of the country, all this entertains me greatly, offering me an unforgettable experience, evoking unforgettable emotions. I see this whole evacuation business as an extended holiday – a break like any other, that is always too short and that leaves sadness, yearning and nice memories in a child’s heart. The sun shines down on the potatoes and beet fields around me, now damaged and trampled. A bit farther, I see the ruins of a village, no trace of human activity, only smoke-tarred chimneys point to the sky among smouldering charred remains.

This is the first view I see of wartime devastation and, as such, it makes a huge impression. It breaks my heart and I ask myself: what happened to the residents of this village? All the passengers look sorrowfully at this act of wartime devastation. But the train chugs on slowly and the burnt down village disappears from our sight. After a while, the track network grows denser and we enter a small town station. A sign on the station building says “Zielkowie.” The train slows down gradually, and finally grinds to a halt. It is dangerous to stop at stations and the passengers demand that the train move on. Unfortunately, that is not possible as our transport is caught in between two others. On top of that, the tracks are damaged 1.5km from us on the line towards Warsaw. People get more upset. Then a piercing scream announces: Airplanes approaching!

I look up and see a dozen or more dots in the blue sky. Tiny, silver, shining in the rays of the sun. They are moving slowly, sluggishly. They are German bombers. They are very high and you can hardly hear the whirr of their motors. I start counting: "One, two, three..." but then a huge boom shakes the air, followed by another and then another. I stop watching the planes and climb up over the edge of the carriage to see what happened. A hand grabs me abruptly and pulls off my red sweater. I hear a voice, "You can't be wearing anything red or white, as that can be spotted easily from up above..."

I look at the person speaking to me with astonishment. Can my pale sweater really be seen from an altitude of several thousand metres? And now I'm freezing...

The bombs keep falling. Their banging, the loud roar of a belated alarm siren, the screaming of terrified civilians all blend into a petrifying cacophony. The commander of the local anti-aircraft defence unit runs out of the station building and tells us to leave the carriages and run into the fields. People rush towards the doors forcefully, jump off and drop their luggage. There is a racket, panic and uproar...

The first person in our carriage to run towards the door is the same nervous man who previously made me take off my sweater. As soon as he drops his suitcases, they are struck by an incendiary bomb which sets them aflame. The screaming and wailing continues.

The bombs get closer and closer on both sides of the train as well as in the fields, but none hits the carriages themselves. Nevertheless, people are increasingly panicked. They run from one place to another, unsure which way to turn. The bombs are everywhere, and so is death...

Ostrów, June 1940. I sit with my sewing project in hand and recollect the past war developments...

We returned from the evacuation in one piece. We also escaped the deportations – that means I have everything that people these days say one needs to be happy, but I still don't feel that way. I miss school, despite being busy working all day. My life feels utterly emp-

ty. Only now do I realise what that thing called freedom that has been taken away from me really is. During these wartime months, I have understood a great deal about things that had been alien to me. I smile condescendingly as I remember my enthusiasm and childish joy at the evacuation...

I don't have any personal wishes, all that I want has become a single powerful yearning for freedom. Deep down, I strongly hope it will soon return...

I actually don't know the basis for this hope and certainty – I follow the general sentiment and look to Paris as our last, reliable resort. Recent developments don't bode particularly well, as the enemy has seized Belgium, the Netherlands, half of France and is now stopped at Paris, the very city we expect to support us and lead us to break our shackles.

The more I think about it, the more certain I am about the future. It is as radiant as the rising sun, it touches our hearts like a tune that wafts into a room through a window left ajar and that shakes me out of my pensiveness.

I jump to my feet and look out of the window with my brother. I see a unit of German soldiers marching down the street with drums and trumpets. They stop every so often to play their instruments and announce their victory to the entire world. They are followed by a delighted crowd.

“Paris has fallen,” a powerful cry drowns all others, echoing ominously among the tenement walls, making my heart resonate painfully. I feel the ground being cut from under my feet taking away the last hope. I watch the entire house of cards I had built in my heart collapse into a pile of rubble...

Ostrów, September 1942. I have been working as *Kindermädchen* (au pair) for a few months now and perform all kinds of household chores.

What a hateful job it is and, to make it worse, time goes so slowly! I work like an automaton from half past seven in the morning to nine in the evening without showing as much as a scrap of eagerness. I am silent all day and only speak when spoken to. What can I talk about with Germans?

...At any rate, I can clearly see the wide gap that separates us. They, the “Herrenvolk” (“master race”), me reduced to the role of an “Untermensch” (“sub-human”). I don’t want to insult their super-human dignity by imposing my conversation. Besides, I feel superior and proud of being a part of a martyred and righteous nation. My pride has kept me from seeking anyone’s favours, which is why I ended up having this job...

Ostrów, 17 August 1943. I am feverishly anxious and excited as I listen to a poem recited by an eight-year-old boy, all the while checking the time on a clock.

It is 15.45. A commemoration staged by a scout organisation is to begin in a quarter of an hour. The final preparations are under way – a dress rehearsal. Guests gather in the room designated for the performance. One quarter of the room, set out for the audience, is covered by a “curtain” made of a few white tablecloths. Embroidered on them is the lily, the scout cross and the date: 15.08.1920, the day of the Battle of Warsaw, in which many Polish scouts died a heroic martyr’s death, a moment of triumph and incredible victory. We celebrate it very solemnly to honour the fallen heroes and to fill people’s hearts with comfort. For our team, the day is also particularly solemn as, two years earlier to the day, our banner was consecrated and our first members, me included, were sworn in. Since then, we celebrate the anniversary with extra fervour.

The clock strikes four ...

We secure the front door with every lock and latch, slide a wardrobe to block it and commence the performance. The team leader, nicknamed Rapacious Eagle, opens the commemoration. Despite his alias, he is far from threatening. His words are straightforward, gentle and warm as he describes the reason we all had gathered. Tears well up in the eyes of the audience.

We follow our agenda one item after another. Recitations, speeches, songs. We all sing at the top of our lungs, forgetting the danger. Nevertheless, the repertoire selection shows a certain caution – other than the national anthem and some exceptional songs, we mostly sing newly composed pieces to the tunes of German songs.

You can hear the melodies in the hallway but can't distinguish the words.

The most solemn part of the celebration is now approaching.

On a signal, those present rise and the team leader raises the flag. We are all impressed by the flag's grandeur, although it is no match for pre-war banners. We are moved by the sight. It is our flag! Our symbol!

We stand straight at attention. A powerful hymn reverberates:

Long years in captivity ...

We sing with zest and excitement. Especially the chorus part, which summarises our feelings and yearnings, comes out powerfully. Anyone who might find himself in the stairwell and hear these words would certainly join in our call if he were Polish:

because we want, we want a free Poland! ...

If he were German, he would be surprised to hear incomprehensible words sung to the tune of the Third Reich anthem:

... denn wir fahren gegen England ...

Slowly, the hymn dies down, but we remain standing as three scouts are now to take their oath. They place two fingers of their right hand on the pole and recite the oath, "I solemnly swear to serve God and Poland faithfully for all of my life."

Then the team leader attaches third-degree scout crosses on their uniforms. A few members of the audience lose their composure and begin to sob out loud.

Yet, we don't let people remain emotional for long. We sing "The Oath" by Konopnicka and move on to part three of the celebration, which is filled with jokes, anecdotes, lotteries, games, etc.

Two odd figures enter the stage. At their sight, the children's jaws drop and eyes bulge. The figures walk slowly and stop over a camp fire in the middle, made of electric lights draped over with

red blotting paper. One of the figures draws a sabre and sings in a high-pitched voice:

*This is the famous sabre, hey,
With which Cain killed Abel, hey ...*

At this, the other singer shines two crossed daggers and accompanies the first singer in bass with more current lyrics:

*These are the famous swords, hey!
You should know, nice fellow, hey!
That with our sabres or rapiers, hey!
We move against Hitler, hey, hey, hey!*

Bursts of laughter separate each stanza. Finally, to everyone's regret, the singers walk away, replaced by a man dressed as a traveller with a bag over his shoulder. He comes from afar, wants to warm up by the fire, sits down and shares the news in a singing voice:

*Do you know, people,
That Germans are in a tight spot today? ...
Do you know that streets in America
Have filled up with troops?
The soldiers gather in masses
Preparing to follow General Haller.*

Some of the stanzas are so joyful and witty that everyone rolls on the floor laughing. The singing is frequently interrupted by thunderous applause. Meanwhile, the fire burns out slowly.

After all this prepared entertainment, we break out games and lay them out on a table. Time flies when you are having fun. The clock strikes nine thirty, reminding us it is time to quit. Sadly, but no one wants to violate the curfew and fall into the hands of the Gestapo. We end with the hymn, "Beneath Thy Protection..." and send a scout out to check if the stairs and the immediate surroundings are clear. After that, we all disperse.

I remain in a much emptier room now with a few “Eagles.” Our job is to clean up and cover up all traces of today’s celebration. We wrap the flag in a paper cover and hide it under the attic floor. The speeches, poems, agenda and minutes, all of which form a record of today’s celebration, go to a sandbox in the hallway. It is not safe to keep anything in the flat.

We discuss the celebration vividly. It was so beautiful! Too bad it passed so fast and we have to go to work again tomorrow...

I shiver at the thought. Why are happy moments so rare and short-lived? Why do our lives otherwise consist of a continuous string of torment, grief and toil? I ask myself this question in my heart. Echoes of our songs, the memories of the celebration and the horrifying spectre of our suppression suggest an answer: Not every life, just the lives of slaves such as ourselves!

Siemkowice, 26.08.1944

Listen up, civilians
It is nice in the ditches...

sings a column of people marching down a forest road. Each carries a spade over their shoulders, as well as either a backpack or a bag. I march with the others, carrying a huge shovel. I smile – my mood is great, due to the wonderful weather we are having. Just look how glorious it is here! Birch trees rustle in the wind, the red caps of fly agaric mushrooms stick out of the moss here and there, while orange beams of sunlight shine through the trees.

My work has changed completely and, to be honest, I have been happy with that change so far. God, how unpleasant it was to be stuck in a stuffy flat all day, darning, cleaning and teaching a child to read and write in German! Listening to German only all day long! Here, at least one can speak Polish.

I have been in the ditches two weeks now. My departure came as a big blow to my parents but I myself was never very bothered. In fact, I was quite curious to see what this life in the ditches was about and, most of all, I yearned for a change, no matter what kind.

Nevertheless, my heart sank when I was leaving and the question that any deported person in this day and age asks himself pressed out of my mouth, "Will I ever return?"

I was teary-eyed, and so I closed my eyes tight not to let the tears show. The last thing I wanted to reveal was that I was sad. On the contrary, I wanted my high spirits to rub off on my parents and cheer up my brothers as all four of them saw me off to the train station. I departed amidst the thunder and lightning of a raging storm. All this depressed me, and the mood stuck for the first few days of my stay. But then, the sunny weather raised my spirits. I was enjoying the day and tried to think of everything that was beautiful and good, and forget about all the down and evil sides of life.

We slept on hay in a barn, which is quite healthy. In fact, there is too much fresh air, as the barn has no gate and its roof is as leaky as a colander. At least wasn't raining.

We get up at five, sing "Kiedy ranne wstają zorze" ("Morning has broken"), prepare our victuals and go to work. While it is nice to work in the forest, the fields, which are exposed to the sun, become oppressively hot. Sometimes we leave the field and dive into blackberry bushes to satisfy both our hunger and thirst.

In the evenings, once we return from the fields, there is dinner awaiting us. Too bad it is so far, all the way in Bugaj, which is 4km away. We bring it for the whole group in a bucket. We regret that on some days, it is so horrible, full of flies and other good and tasty creatures that one can hardly swallow it down. We then pour the entire contents of the bucket in the back yard to the delight of our host's cat and dog, while we ourselves are forced to eat potatoes from a field that stretches right outside our barn. Once we are done with all of the above, we wash at the well and sing well into the night on our straw bedding. This pretty much summarises our life.

We are to go home in a week. After all, they told us we would only be here for three weeks... Every time I remember this German promise, I think back to what father told me on departure, "Remember, child, ditch digging is not the purpose of your stay there. You are being moved away to be destroyed and you will not return until the times change."

I didn't know at first whose opinion to believe, but I now understand that my father was right, which makes me somewhat apprehensive about the future.

Siemkowice, 24.10.1944. I wake up numb from the cold and look around.

The break of dawn painted the treetops and the peaks of distant hills pink, still wrapped up in fog. The fields and meadows are covered in frost. The wind blows through openings in the barn and moves the rotten beams, which creak frighteningly. I can hear someone calling me, and therefore rise quickly and leave the building. Out on the road is Krysia, my colleague, who is staying in the Ożegowo camp in another village, 3km away. She lives with my childhood friend Zosia J. I can tell from her facial expression that she is bearing bad news. I look at her inquiringly. "Zosia is severely ill – she asked for you," says Krysia. Without hesitation, I hop on a bicycle leaning against our host's house and soon make my way to Ożegowo, with Krysia on my side. On the way, Krysia tells me about Zosia's disease. "She has been unwell for weeks, she visited the Red Cross several times but was always sent back to work. Only yesterday, when she was no longer able to get up, a doctor was called in and diagnosed her with typhus. There is no longer hope for her to survive it. She has a high fever and only regains consciousness for short intervals. During one such spell of consciousness, she said she wanted to see you."

I am overwhelmed with sorrow, have a lump in my throat and feel I am about to cry. I cannot utter a word. I hurl down the road as fast as the bike will carry me. I have an ominous feeling I will not make it in time. Poor Zosia!

I don't know how long I've been riding – it seems like eternity and still there appears to be no end in sight.

Finally though, we arrive at the village, pass some buildings and stop in front of another with a Red Cross poster on it. We head for the entrance but the door is locked and they are not letting anyone in. Through an open window, a Polish orderly tells us that Zosia has just passed away...

I lie on my straw bedding and look thoughtlessly into the distance. I seem to have lost a few years of my life. I cannot believe it, I cannot bring myself to realise what just happened...

Suddenly, I hear happy laughter which annoys me greatly. Helcia, my roommate, brings me a letter and, on seeing I am sad, tries to cheer me up. The letter is from Jadzia, a friend in Ostrów, the secretary of a secret Polish Red Cross association which I joined a few months ago. Jadzia keeps me up to date on all the news and the organisational work that has been done since I was taken ditch digging. The news I had received a month earlier was upsetting. The Gestapo caught wind of our organisation and carried out searches to reveal it. I impatiently tear the envelope open and glance over the sheet inside, which reads:

*"I learned yesterday that after four days in a concentration camp and three weeks after his arrest, our late lamented colleague and organiser Bogdan N. passed away at the age of 18.
We salute him!"*

Brzeźnica, 09.01.1945. We are working in an open field, on a hill, digging an anti-tank ditch. This morning, the temperature fell to 17 degrees below zero. Recently, they promised us to send us home if it got down to minus fifteen. The ground is frozen solid 20cm deep. Our spades are useless and so we use picks to dig in. The work proceeds slowly. The picks are so heavy, our hands, numb from the cold, grow weak and we can hardly hold them. We take turns, as we don't have enough picks for each of us, and every now and then one of them breaks on impact with the icy crust. As a result, even more people stand around idle and freeze.

Without a doubt, no one could see in these scrawny figures the people who briskly marched to work singing only four months ago. They have turned into mere spectres, their faces emaciated and frostbitten blue, their eyes sunken, hollow, their eyelids swollen, their lips the colour of earth. As I rub my hands to warm up, I think of the promise of staying in the ditches for up to three weeks.

The recollection makes me laugh sarcastically albeit painfully: how could I have been so naïve as to think, even for a moment, that the promise would be fulfilled? Now that the winter is in full swing, the real reason for sending us to “Einsatz” has become all too evident. In the summer, one man can easily perform the job that twenty people are now struggling to conclude. But it is not the job that this is about!

Frost is biting us to the bone. It is getting increasingly colder. Our hands and feet go rigid, it appears that the swaying figures are about to drop to the ground never to get up again. The wind whips our faces mercilessly, penetrating our thin coats and jackets. Our breaths freeze on the collars, covering them with white frost. Time drags on haplessly – equally hopeless is the emptiness that surrounds us and our fates.

We can't feel hunger, fatigue, drowsiness, joy or sadness any more – all we know is that we are cold, terribly cold. The cold freezes our breaths and the blood flowing in our veins. Our hearts gradually sink into an abyss of despair and doubt, they grow rebellious, murmur in protest against eternal providence. “God, will this ever end?!”

Brzeźnica, 16.01.1945. “Come outside, it is such a nice day and there is unusual traffic on the road – we can watch it for a while,” says Helcia to me as she runs inside.

I don't feel like going out, my frost-bitten feet hurt very much. Finally though, I give in and we step out into the market. The air is filled with the smell of petrol, the sun shines beautifully and happily putting joy into our hearts as we watch. There are airplanes whirring overhead, while tanks, armoured and non-armoured trucks, bearing Red Cross markings, horse-drawn wagons, bicycles – the road is jam-packed with vehicles of all kinds which bump into one another and, in the general confusion, make their way towards Wieluń. The wagon drivers have expressions of terror on their faces, the women cry, the children scream.

I never expected to see anything like it. My heart filled with a non-descript, but exuberant sensation, and I gave my friend's hand a firm squeeze.

“Could this be ... the end?” I whispered in her ear. She looked at me beaming. At that moment, a military vehicle that stopped nearby caught our attention. A few German soldiers got out. Their faces were dirty from dust and smoke, their uniforms stained with blood. They were immediately surrounded by a group of German children who peppered them with questions. They replied in broken sentences:

“Russians in Radomsko... approached the town in the morning, bombarded two military transports sitting at the train station. At 11am, they took the town... our army shattered... we are retreating... they are treading on our heels... they will be here shortly.”

We then hear joyful yelling from the side of the border (Brzeźnica was crossed at the border between Germany and the General Government). We turn around. It is “our own” people, coming back from the ditches but no longer carrying their shovels and spades. On seeing us, they all scream:

“There are Russians in Radomsko! We are going home! Home! The Obersturmführer and all the “Schachtmeisters” have run away! We are going home!”

I looked at the crowd in surprise. The same people who seemed hardly to have any life smouldering inside them are now reinvigorated as if someone connected them to a source of life! Their scraggy faces brighten up smiling, their shiny eyes project joy: they walk hurriedly, run even, to the church which used to be our “lager.” Then, from the other direction, come the “ill” ones, who worked in the kitchen. They scream from afar, “We are going home! They have all run away, not a trace left of them! Even the Lagerführer! And the red cross sisters too! We are going home!”

People fall into a frenzy of joy. They jump, dance, kiss one another, share the news which reaches fabulous proportions.

They start packing feverishly, but that doesn't take long as people only take the few items that fall into their hands. The rest is left behind scattered in the straw. How meaningless are all those objects in view of the enormous joy that the renewed hope in resurrection has poured into people's hearts?!

The ones who are ready take off from the church in small groups. There are thermoses with untouched lunches in the cemetery, but no one will as much as look at them today.

I hastily finish packing. Helcia is ready to go, waiting down below (I am up on a third bunk) and is getting impatient. I finally jump down, put on my backpack, grab the cardboard boxes and we set off hurriedly. I no longer feel the pain of frost-bitten feet – I don't even have the time to think about such trivialities.

It is dusk outside, a short winter day coming to an end. Millions of stars shine in the sky, the moon majestically slides from behind clouds. The frost has grown stronger, freezing the road surface that melted during the day. We are seeing frequent fires, the bangs of explosions shatter the air. We walk on unfazed, happy with the arrival of the long-awaited liberation and the prospect of returning to our loved ones.

7

Sabina Hanna Gruszczyńska

born 16.07.1927 in Powidz, Gniezno County

During the occupation, she resided in the General Government.

Currently, she has moved from Gniezno to ul. Górna Wilda 59/16, Poznań.

Student of Blessed Jolanta Girls' High School in Gniezno,

Year 1c of High School

End of August, 1939.

What wonderful summer days. We spend them at my grandpa's. Now, we are returning home to dinner from a lake. On the way, we notice crowds gathering around posters. We walk over. We see the word "mobilisation" in large red print. We hurry home. Everyone is very serious – they discuss the matter at length. Even on that day, many men leave to get drafted. They are sent off with tears, to the sounds of a song and a military band – they go west. I don't understand why people are crying. If there is war, that's fine, I have always imagined our troops defeating the Germans. I was 12 at the

time and I saw the war in bright colours. Unfortunately, the following six years would open my eyes to the atrocities of war and show me just how wrong I had been.

War is officially declared on the morning of 1 September. Since then, refugees have been crossing our town in droves heading eastward towards Warsaw. Our beloved soldiers are moving too – walking tired and hungry. Where to? They don't know. The radio announcers try to remain upbeat but no one believes in good news any more. Daddy wants to flee but the rest of the family are against it and we end up staying put.

On 12 September, our town is conquered by the Germans. On the very same day, the Germans begin to arrest and execute good Polish patriots by firing squad. Fear is ubiquitous.

Warsaw is our last hope. The wave of German invasion must break there. We dread thinking of our two elder sisters who are in Warsaw. Warsaw is taken after fierce fighting. This comes as a massive blow to us.

Another blow follows soon. My father is arrested on 21 October and, as a political prisoner, is detained first in Gniezno and then in Poznań. We fear for his life and put our entire hope in God, praying fervently for dad's release.

So many other relatives and friends of ours have been imprisoned. Dad hasn't been released yet. We get our first letter from Warsaw from our sisters. They are alive and hope this ordeal will not last much longer. People slowly shake off their apathy. Here and there, we hear of a miracle that is to happen on 8 December and set us free.

Unfortunately, what was supposed to be a miracle was in fact deportation. "Well-cultured Germans" arrived on the night of 13 December and evicted us from our home. All they let us take was a small suitcase with a few days' worth of food provisions. The eviction took a mere 15 minutes. We are in a barracks now. They will soon transport us by train into the unknown. Daddy knows nothing of this – God! He will be worried sick about us. What makes this hardship a bit easier to bear is the thought that we are not suffering alone and that our fate is shared by thousands of other Poles.

After being transported around the General Government for a week, we disembark in Kraków. We remain there for a week in a barracks but the conditions are very different from those back home, as Poles are generally eager to help us out.

We have been assigned to a flat. A small room with a kitchen. We spend our first Christmas without a wafer, thinking of father, whose uncertain fate is a constant source of anxiety.

We gradually get used to the way things are and settle into the new life. We have many friends in Kraków from before the war who arrange a job for mummy. Meanwhile, my brothers resume their education. Mummy sends my sister Zosia and myself to stay with our elder sisters in Warsaw. There, I begin to attend year six of grammar school. The first year of the war is very hard. The Germans steal all things of value from us and ship them into Germany while Poles barely survive from one day to the next. However, they never lose hope for a better future.

We use all available means to learn something about daddy. We write to various prisons, the German Red Cross and other institutions. No answer. Finally, in November 1940, we intervene through the International Red Cross. Soon, a reply comes back. It is terrifyingly curt and horrible. Father is dead. Several days later, the Gestapo come around and tell us, on orders from the International Red Cross, that father was executed by firing squad on 13 March 1940 in a forest near Poznań.

Mum is very sick. Therefore, my big sister Maria and myself go to Kraków. We all try to cheer mummy up so she can take this blow boldly as a Pole and accept this new experience from the Almighty without protest. After all, she is not the only one to suffer, we are there with her. Besides, countless other Polish mothers and wives around us are suffering just the same.

The German terror is picking up. Thousands of Poles are thrown into prisons, thousands die from the bullets of Nazi tormentors. Even in the first year of the war, we hear about the notorious camps in Majdanek, Treblinka and Auschwitz. So many of our own die for being good Poles. The news gets worse and worse. One day its dad's brother Marian from Środa, who dies by firing squad, on another:

aunt Krysztalkiewiczowa from Gniezno is imprisoned, on yet another, mum's cousins from Silesia end up in concentration camps. Still, we must not allow all this to shake and break us. Whatever we experience makes us better prepared for further misfortunes, it makes us better sons and daughters of our Motherland. We will not give in! We will not allow the German invaders to break us! The thoughts and hearts of all Poles unite. An underground effort to stand up to the occupier is in full swing. All hearts want revenge for a multitude of wrongs. There is strength in unity and, united, we can resist the German onslaught. The ultimate victory will be ours.

I graduated from grammar school and now attend a trade school. My brother commutes to Warsaw where he goes to the University of Technology which, for security reasons, operates under the downgraded name of "Technical College". Mummy wants me to come to Kraków. I like Warsaw so much but, what can I do – I go. In Kraków, I graduate from the trade school and take up a job in an agricultural publishing house. The Germans send masses of people to forced labour and, a certain percentage of them, to our company. To avoid that, I go back to Warsaw.

Once in the capital, I feel safer. The city has considerably fewer "liberators of Europe" compared to Kraków and Lviv. Proudly, with typical German insolence, they march in groups down the main streets. They "do not like" other places though, afraid that their bodies might be fished out of the Vistula on the following day.

My sister Mana was arrested and placed in the Pawiak prison. After six months of concerted effort, the Gestapo agreed to release her for two weeks due to poor health, in exchange for a high bail. After two weeks, they ran a massive search but, given the size of Warsaw, their hunt turned up nothing.

Then came a very eventful July 1944. Our hearts swelled at the news that Germany was collapsing. The Russians were near and the invasion of France had begun. No one listened to the German propaganda – everyone laughed at their outright lies. We are in Świdler, a town just outside of Warsaw. We take full advantage of the summer vacation. As the frontline approaches, we return to

Warsaw thinking we'll be safer there. All Warsaw is tense. We come on the last train. There is a distant rumble of artillery, the Russians are said to be on the outskirts of the Praga district.

On the following day, i.e. 1 August, Soviet aircraft show up. The sirens wail an alarm. The Russians drop bombs on military facilities, causing little damage otherwise. The city grows even tenser, people sense something in the air, various versions of events go around. That kind of mood remains until the afternoon. Around 3pm, an uprising breaks out in Żoliborz and gradually spreads from one district to the next, all the way to the city centre. In the initial days, we are all elated, there are Polish papers and radio programmes. We make flags. We are moved by the sight of the first insurgent troops marching to their station in combat formations. These are "our boys", as they are commonly referred to in Warsaw. Everyone believes that Warsaw will be fully controlled by the insurgents within a few days. The few days then turn into a week and two. We still think everything will be all right.

For now, we're fine, there is enough food to last us through this time. Then, from one day to the next, our dear Warsaw begins to look very different. Barricades rise up at intersections, pavements are torn up, the streets are full of holes used to get the sand needed to build fortifications. No one walks on the streets – openings are made between basements and ditches to serve as passages from one tenement to the next.

A planned bombardment begins, one district after another. Entire city blocks are annihilated, Warsaw's most magnificent buildings turned into rubble. Worst of all are the "roaring cows" which spew out fire. They bring death and destruction, set everything on fire, even bitumen-topped street surfaces are ablaze. Heavy artillery shelling continues incessantly. The city becomes an inferno.

Eventually, we run out of food. Water too becomes a precious commodity. People queue for water starting at five in the morning. The Germans drop bombs on the city wells. Thousands of people die, paying with blood for water. German pilots bombard these sites many times over, turning over the rubble and the dead. A handful of insurgents make a superhuman effort to defend their positions

in the rubble, outnumbered by an enemy who is well supplied with munitions.

We live on ul. Żurawia in the centre, where it is initially quiet. Soon, the fighting spreads to our street as well. We can hear distinctly the fighting that goes on near us, in Plac Trzech Krzyży, Aleje Jerozolimskie and in the adjacent city blocks.

On September 16, all three of my sisters are killed by bombs. I can't believe the news when I hear it. My oldest sister's husband and my younger sisters' fiancé move amidst a spray of bullets to see and find out for ourselves. We first travel via cellars and then along a newly-dug ditch. The building is beyond recognition. All that is left of this five-storey tenement surrounded on all sides by courtyard buildings are the metal fastenings of the main gate, a huge crater and a pile of rubble. Marcia, Milka and Zosia are gone for ever. The pile of debris is the only remnant of their former existence...

At times, we go mad. I tell myself not to think so much, I must divert my attention elsewhere – but it is so hard, so terribly hard to do.

All of my loved ones are gone, and I am not alone. Hundreds of thousands of other people in Warsaw go through the same ordeal.

Meanwhile, our beloved capital city is ablaze, the smoke reaching the throne of the Almighty, imploring him to have mercy and show his grace. The priests absolve people's sins en masse. Ever more people die, we run out of strength to bury them all. It gets worse by the day – we look for any help we can get.

The end of the day on 2 October brings capitulation. People come out of cellars singed, emaciated and famished. Many carry suitcases and bundles, remnants of the riches of Warsaw.

The only way to get around is to walk on the rubble. Some streets are covered with debris up to the height of the first floor. We are told to all come out and leave town.

This is the worst moment – saying farewell to Warsaw. A final glimpse at this cemetery of a city which holds all things that are holiest and dearest. Since I am ill, I leave on a transport of injured people in a freight wagon to Pruszków. There, a doctors' committee will decide if I am fit to work in the Reich. The committee acknowl-

edges my illness and, together with some companions of misfortune, I am sent on what they tell us is the way towards Kraków. However, once we pass Częstochowa, the train makes a turn towards Germany. I have no other choice but to escape. Once I and some others succeed, everyone continues on their journeys by themselves. I go to mummy in Kraków.

I am back in Kraków. I take a long time to recover, as the horrible experience and poverty during the uprising wreaked havoc with my health. Then, I have to remain in hiding for another six months as the Germans go to great lengths to catch “the Warsaw bandits.” They round people up day and night, catching thousands of oppressed Warsaw inhabitants and sending them off to camps from which they travel directly to the Reich.

Once Kraków is liberated by the Red Army, we feel inspired. We choose to go home to Wielkopolska. After an arduous journey of a dozen or more days, we end up in our birthplace, ready to start over in a free homeland.

8

Krystyna Pénier

born 09.08.1926 in Włocławek

During the occupation, she was deported to Sokółowo Podlaskie.

Currently: Rogoźno Włkp.

Student of Przemysław State High School in Rogoźno Włkp.,

Year I of High School

...The events of the last few days have saddened me greatly. I can't find a good reason for joy or happiness. Sorrow has taken hold of my heart. I examine my feelings in a spare moment. I can't recognise myself. What is making me so negative? I return home from school depressed. On the way, I meet a friend from pre-war times when we planned our bright futures together and visited fairy-tale castles in our dreams. And now? What a huge change! Time has made all the difference.

Her torrent of words tells me that her wartime life has been more bearable for her than it was for me. It is now my turn to confess.

I can well remember that dismal day of 1 September. The word “war” came out of millions of mouths repeated millions of times. I never thought that day would begin a period of misery and bring up tears of despair.

A wave of humanity fleeing the German invader carried us all the way to Warsaw. After weeks of wandering with hearts drowned in sorrow, we returned home. I saw enemy hordes exploit our land. Anything that smacked of Polishness and suggested the Poles’ claim to this land drove the Nazis mad. They immediately applied Bismarck’s call for the “Ausrottung” (“wiping out”) of the Poles. They used a pre-compiled list to systematically eliminate righteous Poles. Some were thrown into prisons, others tortured horribly.

In addition to losing our land, we spilled streams of blood and shed rivers of tears. Then came 4 December 1939, a cloudy winter morning. It was 6am. A furious clamour at the door woke us up. Our hearts trembled at the ominous premonition that this was the Gestapo. The rude tormentors barged in, guns at the ready, announcing we were to leave the house immediately. They condescendingly gave us a dozen minutes to pack our underwear.

They transported us to the Kowanówek lager and then, a week later, to our destination in Sokołów Podlaski across the Vistula River.

I will not give you the details, my dear, of our initial days in that town. Suffice it to say that the local Poles have been very kind to us.

Despite their misery, they haven’t lost their belief in a brighter future. Young Poles have demonstrated a resilient spirit and resolve. When it appeared that the black eagle would cover the whole world with its wings and tear the hearts of virtuous Poles with its bloody claws, young people set up secret organisations, met in private homes in evenings, studied and comforted each other, believing in a better tomorrow. They would enthusiastically disappear into forests for days on end to perfect their aim and prepare themselves to defeat the German oppressors when the time was ripe.

You cannot imagine what studying under such circumstances was like. We gathered in small rooms in groups of five to ten. Everyone listened intently to the teacher and, even more attentively, to the street noises outside. Many times, we would be horribly terrified by the noise of a passing car's engine. I can vividly remember the black-uniformed administrator with his machine gun. How many people cried because of him?

We got used to such conditions and can now say proudly that our efforts have borne fruit.

I can now appreciate freedom. I understand the word "nation" and pronounce the word "Poland" with reverence, as it is for her that millions have died! I now profoundly understand the history of the Polish nation, its victories and defeats, its ups and downs. My personal experience has taught me how to be a Polish citizen.

As I compare those days of clandestine education with the current conditions, I feel like I am living a delightful dream. I recollect the words of our teacher who said, "What a valiant nation Poles are, what a resilient spirit, behold – any country would take pride in such citizens! We salute the Poles who persevered in their education despite the executions and their fearless compatriots who sacrificed their lives!"

I feel proud in my heart of the small contributions to this work myself and my close friends have made.

My account may be deeply emotional. Please forgive me for this, my dear – I so want to share my experience with you. None of what I have been through, though, compares even remotely to the misfortunes that befell my family.

On 8 August 1942, as daddy was returning to Sokółów from Warsaw by car, the Gestapo searched him and confiscated a whole pile of Polish underground papers. I heard the details of this from an eye witness. He cried as he told me the story. I realised fully well I would never see my dear father again and how terribly he must have suffered. I nevertheless knew for a fact that he would rather die than betray anyone. Despair and sorrow touched us to the quick. On the following day, as could be expected, the Gestapo searched our home. Afterwards, they robbed us of our belongings. They detained my mummy and brothers leaving me all alone.

At that time, my heart filled with nothing but emptiness and despair. I thought I would go insane. I ran to the prison and saw mum through a barred foggy-glass window. I saw her composure, felt the struggle in her heart and knew that mummy wanted to show the dignity and pride of a Pole to the German thugs.

I then ran like crazy, looking for rescue. Uncertainty is often worse than the saddest reality. There was nothing I could do to help either of my parents or my brothers.

They were moved to the “Pawiak” and subjected to further tortures. The name Pawiak may be meaningless for those who don’t know its history or who haven’t themselves spent time in it. Entire generations of the best of Poles died there. Their sacrifice was not in vain. The blood they spilled inspired others to take revenge.

After some time, mummy and my brothers returned home. They spoke little of their experience and the Nazi interrogation methods.

I will not tell you this, my dear, as you have heard of that from the accounts of other people as well as the papers.

My father was placed in the infamous Majdanek. I cursed fate then, and now that time has soothed the initial pain, I realise that my dear daddy had to join the millions of other martyrs. It was necessary for him to go through the Golgotha of a Polish martyr, he had to sacrifice his life, as his blood seems to have tipped the scales of God’s justice in our favour.

Perhaps this is a superstition. Since I lost him, he has, in my eyes, become the ideal Pole and father. His memory is holy to me. I am proud and take satisfaction in comparing my father to other heroes of the Polish nation. He died as did millions of other Poles, his body was burnt in a crematorium.

I felt terribly bitter about it but now I have accepted the fate – this is what God wanted...

On the one hand, I would like my father’s remains to be buried in the Rogóżno area. On the other, it may even be better not to know where they are, as I can be proud knowing that they will be honoured not by thousands but by millions... Millions will whisper prayers to our Lord for the martyr victims, millions will be guided by their spirits and hold them as role-models.

My dear! I am proud of my father's determined sacrifice of his life and of his resolve not to betray our holy cause and his companions.

My family and I have returned to our home town. Although my dear father is no longer with us, I believe that his spirit looks down on us. I returned to Rogoźno, to the even fields, the calm rustle of parks and forests, the quiet swish of waves on the lakes.

I would like to entrust my pain and happiness, my sorrow and joy to them. When I talk to nature, I know I am understood. It then seems to me that through their rustling, the trees carry on the song of my life, which is then picked up by forest birds quietly accompanied by the waves... All this soothes my overwrought nerves, gives me faith in a brighter future and the confidence that the suffering and tears will not go to waste...

9

Felicja Palczynówna

born 08.05.1923 in Wągrowiec

During the occupation, she resided at Rynek 1, Gniezno.

Currently: Park Kościuszki 33, Gniezno

Student of Blessed Jolanta Municipal Girls' High School in Gniezno,

Year 1c of High School

The accounts by German occupation survivors in our region of Wielkopolska are among the most horrific of all regions.

Their experience was a nightmare which we all want to clear out of our minds as soon as possible. We fell victim to German blood-thirstiness. We experienced first hand the sheer extent of the German approach in all its cynicism and perfidy. We were mistreated, oppressed and denied the right to live. We were treated like beasts of burden, beings without a soul. They sensed we could feel and therefore assaulted us with hundreds and thousands of insults and despicable lies, intended to hit us like bullets. They knew we wouldn't talk back as their terror deprived us of the freedom of expression, if not the freedom of thought.

In closed circles of young dreamers, we refuted their claims and repulsed their attacks, one after another. We resorted to Polish history (exclusively Polish) and literature to demonstrate our right to live and our other rights so ruthlessly denied. This gave us the strength to endure.

The question of “Dagome iudex” or “Ego Mesco”^{*)} became a matter of survival. We translated articles from German papers which screamingly asserted the original German title to our land. We refuted their feeble arguments using the evidence we drew from early Polish history.

Oh, the things we discovered! This field of knowledge is huge, and abounds with documents and evidence of our rich culture. Our research opened up our amazed eyes to facts that allowed us to maintain our dignity.

We lived in miserly conditions. It is difficult for anyone who hasn't had the experience to realise what that life was like. We went through moments of despair and depression. And yet, someone would always come along who retained his resolve and who would uplift the spirits of dozens of others.

We loved all things Polish with our entire hearts. Despite attempts to tear them out of our hands, mock, jeer and mistreat them. We yearned for freedom and dreamed of the moment of liberation to which we felt entitled.

We learned the hard way the meaning of the Latin adage: “Inter arma silent leges, inter arma silent musae” (“In times of war, the law falls silent”). The laws of our land were silent, as were the muses among us. We so missed everything that makes up culture.

^{*)} A famous document dating back to 990-992, in which Duke Mieszko I of Poland, his wife Oda and his son Lambert, hand over Poland, within the borders it then controlled, to the Holy See. The document itself and especially its opening words became a starting point for various scientific hypotheses regarding the origins of the Polish state. German scholars claimed that “Dago” was the proper name of Mieszko. They used the claim to develop a theory of the Norman origins of the Piast dynasty and the Polish state. Other researchers interpret the opening words of the document to mean “Ego Mesco”.

We attempted to arrange literary mornings on some occasions. And even though our attempts were inept, the significance of these efforts cannot be overestimated.

I will never forget the meeting on the morning of Whitsunday in 1944, which we devoted to Norwid, our wartime acquisition. We discovered Norwid and made his works our own as his writings suited our needs in bondage unlike any others.

We swore using his “Klątwy” (“Curses”) and prayed by reciting his “Litania” (“Litany”). An interpretation of “Fortepian Szopena” (“Chopin’s Piano”) by one of us moved us to tears.

These were the times we were truly happy despite our misfortunes. Our hearts filled with pride and a sense of dignity, we were confident about the worthiness of our cause. We rose above the mundane, slanderous, hateful barking of the enemy.

Together with Artur Górski, we pondered upon “Ku czemu Polska szła” (“Where is Poland headed”). In his company, we let the sun shine in our eyes and endured, despite the blows that rained upon us. Perhaps this was a small merit and one that will never be recognised. We followed our Polish conscience – our constant revolt against the lies and persecution from our enemy showed our determination which, although restrained and suppressed, was also lasting and stalwart.

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