Me and the War — Full English Translation (Part 1)

ME AND THE WAR

Perhaps the title sounds odd: “Me and the War,” but when I set about writing 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, Otuś — 2 years old.  
Ania was born on 11 October 1939.  
There was also a girl — a domestic helper — Hela.

We lived then 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 came down with scarlet fever — seemingly it had nothing to do with the war, and yet it did.  
They were very ill, especially little Olek, and I made a vow that if they recovered I would give the church  
the most precious thing we had: our wedding rings. Then the war broke out — the government appealed to citizens  
to support the national treasury, so we offered those rings as a gift. Many times we wondered whether someone  
had simply taken them and fled abroad (thousands were fleeing), but deep down I did not regret — and do not regret — that step.  
My children and Poland were one and the same for me.

I remember how we never left the radio, listening when the Germans seized Czechoslovakia,  
when the announcer said farewell to his listeners, when the Czechoslovak anthem was played for the last time.  
I cried then, realizing that the horror was drawing near to us too — to Poland.

On 1 September 1939 mobilization was announced. I will not give exact dates here, only the facts,  
the experiences that etched themselves into my memory like images on a lasting, precise plate.  
In the first days of September (or perhaps at the end of August) Tadzik’s mother (today he is my son‑in‑law),  
passing through on her way from Teremne for some medical treatment, came for advice about whether to continue  
or return home. I advised her to return, and she did.

Tulu received a double salary for two months, with which I bought some food: flour, sugar, fat, cocoa  
(with that cocoa I long enriched my little Ania’s meals). I put these stores into Grandmother’s big chest,  
added a fair amount of preserves and juices I had made that summer, and we waited for war — war in Krzemieniec,  
war in our own home. Events rolled down upon us like an avalanche; people flowed through our house and yard  
like in a kaleidoscope.

The yard was full of cars. Refugees from western and central Poland fled in crowds through Krzemieniec  
and Zaleszczyki into Romania. At night the road through the Dubno Gate (a suburb of Krzemieniec)  
looked like a shining snake — lights of vehicles, an unbroken stream. The sound of engines reached our flat.  
No one expected, on a beautiful sunny day (probably around 11 September 1939), that there would be a bombing.  
The refugees had dispersed to buy food — which was still plentiful in the market then (peasants had already heard  
that Soviet troops were approaching and suspected their farms would be collectivized, so they were selling off their goods).  
With that stream of refugees a girl about twelve years old ended up in Krzemieniec; she had no family at all.  
We took her in — her name was Janka.

That lovely morning, after consulting with Grandmother, we sent Janka to the market to buy plums for preserves.  
Tulu went to the police station to register the radio (to hand it in). And then the bombing began.  
German planes descended over the market packed with people and directly strafed the crowd with machine guns.  
At the same time the entire main street was bombed; even the cemetery was badly hit. Many people died.

The girl Janka leapt into the nearest entryway, where she sat petrified until evening. Tulu, in the abandoned police building,  
lay down under a window and returned unharmed. I was pregnant with Ania (she was born on 11 October 1939).  
I grabbed two‑year‑old Otuś in my arm, held Lila by the hand, and shouting for Grandmother I ran to hide  
in the so‑called “Virgin Rocks” (Skałki Dziewicze). There were many people there from nearby houses.  
Grandmother turned round and round in panic, ran back into the flat, and stayed at home.

When at last we all reunited safely — I with the children, and Tulu — we began to worry about Janka.  
Tulu went to the market, somehow found her, and brought her back. From that day on, alarm followed alarm.  
At first we sheltered in the cellar, but eventually we stopped reacting to sirens and sat at home;  
only little Lila, green with fear, spent whole days in the cellar and dragged us all down there with her.

At last the alarms ceased. People began saying that Soviet troops were approaching. The end of Poland — as the Ukrainians said,  
“Polska łopnęta” (Poland has burst). A new partition of Poland had taken place — divided between the Russians and the Germans.  
I cried terribly, but kept bustling around the house, cleaning, scrubbing, and weeping.  
One of the refugees, Marek — a miner — tried to comfort me, saying he was in a worse situation,  
cut off from his family already under the Germans, and that surely the world would not leave us abandoned.  
We learned that England had declared war as well. From the very first of September there were already predictions and rumors:  
in a month, in sixty days, in three months it will be over; that somewhere the Polish army was resisting the Germans…

LIFE UNDER SOVIET OCCUPATION (1939–1941)

Little by little, life in Krzemieniec began to take on a kind of routine.  
Some Polish refugees returned to their homes in the General Government;  
others — especially men — fled abroad, mostly to Romania.  
Some were deported to Siberia, and remnants of the Polish Army fell into Russian captivity.  
Still others were murdered immediately by Ukrainians.

One of those trying to cross the border was Witold Duda — Lolek.  
He visited us in Krzemieniec around 15 October 1939, said goodbye (before the war he had been postmaster in Stalowa Wola  
and a reserve lieutenant), and set out towards Zaleszczyki. At the border he was captured by the Soviets  
and deported to a penal camp in the Komi Republic. Only after a year did we receive from him a brief card from the camp  
saying he was alive — that was all we knew of him during the war. Later, after the war, we re‑established contact and learned  
how he survived. After that card, we put together a parcel — hardtack made with eggs and milk, garlic, linden blossom,  
and a little bacon — and with great difficulty managed to send it. I carried it as far as Smyga near Krzemieniec,  
because the Soviets kept changing the collection points. The package could weigh no more than two kilograms  
— they deliberately made it difficult. That package, he later told us, saved his life, because he was already starving to death.  
When the Sikorski–Stalin agreement was signed, Lolek joined Anders’ Army. Along the way he married Danka Musiałówna,  
who had also been deported to Siberia. He fought in Italy near Ancona, left the army after the war as a captain,  
stayed in England for a time, then emigrated to Bariloche in Argentina. He has a son, Andrzej (already married),  
and an adopted daughter. Now he would gladly return to Poland.

Meanwhile my own time was drawing near to give birth. The yard had emptied of refugees, the girl we had sheltered  
went back to her parents. On 9 October an unexpected snow fell. Fearing the vegetables would freeze in the garden,  
I dug them out from under the snow — heavy and wet — and carried them to the cellar; that may have hastened the birth.  
Around midnight I sent Tulu to fetch the midwife. Grandmother felt unwell, so I lit the fire in the stove,  
put on water, prepared the swaddling and shirts. Before the midwife had even washed her hands, little Anusia was born  
— a brave, clever girl, bold even to the point of risk. At first Grandmother was disappointed it was not a boy,  
but after a few days she became very fond of Anusia. I lay abed for only three days, and even then only briefly,  
for I had to bathe and change the baby myself — the midwife did not return, and Grandmother was afraid to handle the infant.

After Anusia’s birth, the weather turned beautiful. Just then Tulu’s brother Lotek came to visit.  
By then Tulu was teaching in two Ukrainian schools, as the Polish schools had been abolished.  
I was the “householder,” tasked with keeping the family alive — which was no small thing.

Food was desperately scarce. For everything one had to queue, and the queues were enormous,  
for many Jews had fled from the General Government to Krzemieniec. Sometimes I stood from midnight onward  
just to obtain 25 dekagrams of sugar, at most half a kilo — and often I returned empty‑handed.  
Occasionally I managed to get some very poor candies, and then there was a feast: even the adults could sweeten their tea.  
Bread, flour, salt — all were available only after endless waiting. Polish textile goods vanished like camphor —  
some had been bought out in September, the rest were confiscated by the Soviet authorities and dispersed.  
From time to time transports came from Russia, but the materials were worthless — flimsy printed cottons.  
I queued half a day for a few meters; Grandmother made pajamas for the children, and I sewed myself a dress.  
The pajamas fell apart after the first wash, and my dress looked like a rag after its first wearing.

Soap was unavailable. I made lye from ash, scrubbing the dirtiest parts of the laundry with tiny remnants of toilet soap.  
Sheets were worn on both sides. Tulu’s light‑colored shirts were a torment to wash — always by hand, in the tub.

Milk could only be obtained by barter. I gave away coats, shoes, curtains, because the children needed milk.  
Fuel disappeared too. From the beginning of the war until we fled Krzemieniec, we burned whatever I dragged from the forest  
or tore from nearby fences. I carried heavy branches home until my shoulder was swollen and sore.  
Once I even worked cutting peat near Sapanów — literally for bread and water. I slept on hay in a peasant’s house,  
but it was dangerous: peasants were already readying themselves to murder Poles. In the evenings my back was so bent  
I could not straighten it, and blood oozed from my fingertips. Still I endured a fortnight, bringing home precious cartloads  
of peat. That was a treasure, for winter was coming and I no longer had the strength to drag wood from the forest.

We constantly feared deportation to Siberia. At first the Soviets deported families of officers, policemen, foresters,  
officials, anyone “suspect” — and that included us, since Tulu’s brother Witold was already in a labor camp.  
All Poles were “suspect,” even refugees. In that fear I always kept dried bread and pasta on hand,  
and I nursed Ania until she was a year and a half, so she would be safe if we were deported.

We delayed her baptism for the same reason — we waited for the end of the war, hoping for a proper family celebration.  
But the war dragged on, and when Ania was a year and a half, she went with Grandmother and me to the church on foot.  
Our friends Mr. Werner and Balcia “held” her at the baptism, though in truth she stood herself in the sacristy,  
in a long cream gown sewn from my prewar ball dress. She already walked and talked well by then. Grandmother was proud  
to be her godmother, and Ania received the name Joanna, after my mother.