

War Recollections

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Przylek is an old village in the Kielce province. Nearby to the south is the river Pilica, its winding banks cut from the Spring tides. Rows of lush meadows, and behind them a dark belt of forests.

To the east and north side of the village were farm fields cut by divisions indicating that they belonged to small farmers. The village has a romantic setting from the east and west the mills rumble day and night. On top of each are storks' nests which draw attention from whoever passes by. In the center of the villages, on a hill is a small church surrounded by old chestnut trees, its steeple is finished with a cross with a date 1776. On the cross roads Naklo – Secemin and Szczkociny – Koniecpol is a small house with a straw roof resembling most of the houses in Przylek. But this house is connected to a history concerning a Jewish child.

It is fall of 1943. World War II is raging in the world. Bad news reaches the village. During the night the partisans pass by. The adults have their secrets. They gather in the houses, the men smoking cigarettes made of inferior tobacco. The poverty is also evident. Not many well to do households. In that little house on the cross roads live my parents, my brother Mirus, six years younger than me, and I. I was 13 years old.

In the evening I meet secretly with a group of my friends. Our teacher teaches us in his kitchen. We study the regular subjects -- history, geography, math and the Polish language, but no gymnastics, or singing. We missed mostly the gymnastics; we all liked to play, especially on the pasture while tending to the cows and geese. We had no handcrafts, but each child had sore muscles from work on the farm.

One day as it was getting dark and I was about to light the kerosene lamp and put away my books, there was a knock at the door. I lit the lamp and turned around. I noticed a man in the doorway who warmly greeted my mother and father. He turned to us and mother said: this is your Uncle Stach! I heard about him but I did not remember if I ever met him. But I knew for sure that this is my mother's dear brother. She used to talk often about him. He was also known in the village because years ago when he finished school he used to teach here.

After greeting us uncle motioned to our parents to step outside. After a few minutes they all returned but uncle brought in a little boy. The child felt at home right away. After a

short whispering between my parents and uncle, the uncle quickly left. From their whispering I could make out: Oswiecim, partisans, Gestapo, searches at uncle's house in Wegleszyn, that his sons, Janusz and Krystyn were cared for by the wife of the head of the village, and a few more sentences...

I was impressed with the child my uncle had brought in. Farm children are shy, when talking to strangers and would only nod their heads "yes" or "no." But this young boy introduced himself: "My name is Jureczek Staszewski, mother is in Auschwitz and father was taken by the Bolsheviks."

Mother pats his head, he looks like a child that misses his home – but at once found a home here! That evening I did not even put away my books; I completely forgot about my studies.....

My parents did not hurry either. They had to adjust to the new situation. During the war years many people passed through our house. In the city people were hungry. Trains full of people arrived from Czestochowa in hope of purchasing some food here. Przylek was a popular place. It had two mills and people arrived in hope to buy some flour. At night they were asking for a place to stay. We had family in Czestochowa. They and their acquaintances and even strangers would spend the night in our house. It was a problem if one needed to relieve oneself during the night, because people were sleeping in straw on the floor. It was a favor to those who were very tired.

What took place after lighting the kerosene lamp I found out after the war. That evening mother informed us that the Gestapo arrested Aunt Wanda (the wife of Uncle Stach) and her sister. They were taken to Auschwitz (I already knew that the Germans starve and torture people). Janusz and Krystyn resided in Wegleszyn. The head of the village cared for them because uncle was in the forest with the partisans. The little boy, Jurek, is the child of Aunt Wanda's sister. He will remain with us for some time until aunt's sister will return from prison.

For supper we each got a piece of bread and a cup of milk (it was still warm from milking the cow), my brothers and I kept asking Jurek about different things, he replied lisping. Mirek liked to carve a piece of wood with a knife. Jurek was handy with this too; they messed up the kitchen floor. Mother ordered: boys, clean up, Renia, make up the beds for sleeping. We looked at each other wondering where is "he" going to sleep, this new addition to our family? There is only one bed and a sofa.

Mother and the children slept on the bed and father on the sofa. Mother decided to combine three chairs and push them to the wall. Jurek will get a large pillow under his back and a small one for his head. We will give you a cover and a shawl, all right? The child was delighted. He was ready to get undressed and put his head on the small pillow, but Mirus was first and he wanted to sleep there.

But, mother spoke up, what about a prayer? Mirus, Renia kneel. The child kneeled next to us. He crossed himself and looking at the picture of Jesus was begging with an open heart:

“God give health,
Mother should return
and father should return.
We should last through the war
and survive.”

For a moment it was quiet in the house. Our parents secretly shed some tears.

The short, fall days passed. Our parents were busy preparing for the winter. They gathered wood for heating. They dug up whatever was left in the garden. The most important was the storage place for the potatoes that should be well protected from the frost. The long fall evenings were also productive. Father had a shoe repair shop - in the corner near the oven where it was warmest. He fixed for people their old worn shoes. He put in so much heart into his work to rejuvenate those old worn shoes that sometimes even their owners did not recognize them. While working he liked to sing songs from his youth. Mother sometimes made fun of him saying that he sings all the songs with the same melody.

Mother had her duties – almost everything we wore was made by her (she had no sewing machine) she used to mend, wash and iron. She also liked to read – Pan Sienkiewicz, Pan Krasicki were her favorite writers. I loved doing any homework, especially history and geography. Together with my parents we looked up places on the map of Europe that was my assignment from school and that was our travel together.

The two boys in the house are also very busy. The little newcomer admired Mirus. He copied him in everything. Mirek takes him to his friends, but only for a short stay because he is still so young. Then he takes him home and he goes back to play ball with his friends. Jurek’s favorite place is under the table. He spreads out his toys, weapons carved by Mirek. The village is full of partisans. The boys observe the different weapons. They imitate the partisans.

Soon it will be Christmas. With mother’s help, during free time, we make decorations for the Christmas tree; we bake cookies cut out in the form of stars and circles. We enjoy the Christmas tree. Just before the holidays we get another shocking news. My mother’s youngest brother, Uncle Kazik, an officer in the Polish army returned from captivity. How happy my mother was. I do not remember where he slept, but I remember how much he ate! He told us that he eats and he is constantly hungry. Our parents could not wait until he will be satiated. He was with us till Easter. How handsome he was. I have never seen such a handsome man. I was so proud that he was my uncle.

After Easter he went to Wegleszyn. He wanted to meet his brother. He did not meet his brother, instead he was arrested by the gendarmes (they were looking for Stanislaw Wlodek, but it was enough that he had the same last name) he was sent to Auschwitz, a few letters came, mother sent a few packages, by the end of the summer came news from Auschwitz that “he died of typhus.” To this day I hear my mother’s desperate cry.

Our new little brother is developing well. He asked my parents if he could call them mother and father, the same as Renia and Mirek call them, instead of aunt and uncle. Sometimes mother wonders how old he can be. His mind is well developed but physically he is small. We thought that he was older, that his growth was slow. He had a very nice delicate face, black curly hair. Eyes – I best remember them, dark brown, expressive. He liked first to observe and then to speak.

In general, he was liked, but he could sense the situation, he tried not to complicate it. It seemed that he sensed that he was a danger to himself and to us. But with his personality he won people around him. He feverishly prayed in church for the partisans, he was singing, recited patriotic poems I had taught him. Jurek was my first and most accomplished student. After the war I became a teacher.

Often, tired from marching, the partisans rested near our house. Here stood a statue of St. Florian surrounded by chestnut trees, under which the boys often rested. Jurek was right there. He found the leader and asked him if he can sign up. The soldiers were smiling, awaiting his registration. The child armed with a wooden gun Mirek had made for him stood at attention and recited a poem:

I am the little Jurek
but a brave young boy
to the commander-in-chief
I will report.
 I pledge Field – Marshall
 that when I grow up
 I will be courageous
 and in the army I will serve
You will put then
a real weapon in my hand
and we will defend our country
Our great Poland.

There was applause, and inquiring: to whom do you belong, where do you live? The boy has an acting talent. He sang partisan songs combined with poems. He wanted to show off, but only in front of those who wore military uniforms. He ignored the ones in civilian clothing, no matter how much we begged him to sing for them. His reply “I will not sing for the beggars.”

He was also performing at home. He learned quickly new songs and poems and had quite a repertoire. Neighbors used to come in to visit, especially the miller's wife, Mrs. Banasik. (At the end of the war bandits pretending to be partisans shot her.) Mother wanted to show off to the neighbors so she asked: "Jurus, what would you sing for us? He at once stood in the center of the room and started to sing. But he soon stopped and asked mother if he could have a spoon of cream because his throat is dry. Mother kept giving him spoonfuls of cream because his throat kept getting dry.

Eight years ago Jurek came from the United States to Poland. In Przylek he found an eighty year old Uncle Antek and his wife. The uncle, my father's brother hugged him with tears in his eyes. He recalled those long gone years, and remembered the songs and poems Jurek used to recite. But, the present university teacher of mathematics tried hard but could not recall any of this. He kept asking: Did I sing this? I do not remember a thing.

The situation got complicated. The Germans often raided the partisans. The villagers worried. They were not allowed to have strangers in their homes. Luckily the neighbor accepted our parent's tale and no one suspected the truth. Only our parents knew that Jurek was a Jew. I remember my grandmother's, Kowalikowa, surprise, when after the war Jurek's mother arrived. Whoever met her had no doubt who she was.

It was easy for the people to accept my parents' version, because my mother lived here as a teenager. She came with her brother who got a teaching position here. The elderly people knew her parents. Her father was a forester in the Polish forest service. And everybody knew that mother's family lives far away, so Jurek could be a child from someone in the family.

The worst was coming. The Germans are digging trenches; actually the Poles are digging the trenches for the Germans. They are coming from Koniecpol toward Przylek. They came. They settled in the entire village. Across from us was a large estate belonging to Mr. Paszartow, the SS settled in there. They gathered the people, put them up in schools and homes and every morning marched them to dig ditches. They did not assign anyone in our house because mother put us all to bed. She wrapped our necks and heads, and crying explained that the kids are sick. The Germans were afraid of an epidemic and left at once. We were left alone. Mother was relieved.

Jurek was very excited. So many people were all around. Across from our house was field kitchen where they cooked meals for the Germans and Poles who were digging the trenches. The odors from the kitchen enticed Jurek to leave the back yard. A talk from my mother made him stay in place, but he wanted food that smelled like the one from the German kitchen. The child was yearning for meat. Mother told father to kill a duck. She made soup with vegetables and noodles. She baked the duck with onions; she made a

sauce for the potatoes and invited us to the table. Jurek was delighted – because of me we are having such a tasty meal!

But meals like this were very seldom. Mother was sometimes despairing that she could make so many tasty meals – but from what? The worst was in the spring. It was the last of the potatoes, and the new ones won't be ready until June. We also missed the milk. Two month before the cow had a calf, my mother stopped milking the cow. A few days before calving, mother milked the cow. It was a very thick substance. Mother cooked it in the frying pan and it tasted like scrambled eggs. Sometimes we, ourselves, would go out with a cup and milk the cow. It was an old cow, she did not kick us.

One afternoon our neighbor came in. His name was Jozef Straczelski, but his nickname was "Spic." Jurek asked him: Mr. Spic does your cow also give scrambled eggs?

The forest helped to survive the hunger in the spring. In May we gathered baskets of mushrooms. In June there were blueberries. The adults were busy in the fields, but the children went to the forest and after a few hours returned with baskets full of blueberries, black teeth and mouths. In our house this was Jurek's and Mirek's job. I had to do the heavier work. I was weeding the garden, pulled out the weeds in the fields and brought them to the cow. I also brought wood for heating.

During the spring we got abscesses. Mother made all kinds of remedies to lessen the pain. She said, it is because of lack of vitamins. In the fall we pickled cabbage. There was still some left. Mother would squeeze out the juice and made us drink it. We also had to eat some of the cabbage, the rest she used for soup.

Soon we got used to the Germans' presence. It was quiet. They mainly watched the digging of the trenches. I also had a taste of that work. We dug the trenches for the soldiers, and wide trenches against the tanks. The Partisans were avoiding this area; they were using another bridge over the Pilica River, some 2 km away. To be careful they tied rugs around the horses' hoofs. The Germans were afraid of the partisans. They put up road blocks, and watchmen for the nights.

I remember one winter evening. Not far from us the watchmen were changing guard. It was very cold that night. One of them came in to our house to warm up. Father could speak some German. The soldier was maybe 18 years old. He told us that he is from Berlin and will soon be on leave. As he warmed up, he unbuckled his belt and put it on the bed, and continued to talk with father. Father translated for us what he was saying. He also asked some questions.

Secretly I was going to the next village to take some lessons. It was in Starzyn, there were no Germans there. We also learned German. So I was trying to talk to him. Jurek was sitting at his place under the table. The soldier stayed maybe an hour. He was already

warm so he got up to leave. He buttoned his coat, took his rifle, put on his hat, saluted and left. Jurek came out from under the table – holding in his hands the belt and the bullets. He took it from the bed and hid it under the table. And now he proudly announced: “I will give it to the Partisans.” Father was pale. He grabbed the belt and ran after the German. There was no joking with the Germans. They were very suspicious. They suspected every man to be a partisan. Luckily father knew some German and could explain the mix-up.

It was the end of 1944 and it was very cold. Work at the trenches was slower and slower. The earth was frozen. In some places fires had to be started in order to dig in with a shovel. The Germans were pushing less. They were gathering to decide what to do, and in the most part were preoccupied with their own issues.

On the Three Kings Holiday, on January 6, 1945 we heard the first reports of the approaching front. I was watching the Germans. I remember their anxiety, consultations; they did not pay any attention to us. The sound of the firings was heard nearer every day.

January 12th was a big commotion in the village. The Germans were leaving the village hastily; among them were many young boys – their faces terror-stricken. Many of them left in horse driven wagons. The last soldiers left about 11 AM, and by 4 in the afternoon the first Soviet tanks entered. They entered very slowly. The villagers tried to decide: should they hide or should they go out and welcome them?

Joy prevailed. People went out. Our family also stood there with the others. A tank slowly moves forwards and after it an entire column. The first one slowed down pointing the gun barrel at us. I will never forget that feeling of fear. People started yelling: We are Poles, Poles. They waved their arms. After a while the ones on the tank also waved their arms and continued. They were traveling like this day and night. They went over fences and trees. After them a smaller column approached. They rested for a few hours. They cooked; spoke, almost all of them were asking how far to Berlin?

In our house they installed a radio station. They were coming and going with reports. Since the noise of the tanks in the background was disturbing, they kept yelling all the time.

Jurek was observing all this. He and Mirek were eating the fat Soviet snacks and were adapting to the new situation. One day Jurek started to speak Russian. An officer entered, and Jurek jumped up, saluted, and said: “Zdrastwuijtie towarisz liejtnant!”

Because of the cold and the movement of the military, mother did let us go out. She had to remove all the plants from the window because the boy was standing for hours at the window, watched the tanks and waved to the soldiers.

The people were enjoying the freedom. The young men returned from the forest to their families. After some time also the ones that were sent to Germany for forced labor returned. A few soldiers from September 1939 did not return. Their families were waiting, but there was no trace of them.

Jurek's mother returned. I do not remember what month it was, but I remember my despair when I saw her, knowing that this it the end. She will take our boy. I was crying all night into my pillow. When they were leaving the next day I could hardly see them with my swollen eyes. That saying good-bye was also hard on my parents and my brother. It was also hard for Jurek. He was hanging on to my mother saying that his mother is here and he will not leave.

Slowly, slowly, Jurek's mother convinced him that she is his real mother. She showed him a picture. It was of his father, mother and him. Jurek recognized: "Oh that is father, that is mother," he kissed them on the picture. Then his mother mistakenly said to him: "I am here, kiss me dear son." The boy kept pointing his finger to the photograph: "This is my mother, and I will not kiss any other lady." As I mentioned, my eyes were swollen and my heart full of grief.

The day Jurek's mother arrived I learned that he was a Jewish child. And that the story my mother had told us was fiction. But to me it did not matter.

I will add that Jurek's outing as a Jewish child spread like lightening through the village. Everybody was talking; there were all kind of comments. Spiteful women were spreading rumors; they heard that for hiding someone from the Germans a lot of money was paid, so what did we do with the money? etc.

Many people asked our parents how Jurek got to us. In general there were not too many remarks directed toward us, until one day Father went to the store to purchase something. Several people were in the store and among them father's friend. When my father entered he stepped forward and spit in my father's face. –"That is for the Jew" he said and left. Father was very sad when he told us about it. That incident hurt all of us. But after that nothing else happened.

To this day I do not know if my parents were aware of the consequences of what would have happened if it were discovered that they were hiding a Jewish child. What would happen to them and their children? Or were they very scared and did not trust anybody. Whatever the reason, I think that they acted very sensible, but I did not realize this until 1947, after I visited Auschwitz. As to the people of Przylek - if only one would have been an anti-Semite, or a Nazi sympathizer, our entire family would have shared the fate of the millions murdered in the concentration camps. Glory to our parents for their skill to keep a secret.