

Escape

Stanisław Czernicki

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This document is dedicated to my uncle Stanisław Czernicki.

Once, I stumbled upon a Polish book in someone's bookcase: '*Stories from teachers*'. The first chapter was written by Stanisław. He is the brother of my grand-mother. I never got to know him in person, but I heard stories about him. This story tells about his escape from the concentration camp. This project is to translate the story from Polish to English, and to do a background research on the mentioned names.

- *Robert-Jan ten Hove* -

The complete journey.



Figure 1.1: Dyrektor Stanisław Czernicki.

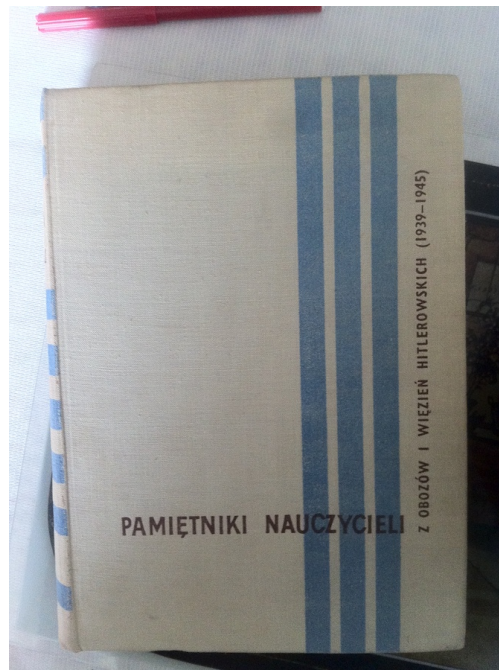


Figure 1.2: Teachers memories.

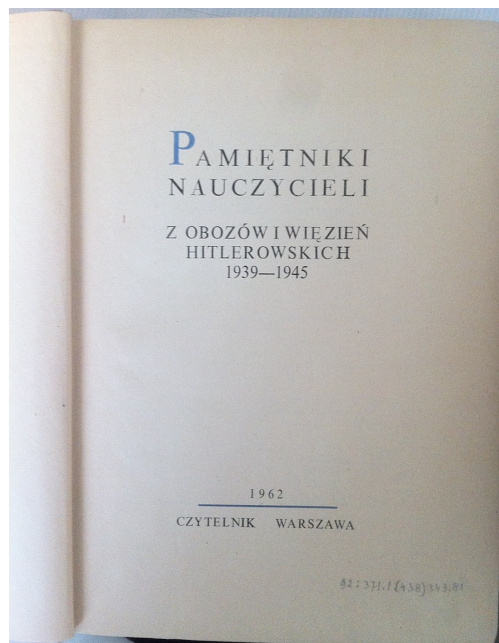


Figure 1.3: from Hitlers prisoners and concentration camps.

Chapter 2

Auschwitz

My memories have survived for seventeen years. Perhaps it will not be an accurate description. After so many years some events have been worn off already in my memory - others, though, are still fresh. I will try to present them as accurately as possible, as they have seen and experienced - first as a prisoner of the Nazi concentration camps in 1942-1944, then as a fugitive from the camp, hiding until the end of the war.

I did not write those memories so far as the vision of the camp have always been before my eyes. Also, I experienced everything again in my dreams. I tried to forget. As a result, I did not get mad. Currently, all these events are just a distant memory. And if he did not notice the advertisement in "Voice of a Teacher", I would not have described them at all.

Twelfth of March 1943, after a year's stay in Auschwitz, I was enlisted for transport to the concentration camp at Neuengamme. The Lagerführer (camp-leader) from that camp came for us: Lucie Mayer (*Albert Lütkemeyer*). He chose a few musicians and one-thousand healthiest prisoners, among whom I found myself. A similar group was sent to Buchenwald. March 13, after a thorough review, we already were on the way. By what cities we were driving - I can not say; we were transported on wired freight wagons. We sat on the floor in rows of five, and in the middle of the wagon were two armed SS men who guarded us. Escape was out of the question. We drove to the unknown - perhaps for better, perhaps for worse, who knows. For me, personally, a stone fell from my heart. I left a human slaughterhouse, from which it was a great fortune to get out alive. Many people there were killed. Counting them is impossible. I do not know if anyone would be able to read the names of the tortured. I doubt whether history will unearth the data.

Chapter 3

Neuengamme

Our journey was long. Our bones aching from sitting. Around noon on the third day we arrived at a small station near Hamburg called Neuengamme. We got surrounded by young punks from the SS of around seventeen - eighteen years old. Of course, with rifles, bayonets and dogs. After an hour's march we came to a concrete square. Around us, miserable barracks, and next to them even more miserable human skeletons. Between the barracks wire-fences, probably to prevent making contact with each other. After Auschwitz, the camp seemed to us at that time as a camp-site. The terrible state of the local prisoners savouring our horror, that in a few weeks, we'll look the same.

They separated us into blocks. We got the new numbers. I received a number 18 665. Instead of striped pyjamas, we were provided civilian clothes that belonged to those that were killed. On the clothes, a red cross painted with oil paint on the chest and backside. No jews were in the camp, except for those who lived under an faked name. The majority of the prisoners were German politicians (the Communists), otherwise it was a bit of criminals-burglars, and the rest were Poles. This camp already had several branches: Bremen, Varge, Dritte and others. Prisoners from the Neuengamme were often sent to these branches.

A thousand of healthy, reasonably well-looking prisoners, those who already had a unbelievable experience and only saved from death by chance, they revived the camp.

On the third day we were led to a long square, still covered with snow. On the other side of the square was kennel in which there were 50 dogs. On this square, a gun factory had to be built, called Fertigungstelle. Further 500 meters to the east there was a canal, on which boats and tugs were moving, importing sand for the construction of future factories and other construction materials. Next to the canal was a large brick



Figure 3.1: A sick Polish survivor in the Hannover-Ahlem subcamp receives medicine from the Red Cross, 11 April 1945

factory.

The construction manager was a tall SS man, Unterscharführer Rese, called by the prisoners Maciejewski. The name was given because, like the cat Maciejewski, he killed people. The function of oberkapa was filled by prisoner Walter Block, a decent German-communist. They divided us into groups. First, we moved earth, then we brought in the materials. I was assigned to a group of moving sand. We carried it by barrows, four persons per barrow. From the canal to the construction site. We were constantly on the move. It was terribly cold - coastal winds pierced the flesh to the bone. Everyone who could, collected some paper from cement bags and put it in the underwear. But pity to him who got caught. He got a beating until it was too painful to watch. However, we were forced to cross the ordinance, as the cold was unbearable, often aggravated by rainy-snow. The effects of the cold soon came to us. On our heads and necks we got ulcers, tormenting us incredibly.

After a so called quarantine period, during which it was forbidden to lay contact with the old inmates of the camp, we got separated under different commandos. I was assigned to Zaunbaukommando. Our kapo was Johann Schmidt, an elderly man, a communist. I got a manageable job in the construction of the fence. We put high poles, similar to Auschwitz. Another group pulled wires and set barbed wires. Several times plans for the fence changed, so that we were also moving poles. The work was prolonged. It was an advantage, since good work was to be respected.

After some time, the political branch began checking our personal data. Letters we sent to all the places of birth and residence, requesting to carefully check the personal data. It turned out that many of us have foreign names. Back came the replies that this or that had long since been dead. They began to call us to the political department. Many persons taken did not return to us. My friend, with whom I worked, gave the name of Dobija. It turned out that his name was Kazimierzczak and was a lieutenant in the Polish Army during the interwar period. Not uncovered in Auschwitz until the poor man came here. Leaving Auschwitz he thought of escape, this time he stood at the precipice. What finally happened to him, I do not know, because in the meantime I left the camp.

Autumn of 1943, our working commando was next to a brick factory. Here I met several colleagues from the Messap commando. Mostly they were Poznanians, for example. Miecio Krauze from Wrzesnia, near Poznan. Sychala under Miedzychód and many others places.

At the brickyard there was the Klinkerwerkkommando. It was one of the toughest commandos in the camp. Every day we watched as they were herded, beaten and kicked. Even worse than this Elba commando. Work in this commando finished off mass of prisoners, as they continuously worked in the water.

On Sunday, we also worked at the excavation for the new building. The work was hard everywhere, and hide from it was not possible. The camp at Neuengamme, however, differed substantially from Auschwitz. People here did not die en masse. Occasionally there were hangings, shootings, but not wholesale slaughter. Kapo's, Vorarbeiters, were recruited mainly from the Communists. The SS may even been worse than Auschwitz, but they had no helpers in finishing off people. Many prisoners went on wires and perished from electrocution.

The commando for the construction of the fence continued through the year with varying degrees of luck. From time to time I received beating with the whip or fist, but not experienced it as bad as in the previous camp.

New victories on the fronts inclined to the side of opponents of the Third Reich. Planes constantly bombed Germany. In July of the same year, raids bombed Hamburg terribly. More frequent alarms wreaked panic among the Germans. Prisoners helped sorting out Hamburg after the raids. They brought all sorts of information about the damage done by the phosphorous bombs, etc. The smoke of the burning city obscured our camp.

At the same time course in the camp had eased a little. Although Lagerführer Mayer got replaced by Lagerführer Thumann from Majdanek, he tightened discipline, but did not managed to turn the camp into an abattoir of people. We went to work normally, but all of us felt that the end of the criminals-reign is imminent.

Beside the brick factory, we set dozens of poles in such a way that it brought cover and rest all day over

excavated pits while waiting for the end of the war. One person was standing watch and to alert us if necessary. Then we worked with redoubled energy. It worked successfully for a long time. But the pitcher goes as far until the ear doesn't tear off. Once, before the end of the work we went in a group and we started to talk about our experiences. Suddenly, unexpectedly arrived the Lagerführer. He wrote the name of the commando and my number as the guardian of the group. Knocked on the whole. It has not helped explaining that we were only gathering for ending the shift and such. It was in April 1944.

On the evening roll, my name was call out and I had to present myself for the whole camp. I was told to bow my head, which got tied to the stool together with my hands. Two of the strongest camp prisoners whipped me more than 25 times over my behind. I saw all the stars in the sky, but gave not even a whimper. The Sturmführerowi did not enjoyed it and therefor ordered to repeat the portion. Of course, he ordered to lash faster and with more force. This time, I not even felt the pain. My-continued silence brought the Sturmführer into a frenzy of rage. Apparently he did not want to loose face - the called to end the appeal, and I had to be escort the shed next to the kitchen. There, he only changed the executioners. Again, I received my portion. After that, they released be to the block hut.

Please try to imagine, how I moved myself to my hut. Józio Ślaski and Bolek Maciaszek took me under the arms and brought me to the bunk. There they washed off my blood and put compresses on me. For three weeks I could not sit, and I could only sleep on my stomach.

Chapter 4

Braunschweig

So our commando got the attention of the Sturmführer and the next transport has been designated to go to 'Dritte'. They herded us to the bathhouse, where a medical examination was scheduled. I got out accidentally by being in the dispensary and avoided transportation. Also, most of my friends managed to escape from the bathhouse.

For the next transport we got called up again. I knew that I won't be able to avoid the transport every time.

Therefor, I looked for a transport myself. That opportunity arose. A small commando were departing to Braunschweig. To complete the group, they needed a bricklayer. I thought to myself that I can be as well a bricklayer. After all, these big blocks in the camp were also not build by experts. So I volunteered as a mason at Kapo Martin. Also I covered for Bolek Maciaszek and we got accepted and included for the drive out.

I left the camp in Neuengamme on May 3, year 1944. I did not assumed to go back there ever again. Fortunately. Because before the end of the war, the camp was liquidated: the prisoners were taken to ships which then got bombed. Only a handful were saved.

So to the camp at Braunschweig I came. There were Spaniards and French. A prison car took us to work. In the middle of the town we built a barrack. During our stay the town was bombed very often. People got buried under rubble. Even bunkers proved little protection against the bombs.

We were not afraid to die from bombs. Each bombing elicited great joy from us. For us, what was bombing compared to be killed by the wheelbarrow, get a boot on the neck and suffocate or to drown in the muddy trench, or, at best, be shot like a dog.

Construction proceeded quickly and efficiently and soon I finished the construction. After a few days we were placed at a small village near Helmstedt. Here we fix the warehouses of the SS that were crumbling from the bombing.

Me as 'bricklayer', was told to fix the chimney. At first I thought that this wouldn't be a too difficult job. I was wrong. I pretended to be an expert, but could not use a trowel. Soon I had to go through the exam. I got exposed. I was not sent to the camp, what I feared most. Instead, I was changed in function: I became an assistant in construction, and masons were brought from the village. They were two old Germany civilians. Together with Molik, we brought the bricks, stirring the lime and carried "mischung" up. The job was not the worst; it was far from the camp where we were constantly being routed up "Los ... los ..." Sometimes only Kapo Martin hunted us, but when we "bought" him some products from parcels, he calmed down.

The repairs continued over time. No one was in a hurry. Neither the Kommandoführer was in a hurry to leave this secluded place away from the bombing, nor the SS, nor the gendarmes assigned for protection. After a few days the Kommandoführer got acquainted with the owner of the buildings, a young German woman. He began an affair with her, and we, in the best of our ability, we tried with our work to extend their romance.

In the afternoons and on Sundays we were taken to harvest. We put sheaves in the field. Occasionally, we were allowed to bathe in the stream. We could not complain. Bolek received parcels, which he shared with everyone. Next to us lived French prisoners of war. There were fifteen of them. Every morning, they went to work dressed in their military uniform. They returned late in the afternoon or evening. Often we envied their “freedom”.

After renovating the floors and repairing the roof, we went down to the basement. Because of the raids, it was decided to put the bulk storage as low as possible. We started digging at in the rocky bottom where the crane would be stored. It was like working in the mine under electric light. We could not dig too deep, because of constant flooding from groundwater, which we had to remove by using a hand pump. We worked in shifts, day and night. The only entertainment at pouring water all-night, was listening to the radio brought by an SS man. This was the period of the Warsaw Uprising. Every day the fighting in Warsaw, every day of the massacre carried out in the heart of Polish. It stirred in us a passion for revenge. Our hearts breaking for our fighting countryman. Our hands tightened to fist ready to kill the animals personified in the SS. There were moments that I had to withstand the urge to kill an SS with his own weapon. I deliberated, however, and waited for a better opportunity.

I became restless, taciturn and only looking for sedation at work. Sunday came. It was the end of September 1944. Three of us gathered: Bolek Maciaszek, Molik and me. We started a long discussion. The main topic of our discussion was, escape, as soon as possible. Certainly the Warsaw Uprising will trigger reprisals against the Poles. For sure we will be driven to the camp. Faith already known. One way or the other, it ends in death. Molik was of the opinion that we needed to arrange civilian clothes. Apparently, he already made efforts with the French soldiers. Stubbornly he stuck to that plan. But that would only bring us in trouble, because it is difficult to trust people you do not know. How would it be organised? We did not know the French who would provide us the clothes. Our lives would be hanging on a hair. We could not find a solution, the more that Molik was not fully determined. We decided to flee, together with Bolek. The deadline was not agreed. We only waited for an opportunity. And an opportunity came...

Chapter 5

The Birthday

On 7 October 1944, our Kommandoführer celebrated his birthday. It was a Saturday. From early morning people congratulated him. There was no share from our part in it. For this occasion, Bolek devoted all cookies from the packages from his fiancée.

In the afternoon, our guards went to the owner of the buildings, a young German woman, for ‘a treat’. Her husband was in the army, so she consoled herself when she could, with our Kommandoführer.

In the evening the whole company, already ‘tipsy’, went in the direction of the village, leaving only two guards, also being tipsy, to guard the prisoners. One guard was checking the building going around from the top and the other went by the lower side. We were still not locked up in the cell - apparently because of the birthday celebration. So we were able to walk around the ground floor of the warehouse. The Prisoner from Netherlands, ‘Pibel’ (nicknamed because of his small posture) they made sandals. Others wrote letters. Kap Martin went out to the backyard to a German woman he fancied.

A crazy opportunity. We went on the ramp. The guard walked and growled something to himself. Probably he wanted to go to sleep, and there he had to guard. Without wasting time I winked to Bolek. From the ramp he jumped on Fritz’ head and with one blow he felled him. We shoved him under the ramp and stripped him to the shirt. Bolek quickly put his uniform on and took the gun. We moved towards the second guard. He did not stop us as he thought that his colleague was approaching. We managed to overpower also this guard with one blow. Now we were the new the owners of the uniforms. The rifle we did not take, only the handgun, which later provided us many big favours.

As quick as lighting we jumped into the fields and meadows, in the direction of the forest, away from the warehouse. The first moment in freedom was crazy. After a short time it turned out that we lacked strength. Somehow we jumped over a ditch and stopped for a moment. We saw a herd of grazing cows. It looked like an army ready for a raid. It is hard to imagine how frightened we were. Already we thought it was a manhunt for us. Luckily it was only an illusion. Bolek and I kissed each other for good fortune to our journey... to Poland.

What happened in the camp after we fled, was described to me by mate Molik after the war. The Germans alerted all the nearby villages. They occupied the buildings that we renovated. For defence they called the local Landwache. They put around machine guns and they waited. They thought we would come back with reinforcement, to rescue the other prisoners.

Escaping was easily. But what next? From one we knew, back to the camp is impossible. Either we reach homeland or we die. In no case we should fall into their claws alive. It would for sure mean death in wildest agony....

Chapter 6

The Run

We decided to go for it. In the beginning we went off-roads. Crossing fields and through the forests. We avoided villages and people. In the morning we arrived at stacks of grain in the clearing. Further march was impossible. We hid in a pile of straw. A little sleep, meditating on our fate. Hunger began to tease us. We strengthen ourselves on raw carrot and cabbage and waited for the night. We could not go by roads. Our compass were the stars. We had bad luck, because for the whole three-week trip the weather was bad. Rain or cloudy nights did not allow us to get a good sense of direction. After three days of walking we decided to figure out where exactly we were going. We went to a village to read signposts for direction and place names. We had assumed that these three nights we walked for 100 km. It turned out that we are only 20 km from the place of escape and were walking back in the direction of the camp.

On the edge of the forest we entered the fenced area, where we could not get out. A large German shepherd ran to us, sniffed and walked away. He saw a German uniform, but did not sense who it got in it. There was a flash light. We saw the mast, and the Nazi flag. Nearby stood a police station. Despite the lack of strength with incredible speed we were outside the fence - to get as far as possible.

Sometimes we lied through the whole day in haystacks. In the fields we saw farmers plowing. Soggy patches, mud and rains forced us to take risks. We decided to march along roads, on which cars were moving. The direction of our march led to Berlin. Food we gained in different ways.

In different ways we struggled through Germany. Only a novelist could describe our journey, strewn with thousands of surprises.

One evening we reached some village. In one of the houses the light was on. We approached, of course, weapons in hand. A large family was speaking Ukrainian. We called the host. We told him to bring a loaf of bread and 5 Mark. He brought it. We gave him a pack of cigarettes. Both sides were happy.

Mostly we walked between the hours of 20 pm to 4 am, because then the Landwache descended from their posts. We got a long way. We reached Halle. Bypassing the city from the North, we encountered some dugout. We went to one of them and to our surprise we noticed the gun in the stands and the bunks full of soldiers, both sides completely full. One soldier apparently doing night duty gave salute and wanted to report something. We asked only for the way, of course in a opposite direction, and we left. I think they were an outposts anti-aircraft artillery.

On the second day, after traveling about 30 km, we lie under a haystack. Suddenly we hear the barking of dogs. Straight at us group goes hunting. Germans in hunting attire with dogs. They came to the railroad tracks. Apparently they did not want to go over the tracks, they turned into the drive. Meanwhile, we slipped out of the entanglement. Only the people who working on the field digging potatoes and beet, started to insult us and called out: "Deserters!". It was in the evening. Quickly we went through the fields and entered in a meadow, where, in the bushes next to a brook, we waited for the night. We came to the conclusion that this way we won't get far. More and more surprises on the way. You can fall in one without even knowing when. We decided to try to ride the train. We had 5 marks and this encouraged us. The railway

line Halle-Berlin is connected to the narrow-gauge railway line, encircling Berlin from the South. It was almost to the eastern border of Berlin. We decided to take this route and get outside Berlin, where the former Polish-German border seemed close to us. We arrived at the small railway station on the Elbe. We purchased tickets to the next station to the other side of the river. We expected that these 5 marks for this purpose would be used up. It turned out that tickets were much cheaper. We still have 2 mark, for which we bought a beer, and the rest for bread rolls. After an hour, the train came. We set off in the direction of Berlin. On the train was mandatory blackout. It was very beneficial for us. There wasn't any control on the train. We drove to our station for which we bought the tickets. Had to get off, but inside the train, so warm, pleasant. We stayed sitting and made the kilometres while outside the wind and rain whistled. We did not get off. The closer we got to Berlin, the more travellers got on the train. Mostly military. An officer asked me about something. I pretended to be asleep. He did not ask me anything more. We eventually got to Potsdam. Almost everyone got out. We also headed to the station, but the view controllers and the military startled us on time. Discreetly we retreated to the other side of the train. Rails, jump over the fence and we ended up on the street. It was about 23 hours. We wanted to get out of town, but in no way could not find the right way. We went astray for about four hours. In the end, we rested in a park with tall trees. A light rain fell. At dawn, we looked at each other with pity. We looked like two paupers. Enough for anyone seeing us, at once to be recognised as fugitives. We moved on further exploring a way out of the city. The city began getting more traffic. Right at the checkpoint we saw gendarmes. We sat on a bench and thought about what to do next. Two gendarmes clearly glared at us, but did not hooked on. Skulls on our caps and collars deterred everyone.

Chapter 7

The Lift

After some rest, we went out to the edge of town. It was already around eight o'clock. Two more hours of walking and we found ourselves in front of a yellow sign reading "Berlin-West." A few light beams of the sun came through. In the bushes we dried our clothes. We shaved, and with a piece of our ragged prisoner clothes we had under the SS uniforms, we cleaned our shoes and improving our looks somewhat, we moved over South of Berlin to the east. On the way we saw many destructions and ruins. A military unit marched through the street. The commander gave us the honour, which of course we responded to, and without the slightest hassle we went further.

On the way we passed some factories, fenced with wires. Some of them - newly built. In front of one of the factories we noticed 'stamped' people walking around unrestrained. The first of a kind we met with a "P" and the "U" sign. We assumed that "P" is a Pole. We went up to one man with the stamp "P". I first asked in German what this stamp means. He replied. Then in Polish I asked where he came from and what he was doing here. He replied that he was from Łódź. He was taken to work. To work in a factory. I told him who we were and we ask for help. He gave us 10 mark and showed us the way to the tram. Today, I wish I could thank him again , because neither his name nor his place of residence is known to me.

From the bridge over the river Spree, we took the tram to Berlin-East station. On the way, however, we changed plans. We were afraid of check-ups at the station by the military police. We went further, to the main highway in the direction of Frankfurt and Kostrzyn. We got off there. We wanted to take the road to reach some small station where there would be no checks for on getting on and buying a ticket.

The map we had ended after Berlin. The road we set off did not lead to the train station. Guided by our senses, we headed east. The entire route was filled with driving cars, which forced us to go off the road. We entered a military area and moved along the line, leaving Berlin behind us. On the way we picked potatoes from the mounds. We fried them in the woods. Back on strengths, we went on the main road. We stopped a truck. Two workers and a chauffeur were sitting in it. We asked them to take us to Kostrin because we were in a hurry. We needed to present ourselves for the army. We were going to the battlefield. They were surprised. They talked to each other until they finally demanded documents.

As our only document, we showed the gun. I sat down with the chauffeur and Bolek with the workers, and ordered them to move. They drove without a word. I do not know whether they were afraid or whether they were foreigners, because we encountered marching troops on the way, we were passing a town and the car did not stop for a moment.

Chapter 8

The Bridge

Around 19hr we reached Kostrzyn. Here we were showed the route and we were told to cross the Oder before 20hr later we would not be allowed to. They blinked at us expressively. We concluded that they were well aware of our situation.

We did as we were advised. We almost reached the Odra. It was dark. On the Odra the traffic is tremendous. Full of troops. We did not stop for a moment. Over the Odra there was a footbridge of over a meter wide. Near the footbridge was a guard station. He did not stop us. After that, at the first foot-pillar of the bridge, there stood a second guard-house. In front of it there stood around fifteen guards, somewhat strangely dressed. They looked at us but no one interfered with us. We went the second foot-pillar of the bridge. There was a narrow kind of rails. We went through these rails to the tunnel and into the square where the signpost was. Darkness everywhere. Bolek put me on the signpost. I read: Stettin, Schwerin. We stood at a crossroad without knowing where to go. Bolek reminded himself of a German football team from Schwerin, who had played matches with Międzychód before the war. Apparently, it is a town located somewhere close to the border.

We headed towards Schwerin. We went into the woods. We wanted to get through it before the morning because we expected some German defences in the neighbourhood. On the way we read the signposts to the nearest towns - just in case. We did it within in a very short time. Maybe we already made 10 km, when we left the road, 300 m away, we noticed an illuminated building. Apparently some barracks. We entered the forest and unexpectedly we stood eye to eye with the soldier on guard. He was in charge of military warehouses. He shouted: "Halt!" A dog jumped out. He sniffed us and went back to the guardhouse. In a moment, without waiting for the guard to continue and before he knew, we were already next to him. "Why are you yelling?" I called and patted him on the shoulder. In case he would shoot, he would have had his piece, enough to cross to the other world. Apparently he noticed a German uniform because he hesitated. He lowered the rifle, which he had ready to fire. I told him we were going to the next village to buy something to eat. When we would come back, we would give him some. Without waiting for his consent, we set off in the designated direction.

On the way we met civilians on bicycles, who looked diligently at us. I looked at Bolek, he at me, but we did not see anything unusual that might draw their attention. After we lost sight of them, we went into the forest and all the way though the grove along the brook. Here in the thickets we sat down for a while and . . . fell asleep. We must have slept for quite some time. We woke up from screams: "Deserters! Deserters!" I opened one eye. Over me stood a young German about twenty with a fusion prepared shooting me, and next to him a German women of about eighteen. They were watching us closely. I closed my eyes again, but immediately I jumped to him. He dropped the fusion, stepped back, and screamed out from the distance: "Deserters!", Threatening the gendarmerie. Near the hut was the there was a rattle.

With one jump we were back into the forest and until evening we went and ran in unknown direction. In the evening we went out to the edge of the forest. We noticed two men covering a potato mound. Next to the mound stood a horse and an empty carriage. I went unnoticed under the mound. Having heard Polish

talking, I went over. There were two of them. I greeted them in Polish. In the course of the conversation I learned that they are on the job. They promised to give us something to eat and even to sleep. I called Bolek, who at the time provided back-up. We got on the car and still during the light of the day we reached the village. They told us to wait. They were supposed to bring some cooked food. We couldn't have waited; apparently they were too scared to help us out. After an hour, one of them came and ordered us to flee, because there is inspection. We did not have anything else but to actually march off.

Chapter 9

Hunger

We were so tired that we could not move much forward. We went a few miles, picked up potato leftovers in the field and like piglets stuffed them into us. So we hastened to dawn. It was terribly cold. We could not recognise each other in the morning. Dirty, tired, cold, we went further. The villages were still asleep. At times, there was a rooster's sound or dog barking. We happened to meet some soldier, but without a word we went on without asking him anything.

For us it was all the same now. We walked all day with small stops. We did not bypass the villages; Either we will come or we will die. We only eat carrots. On the way we found a corn field where we rested and ate a little. By evening we reached a village. Our march stopped by the trenches.

They were freshly dug, which intrigued us so much. Is there an Eastern Front already? We were afraid to go on. We landed in the roadside heap. Terrible cold and wind with rain did not give us any rest. We huddled together to warm ourselves up, but it did not help much.

Dawn. At a distance of 300 m from the heap stood a newly built large barrack. In the distance the village, and near the trenches stretched far away.

For long time no one was seen. Strangely calm. Terrible hunger began to sting us. There was no carrots or cabbage to be found in the vicinity. Around 10 o'clock it stopped raining. Underneath our pile came a boy and started to collect potatoes, which after the rain were easily visible. I went to him. I learned that Poles lived in the barrack, and for a period they were taken by Germans to dig trenches. Today is Sunday, so they do not work. He could not tell us where we were. At my request went to call a better-oriented colleague. Around 15:00 hour his colleague came. He also did not know much or did not want to tell us. He went out to find and bring a map for which we did not waited.

Night had fallen. The wind rose and it began to rain. What to do? We do not lose hope. If there are Poles in the camp, then some help will be given to us. I took off the uniform. Only in a sweater, without a hat, I went to the barrack. Bolek stayed for backup. I walked into the barrack. Party on the whole. Harmony plays from ear to ear. Nobody paid attention to me. I got to one of the elder men. It turned out he was from my region. He gave me bread and butter. The second portion I took for Bolek. After a long search, my friend came from under the heap. He did not give me the map. He probably was afraid. I received a card from him to buy 2 kg of bread. None of the persons, however, could tell me exactly where we were. I went out. Bolek was already impatient.

We continued our journey. We walked along the railroad track. In the morning we came to a city. From the distance there were church towers. It was dark yet, and the ranks of people, with something like arms on their shoulders, were hurrying to the trenches. This made the impression of military manoeuvres, all the more when they started shooting with machine guns, and along the track was advancing an infantry. Under the light bulb we managed to escape to the pine grove. These were just military exercises.

It started to brighten up. Machine guns stopped firing. More and closer to us were the sounds of German

commands. I reached out to the edge of the forest and saw straight in front of me the copse marching company of the army. Under the grove they stopped. They spread all the instruments for gun training. The soldiers divided into groups and started the training. Our location was tragic. Exiting into the open field would mean they will detect us. It could end up in a chase. Staying at the spot was also dangerous because during the break in the exercises the soldiers could enter the woods and would notice us. We stayed, however.

As we had predicted, there was a break in the exercises and several Germans entered the grove to help themselves with their physiological needs. We were unnoticed. To our joy, it began to rain. The company stopped the firing training and marched back.

There were more surprises that day. Suddenly Bolek got fever. He began to hallucinate. He complained that I was responsible for escaping, that we were in this situation and she wouldn't move, that he would've live, and that he would have to die anyway, and so on. Under these conditions, marching further was no longer possible. I talked into him how I could, and when that did not work, we got edgy. Perhaps the weapon would break our dispute, but something like encouragement would come to us. It has been two weeks since this wandering in the dark. We looked into each other's eyes and kissed.

Bolek's fever did not go away, but he seemed to give himself completely to my care. He just asked not to leave him, and if so, notify his parents. I recalled the similar wishes of Józef Bartecki in Auschwitz, my best childhood friend. He is no longer alive. Did Bolek need to see this fate? This time, fate would be shared.

We shaved and cleaned as best as possible. Again the sun appeared in the west. Without waiting for the evening we set out for the city. On the way, coming back from the fields, a wooden wagon with ladies singing a Polish song. It seemed like good fortune.

We entered the city Meseritz (today Międzyrzecze) near Międzychodu. Bolek bought bread in the bakery that was waiting for us to disappear in our hungry stomachs. Next to the bakery stood a young boy with the letter "P". We started to chat with him and straightly explained to him how our situation. He promised to help us. He advised us not to go to the station, because there are constantly strict controls, especially from the military. He led us to colleagues who commute from Międzychod to work. He went ahead, and we followed him, twenty steps from behind. On the way we encountered a mass of soldiers in bright military hatbands. We gave each other the honors by raising our hands the Nazi way. So we fortunately crossed the whole city. In the northern part of the town was a sawmill owned by the Germans. There was a barrack in the backyard, and there in it lived the men to whom we were led by this unknown and honest Pole.

His colleagues were not there. They came in later in the evening. We made our We introduced ourselves to each other. They were very kind. Also Poles. They gave us warm coffee and bread. Warm coffee, we drank it for the first time since the escape. In return, as a hairdresser, I gave them all a haircut. I just finished cutting when the sirens were running. Air alarm. Mates all in fear. They just showed us the way and told us to run away because it could be control. So we did. We went along the railroad track towards Międzychodu. At the nearest station we had to get on a train that was leaving at 6am.

It was 26 October. The freezing did not allowed us to sleep. Our eye-lids were like glue. In the toilet at the station we waited until finally the train arrived. We paid for the ticket on the train. About 7 o'clock we arrived in Międzychodu. We gave the tickets at the exit of the station. We went to the estate 5 km away from Międzychodu. Bolek's aunt was working there. It was already a bright day. Behind us were some uniformed men. Marching during the day was a risk.

Chapter 10

Family

After an hour we reached the estate. We had to wait until the evening, so we hid in the woods just off the highway. One after another, the hours passed by. We hoped that someone would take care of us. I did not know Bolek's aunt, but I've done everything I could to make myself happy, and most importantly, I'm going to sleep all night.

Somewhere nearby the children were playing, and from the distance came the singing of the soldiers and the words of the commander.

Finally, the long awaited evening came. At night I removed the uniform and the cap. Only in a military sweater and trousers, as a civilian, I went to the estate to look for Bolek's aunt. Bolek did not know the exact address. He himself remained behind.

I did not have to look for long. The first local passerby I asked, pointed to the aunt's apartment. I went to the room of a German woman. She pointed me to the next room. To reach the Aunt's apartment I had to cross the German women's room.

In the aunt's apartment I was received by her young cousin. The aunt was still at work. The cousin went out to look for her. Meanwhile, I was left home alone. I started from the kitchen, where potatoes were cooking. At the place I emptied half a pot - in split they disappeared in my stomach. I filled my stomach with bread and milk. I was almost fed up when aunt came in.

It was a little granny, wracked by work. She was about 55 years old. I asked if she knew Bolek Maciaszka. "Oh, Jesus, how do you know him? He's still alive ... Did he not die?"

I reassured her quickly. I told him he was alive and, unfortunately, he was here. As if lightning struck her... "Oh my sweet Jesus, where is he? ... What, you escaped from the camp? ..." I said yes. She just started to mourn ... "Give yourself up to the gendarmes ... give yourself up to the gendarmes. Maybe they will have some mercy ... Give yourself up to the gendarmes, " and on and on she went. I did not let her finish because there was a German woman outside the door and she may hear something. I asked firmly whether she wanted to see Bolek or not. She nodded, and she did not mention the gendarmerie. I told her to take something to eat and follow me.

She recognised Bolek at once. She began to lament again as before. "There are so many soldiers here, gendarmes. They'll shoot you ... they'll shoot. You will not get out of here. You better give yourself up to the gendarmes."

Bolek shut her up and said that she should stop saying rubbish. He took bread and coffee, fed himself a little and said goodbye to his aunt, and half-confidence we moved ahead, without direction. Just not stay stay on one place. We were heading north. We reached Zatom station. Bolek recalled this mate Spychal from the Neuengamme camp at the Messap Commander. Somewhere near Zatom his brother lived. We sat in the hall until 4:00, and then went down the path towards the village. Bolek went ahead, and I was lagging behind in thoughts about our fate. To join the partisans... But how to contact them? I was about thirty steps behind

when I heard: “Halt! Wohin gehen Sie?” Bolek replied something. The tall man staggered out of the darkness. He went to Bolek at the same time as I came. He saw our SS military uniforms, he began to talk politely. We said we were going to the front. We wanted to see Spychał. The man - as it turned out - returned from the night watch, walked on, and we went to Spychał. We went down to the courtyard; It was still dark. In the barn the woman dug the cows, and Spychał “turned” the horses. After a moment he came to us, we sat on a bench near the window of the house. We began to question him about the brother from the camp, until suddenly from all the sides came shouts: “Halt! Hände hoch!” In front of the group was the same German who met us on the road. He demanded documents and that we went with him to the gendarmerie. “You do not speak German very well - it is suspicious.”

Chapter 11

Fiancee

I did not hesitate. I jumped at this German and screamed with camp-language as hard as I could, using the words I learned from the captain in the worst moments of my life in the camp. "What! A soldier of the Third Reich is supposed to identify himself to civilians? Have you become complete idiots? You lay around like pigs, and we shed blood for you at the front! And now you and you dare to bother us? An SS soldier never had to identify to anyone. I will write on you to the Fuhrer himself. We will hang you like stray dogs! Heil Hitler!"

They immediately lowered their weapons that they had pointed at us and responded: "Heil Hitler."

We did not wait very long. Without a word, we left the village boundaries, into the fields and meadows, and then through the ditches to the forest. I do not know if Kusociński would be able to catch up with us at that moment. We jumped over deep ditches, of which at other times we would not dare to cross.

We often remember those moments with Bolek and Spychała, who later interrogated for a few weeks. Spychał did not know us at all. So he could not say much about us, so he was no longer persecuted.

We were in the woods for a long time. Often on the path we meet civilians riding on bicycles. They did not bother us.

We went down the hill next to Ryżyn. Last helpdesk, Bolek's fiancée. Apparently living in Ryżyn. From there she sent packages to the camp. At dusk we went to the village. It was hard to recognise anything. Many buildings and barns were demolished. This is Bolek's family place. Here he was born and raised. Unfortunately, he could not orientate himself well.

PAGE 17 This time I stayed put, and Bolek went to the fiancée's house. In a moment he is running back with frightening cries: "Run away!" We ran through the footbridge on the creek. We disappeared in the dark. What happened? He entered a house where, instead of finding a fiancée, he found "Wołyniak" (fighters?).

We peered through fences and windows to the buildings to meet at least one familiar face. Unfortunately, we encountered only unknown faces. Displaced Poles...

The last cottage of the village side, opposite the station to which we directed our steps, lived the father of the bride. Through the window Bolek recognised the faces of the Czes family. It was already late in the evening. An explosion of joy. One jump and Bolek rushed into the apartment. In a moment an older man went in that passed me without noticing me. After a few minutes, I too was called in.

We were in a Polish family. The door was closed, the windows shut and the dinner started. Our story would've been un-ended if not for the fact that we were wasted...

We slept without a break for two days and two nights. I did not hear how I was woken. I ate in a sleep, because I can not remember anything. On the evening of the third day, I dressed in Bolek's uniform again, because mine was worn to the seam and my shoes fell apart on the road. From this moment on I was wearing: striped camp underwear, striped clothes with a number and red triangular, and Bolek's uniform. At last I was warm. The witnesses: Bolek, fiancé and father-in-law said that I look like a real SS-er.

Bolek got civilian clothes from his father-in-law. He took the pistol, and me the case. I was satisfied with this. As a payment for the dividing I received 10 marks, for which I bought a ticket at the station Ryżyn to Wieluń. Bolek escorted me to the station. Here we said goodbye. From here each of us had carers, and I . . .

Chapter 12

Stations

Finally, the train arrived in the direction of Szamotuł. I was traveling alone. Without arms. I could only save myself by escape.

In Szamotuł I did not get out on the station. On the platform I was waiting for the train coming from Szczecin to Poznań. After an hour's delay, the train approached. Luckily I got to Poznań. In Poznań I had to get off. The train was not going any further. So easy to say: "got off". At the station it was full with gendarmes with metals. At any moment they could hold me and identify me. What would be the end of that - it is easy to predict.

At the exit towards the city, everyone was legitimated, and the military police escorts were on the side. To make matters worse, the train heading for Ostrów Wielkopolski had already departed, as my train had a delay of half an hour. The next train would be at 6:00, after 10 hours. Throughout our escape we avoided large stations, and here at this moment I was alone, accidentally, in the middle of danger. What to do?

I went down to the tunnel. Many people waited for the train. I read all announcements, timetables I did not have a clue about. The gendarmerie was constantly walking around. Only the metals on their chests were buzzing. I did not look into their direction at all. The metals announced they were close to me. I do not know why I was not ask for identification. Apparently they were scared of the skulls on the cap and collar. Or maybe I looked so fierce that I did not raise any suspicions.

An army transport arrived. I mingled up with them, and after their departure, I spent the rest of the night ready for surprises. Apparently I was thought not to die just yet. Nobody stopped me.

At 6:00, I got on the train departing towards Ostrów Wielkopolski. The stone fell from my heart. A soldier came to sit next to me. He asked something about something. I pretended I was napping. I was happy to get out of the worst of the worst. There was only one ticket control on the Poznań-Ostrów Wielkopolski route. I remembered the time three years ago. I put on travel, driven by the Gestapo. Here I heard lamentations of mothers, wives and children who were walking their loved ones to death. From here we drove to the concentration camp in Auschwitz . . .

After a few minutes of stopping, we continued in the direction of Kępno. More people were filling up the wagon. There was a German woman about thirty years old. She started to hook up to and ask me about things, and when I did not answer her, she called me tightwad. What was I supposed to do? I accepted this silence. Finally she calmed down.

At 9 o'clock we entered the Kępno station. Here I had to change to a train going in the direction of Wieluń. What I saw after leaving the train terrified me. The whole train surrounded by the gendarmes. Everyone was told to show documents at the exit. Special inspection.

It was a bright sunny day. An escape could have been unthinkable. The first effects of the control could quickly be seen. They beat the face of one, kicked another, others took to the side. Judgement Day. Not many people got up easily from the upper platform to the station. I was in the middle. I walked along the train, but they were

also checked. I waited for what was going to happen next. I became the last in the queue. I took a cover from a notebook that accidentally found in my pocket. I put the ticket on the cover. I was slowly moving all the way forward. The inspection lasted for an hour. The end was near - my turn was approaching. A granny had something in her backpack; was beaten up and taken to the side.

I approached and did not stop. Ticket on the cover of the notebook in the left hand, I saluted right and said: "Heil Hitler." He answered "Heil Hitler" and ... I went on.

I went to the station. Everything in me shaking. Sweat appeared on the forehead. There was a whistle, and the whole mass of the gendarmes moved to the front. There was a whistle and the masses of gendarmes were getting on at the station. They took the whole waiting room class 1 and 2. They had no place. The late-comers were walking in the corridor, glancing at me from time to time.

I bought a newspaper "Völkischer Beobachter". I read, or rather pretended to read, from beginning to end. Time was passing awry. Around 11 o'clock the train arrived. The first to get were the gendarmes. I slipped forward one wagon further. So I got to Wieluń at about 12 o'clock. Before the train even came to a halt, I jumped off. I gave the ticket to the station master. I was hiding in the closet because another hiding place was not available. The gendarmes drove on, supposedly for the pacification of the forests.

In the evening I left my hiding place. Slowly I went to the city, 3 km from the station. I did not know the Wielun. I was in prison for three years before I was taken to Auschwitz. I only knew that the Kwieciń family live at the Landbergerstrasse and have a butcher shop and that Lewandowska family, the seamstress, lives at Gaschinerstrasse 5. Other people in this town I did not know. There was no fear that anyone would recognise me either.

12.0.0.0.1 NOTE from translator

Wielun station was a kind of collection and transportation hub. People from different corners were sent by the Nazi's to Wielun and subsequently transported to their final destinations. In 1942/43, my grandfather (Bolek Jabłoński), grandmother (Józefa Jabłońska, sister of Stanisław Czernicki, and pregnant from my mother) and two of their sons, were taken prisoner from Brzeznicza and transported to Wielun. From there, they were sent to Doncourt-Cités (France) work camp.

Chapter 13

Hiding

And finally the city. Every now and then, some young Germans greeted me: “Heil Hitler.” I had to respond with similar greetings. I seemed to me that there were many Germans here. I arrived at Landsczy. I did not know Mrs. Kwiecinska, who was selling meat in the store. I went on to Gaschinerstrasse. It was an isolated small wooden house. I did not go, but I waited until it got dark. I walked along the street. As I learned later, it was a district of the Gestapo.

Finally I decided to enter. Without knocking and without removing the cap I found myself in the apartment. There was an old lady in the kitchen. Five dressmaker’s aids were sewing at the center table. One of them I knew. She was the one who brought me food in the jail. She did not recognise me.

I asked in German whether Mrs. Lewandowska lives here. I was affirmed and was sent to the other room. I was happy because I did not want to meet my girlfriend.

In the second room there was a measuring of fur for two grimy German women. I waited for quiet long enough for them to finish the measuring. The Germans were chattering. In the end I could not stand it anymore. The curfew was approaching. I called the Germans to hurry, because I still have something to do here, and the hour is late. They wanted to pass me as first, but I resolutely refused. They froze. They slammed the door and left.

Mrs. Lewandowska wanted to call “dolmeczke” - a translator. I answered in Polish. I introduced myself of who I am. She did not believe me. She did not know recognised me at all. I took off my cap. She sat down with amazement. She could not take me in for overnight. Quickly, before the curfew, she escorted me to the Kwieciński family. They accepted me in the other room, so that no one would notice. They did not know me. Daughters came from the city and they also did not know me. Just in case, I was told to take off my military uniform. For the time being they gave me civilian pants. After dinner I was given a room with an Armanean apprentice.

A human gets used to everything. I got used to the cold air. I could not sleep now in a hot room. The whole night was like having a fever. I could not sleep. At dawn I asked for some other place to sleep. Stefan led me over the stable in the yard. It was full of hay. I was very nice. Through the cracks at the top of the stables I got acquainted with the location of the neighbouring buildings. It was 1 November 1944.

On the second of November, at 9 o’clock Stefan entered the stable and shouted, “Gestapo!” He disappeared. I looked through the cracks. The courtyard was full with Gestapo. They were all armed, they turned the house up-side down. Well, this time - I thought - I will not squeeze myself out of trouble. Someone must have betrayed. Escape is impossible. For a long time the Gestapo guys were discussing something in the yard. Through the cracks I could not see anything. Eventually the group left the house. Mister and Misses Kwieciński were taken to the car. They drove off. There was silence. I was saved again.

An hour later, Kwieciński’s daughter, Henia, arrived. She took me to Kieszowski. Later Kieszowski told me that Henia was also arrested after having brought me to safety.

I was placed in the attic over the barn. There were strong winds blowing through. In the evening, Kieszkowski led me to the basement. Here I sat until November 7, until I was released by the older daughter Genia Kwiecińska. There was a document for a foreigner named Stanisław Starzał, and by the veterinary doctor Fronczak I was sent to work in Borsigwerk near Bytom. At an appointed signal, I went on the Wieluń - Częstochowa highway. Here a man came riding a motorcycle, supposedly a German, and took me to the next station behind Wielun, Pątnów. I was checked at the station in Wieluń. Pakosia, the fiancée of Kwieciński's son, took me to the family of Dr. Fronczak. But we did not find the doctor; I was forced to travel alone to my future job.

Later, I was told what the Kwieciński arrest was about. Stasiek, the son of Kwiecinski, passed through the policeman's field with his fiancé Pakosia. The gendarme came. A quarrel broke out at which Stasiek hit the gendarme. Stasiek escaped to Kraków and hid there until the end of the war. The Gendarme appealed to the Gestapo of Wieluń, and when nothing came out of the Kwiecinski case, they wrote to the Gestapo in Łódź. It was then that the Gestapo from Łódź arrived and arrested the Kwieciński family. They were released after some time. They were looking for a son from Kwieciński, and by chance, almost found me . . .

Chapter 14

Work

I arrived at the place of my future work safely. I applied to Kleinert. I handed to him the papers. I was accepted for work. It involved wearing and laying rail rails at the Borsigwerk station. I stayed in the barrack. There were about forty of us. The food, as in the camps, tasted great. I received a certificate as a railway worker. After work I was able to move freely. I went to Bytom. I wrote letters to the concentration camp in Neuengamme, to Zdzich Piwowarczyk from Radomsko and to his fiancée Kazi Wrzalikówny in Radomsko. I did put the return the address on the envelope.

Meanwhile, in my hometown, Brzeźnica nad Warta, on the border of the Reich with the General Government, they were notified about our escape. The gendarmerie called for help of the border guards and they were constantly looking for me. Vigilance on the border was reassigned. To my father's house, they did the most accurate revisions, including the removal of floors. In the presence of Morga, a resident of Brzeźnica, who served as an interpreter, houses were thoroughly inspected every few days for all the attics and cellars, and finally my parents were arrested.

It is unknown what would have happened if the sad accident hadn't determined their fate. Well, two fugitives, apparently in a similar situation to ours, drove the freight train. Before the station in Brzeźnica, serving as a borderline, they jumped out of the train. They had apparently noticed them, because all the border guards and gendarmes were on their feet and the border was crawling with guards.

The result was sad. The poor, unknown refugees did not expect anything. At dusk they came out of the hideout to cross the border. They went straight into the checkpoints. They received a series of machine guns. They died on the spot.

14.0.0.0.1 NOTE from translator

The identity of the two refugees will be impossible to elucidate. They might have been survivors of the uprising of Warszawa, which took place around that time.

My parents were taken out of prison to identify the bodies. It was already dark, as my father told me. In the light of the electric lights, the facial features seemed similar. According to the data one was bigger and the other, like me, smaller. Dirty from the mud, it was not easy to recognize.

At the sight of the dead, the parents fell into despair and recognized in one of the lying corpses as being me.

To the great joy of the Germans, and the despair of the parents, a photograph was taken which was then sent to the concentration camp in Neuengamme. The parents were released from prison and the dead were sent to the morgue.

As this, I was deleted from the German records of the living. After returning home and mourning my death, the parents began to think about the whole incident. At one point they recalled that I was wounded in the left leg and arm during the war in 1939. I had a scar on my left leg and on my left hand. The mother decided

to go to the corpse and identify the corpse of the dead. None of the corpses found scars. She was very happy. She returned home, not telling anyone about it, except my father.

The work in Borsigwerk was quite heavy. It would not be unusual for my work if it were not for the fact that I had to provide my place of birth and the last place of residence, which was Krumbach (Wielkopolska) under the Wieluń. From where many of my current colleagues came from. They started asking me where I lived, where I worked, etc. I was like a snake trying to crawl out of it. I could not get out of this, and little suspicion could decide my life. I did not even see this place, even didn't knew about it. Starzała, whose name I received, was certainly born there and lived there, but I did not even know where this Krzyworzeka place was.

During the winter we drove snow from the Borsigwerk and Bobrek railway tracks. That's how November and December passed by. For Christmas, I went to Wieluń to visit the Kwieciński. On the road there were tight controls on the trains. Many of my current colleagues are arrested. I returned safely I went back to wait for the liberation.

In Borsigwerk and the surrounding area, the controls were tightened. Documents were checked at every opportunity, even at the exit of the cinema. Our barracks were visited by the Gestapo more and more often. From time to time, colleagues were taken away at night.

I was constantly on the alert. I took charge of the snow at night, and in the day I slept a little, so as not to fall into the hands of the Gestapo.

Upon returning from Wielun, they began to check me out. My personal data was written the second time. More and more they got interested in me. I had to disappear. I managed to get Biskupic. There I got a job at a bakery at Czerneho (supposedly a Czech German). I replaced the baker who had gone to the army. In the bakery, working as a "professional" baking rolls of bread I survived until the entry of Soviet troops.

Chapter 15

Epilogue

The story ends abruptly. I asked my family what happened when he was ‘liberated’ by the soviet army? Did he go back to his home-village Brzeznicza? He did not go back immediately. This story was published during Polish communism so Stasiek needed to be careful what he wrote. Many Polish soldiers that fought on the side of the allied forces and returned to Poland were tortured and/or murdered by the Russians. Many such stories were told to me when I lived in Poland during the 80s. As my uncle also returned from ‘the west’, he had to go in hiding, again, until his story would be verified by different sources.