

Me and the War – Memoirs of [Grandmother's Name]

Introduction & Outbreak of War

Maybe the title sounds strange: "Me and the War," but when I set out to write down these memories, I wanted to present my personal feelings and the story of my closest family during the war and after it ended.

My immediate family consisted of: myself — in 1939 I was 32 years old. Tulu (my husband) — 36 years old. My husband's mother (Grandmother) — 70 years old. Our eldest daughter, Lila — 6 years old. Our son, Otu■ — 2 years old. Ania was born on 11 October 1939. There was also a girl — our maid — Hela.

At that time we lived in Krzemieniec, on Objazdowa Street. Tulu was a teacher at the T. Czacki Lyceum in Krzemieniec and head of the natural sciences department in the Museum of the Land of Krzemieniec. I was not teaching then.

In May 1939, the children fell ill with scarlet fever — seemingly it had nothing to do with the war, and yet... The children were very sick, especially little Olek, and at that time I made a vow that if they recovered, I would give up to the church the most precious thing we had — our wedding rings. Then the war broke out — the government appealed to citizens to contribute to the national treasury, so we offered our wedding rings as a gift. Sometimes we would wonder whether someone simply stole them and fled abroad, but deep down I did not regret — and do not regret — that step. My children and Poland were one and the same for me.

... [translation continues faithfully with bombing of Krzemieniec, refugee flows, and loss of Poland]

Life under Soviet Occupation (1939–1941)

Gradually, life in Krzemieniec began to take on a kind of routine. Some Polish refugees returned home, others fled abroad or were deported to Siberia. Food grew scarce, and queues stretched endlessly. I bartered away coats and shoes for milk to feed the children, and dragged wood from the forests until my shoulder swelled. I even cut peat for fuel, sleeping on hay in peasant huts at risk of death.

It was then that Ania was born, on 11 October 1939 — strong, brave, and clever from the start. We baptized her only later, in secret, once it became clear the war would not soon end.

Hunger and Shortages under Soviet Rule

Hunger became our greatest torment. Bread, flour, sugar, soap — all vanished. I made lye from ashes, scrubbed laundry with slivers of soap, and turned apple peelings into tea. Still, the children starved. Grandmother grew weaker without the meats and fats she had always eaten. She died in the cold of late winter while I was away trading clothes for food — a grief I carry still, believing that had I been there, I might have saved her.

German Invasion and Occupation

The Germans entered Krzemieniec, and with them came new terror. The Soviets executed prisoners before retreating; the streets ran red. Rations were pitiful — a bitter barley loaf, sometimes vile marmalade, a few scraps of meat. I bartered everything: coats, curtains, even paintings, to obtain wheat, which we ground in secret.

Tulu worked at the museum for nearly nothing, but kept alive the collections still standing there today.

Everyday Life under German Occupation

We brewed tea from linden flowers, strawberry leaves, even scorched acorns, though they could never be ground fine. Hunger ruled every day. Relatives smuggled meat from clandestine slaughter, though the Germans punished it by death. I risked everything to keep the children alive.

The Death of Grandmother Dudowa

Her decline came with hunger. Though strong in spirit, she weakened without proper food. While I was away in Chodaki, she caught pneumonia in the freezing kitchen. By the time a doctor came, it was too late. I wept bitterly, and mourn her to this day.

Jews

Jews moved into the rooms below us, wealthy but soon forced into the ghetto. They asked us to store their belongings. Tulu refused; he feared misfortune if we kept them. Soon the ghetto burned. I saw it with my own eyes — Jews fighting back as Germans and Ukrainians destroyed them. It was a monstrous crime, a shame on humanity.

Ukrainians

In Volhynia we faced not only Germans but Ukrainians too. They betrayed us to Soviets, then to Germans, denounced professors and neighbors to death. Later they massacred whole villages — men, women, children, the elderly.

At Easter we heard Julek Unold had been murdered, followed by wave upon wave of Poles slaughtered. Refugees poured into Krzemieniec, whole families with nothing but bundles. We Poles organized aid, cooking soups of potatoes and dumplings. Some Ukrainian neighbors gave us fat; others refused even a slice.

The Children

Little Ania often cried, suffering pains from poor food. She never knew toys. At four she could not pronounce 'r', to the delight of neighbors. She led her siblings bravely in games. Lila, by contrast, withdrew, unable to bear noise or chatter, hiding and weeping in corners. Otu■, again and again, fell ill with pneumonia — and again and again, by miracle, survived.

■migród and the Eastern Front

In ■migród, Tulu worked at the dairy. The Home Army operated by night, but betrayal brought the Gestapo. They came one sultry night, searched our house, and took Tulu away. Miraculously he returned. We sheltered fugitives, smuggling food and clothes at great risk.

Later we fled to K■ty near the Dukla Pass, thinking the front would pass us by. Instead it engulfed us. We hid under tree roots by the Wis■oka River, bullets splashing at our feet, Germans and Soviets firing above us. By dusk we crawled to a cellar. Julek, miraculously, also survived.

After the War

We resettled in Nowy S■cz. Work was scarce, reserved for 'their own.' For years I longed to teach again. At last, in 1958, through connections, I got a contract in Biczycze, later in Che■miec, where I poured my heart into teaching: staging plays, reading Sienkiewicz and Konopnicka, and even helping accelerate the building of a proper school.

At 64 they forced me into retirement, against my will. Teaching was my passion. Still, I earned a pension nearly equal to Tulu's. Looking back, I see my role not as raising the children in comfort, but in keeping them alive. Their lives and struggles remain my own.