Me and the War — Full English Translation (Part 2)

ME AND THE WAR — FULL ENGLISH TRANSLATION (PART 2)

[Continuation from Part 1: after Ania’s baptism and the first months under Soviet occupation.]

After Anusia’s baptism the weather turned beautiful. Around that time Lotek—Tulu’s brother—came to see us.  
By then Polish schools had been abolished and Tulu taught in two Ukrainian schools. I ran the household, which  
in practice meant: keep everyone alive.

Food was desperately scarce. For everything one had to stand in a queue, and the queues were enormous—  
especially after many Jews fled from the General Government to Krzemieniec. Sometimes I stood from midnight  
just to obtain 25 dekagrams of sugar, at most half a kilo; often I returned empty‑handed. Now and then I managed  
to buy some miserable candies, and then it was a great feast: even the adults could sweeten their tea.  
Bread, flour, salt—everything required hours of waiting. Polish textiles vanished like camphor: in September  
people bought up what they could, and the rest the new authorities confiscated and redistributed.  
Occasionally transports arrived from Russia, but the cloth was worthless—thin printed cotton that came apart  
at once. I once queued half a day to get a few meters; Grandmother sewed pajamas for the children, and I stitched  
myself a dress. The pajamas fell to pieces after the first wash, and my dress looked like a rag after a single wearing.

Soap could not be had at all. I made lye from ash and scrubbed the dirtiest bits with tiny remnants of toilet soap.  
We turned sheets to wear both sides. Tulu’s light‑colored shirts were the worst—always washed by hand in a tub.  
Milk could be had only by barter. I gave away coats, shoes, curtains, because the children had to have milk.

Fuel disappeared as well. From the very beginning of the war until our ultimate flight from Krzemieniec  
we burned whatever I could drag from the forest or tear from nearby fences. I carried home branches  
until my left shoulder swelled and throbbed. Once I even worked cutting peat near Sapanów—literally for bread  
and water. I slept on straw in a peasant’s cottage, and even that was dangerous: the peasants were already  
preparing to murder Poles. In the evenings my back was so bent I could not straighten up, and blood oozed  
from my fingertips. I endured it a fortnight and brought home precious loads of peat. That was treasure,  
for winter was coming and I no longer had the strength to fetch wood from the forest.

We lived in constant fear of deportation to Siberia. At first they deported families of officers, policemen,  
foresters, officials—anyone “suspect,” which included us (Tulu’s brother Witold had already been sent  
to a labor camp). Every Pole was suspect, even the refugees. In that fear I always kept dried bread and pasta,  
and I nursed Ania until she was a year and a half so that, if we were deported, she would be safe.

We postponed 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. When Ania was a year and a half, Grandmother and I walked with her  
to the church. Our friends Mr. Werner and Balcia “stood up” for her, although the truth is she stood on her own  
in the sacristy, in a long cream gown which I had sewn out of my pre‑war ball dress. She already walked and spoke  
well by then. Grandmother was proud to be her godmother; Ania received the name Joanna, after my mother.

Hunger was the great burden that fell on me day after day. Grandmother suffered from it terribly.  
She had always liked meat and fat, and suddenly there was none; she weakened badly. Once Julek Unold  
(aunt Hela’s husband) came to Krzemieniec with a consignment of tobacco. He stopped in and persuaded me to go  
with him to Chodaki (40 km away), where I could bring back some food. I dug out what clothing I still had to trade  
and was just about to leave when Grandmother scolded me bitterly for leaving them alone. I tried to explain that I would  
come back with lard, flour, butter, but she stayed upset. I had already gone downstairs and was about to climb  
onto the cart when “something struck me.” I turned back and said a warm farewell to Grandmother.  
To this day I regret that journey—for if I had stayed, perhaps she would have lived longer.

In Chodaki I traded clothes mostly for fat. Every day I went to the hand‑mill to grind wheat, because Julek told me  
that whatever I managed to grind I could take home to Krzemieniec. I went with Hela (she was pregnant with Alek then),  
for they too were grinding for themselves. I was terribly impatient, but our neighbor—who also had a tobacco  
consignment—kept delaying departure; the Germans were not allowing people to leave Chodaki.  
Only after about ten days did I finally set out, but on the way, in Szumsko, I received a telegram:  
Grandmother was dead.

It was late winter. The flat was cold. To reach the kitchen one had to pass through the hall, and the kitchen itself  
was perched above the stairwell. Grandmother had been warming herself by the stove in the room, but went to the kitchen  
to cook something for the children. She must have caught pneumonia. By the time Tulu realized and called the doctor,  
it was too late. If I had been there perhaps she would not have been chilled, or I would have applied cupping glasses  
at once and she might have been saved. I cried terribly—and to this day I grieve for her.

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One day Tulu came back from a conference and said that “something was afoot”—the Russian inspector had been calming  
the teachers and advised them to go for a walk up Bona’s Hill (where the ruins of Queen Bona’s castle still stand  
and one can see Krzemieniec and the surrounding area). The next day there was a stir in town.  
There was nothing to eat in the house. I took Ania in my arms and stood in the bread line on Szeroka Street.  
Suddenly there was shooting. Two Germans appeared on motorcycles.

By chance Tulu had stepped out of the house; he found me, snatched Ania in his arms, and we ran together.  
We jumped down into the stream behind the houses. The streets emptied in an instant.  
We waded up the watercourse, crossed Szeroka, darted into our lane, and reached home—but without bread.  
From that moment on, bread was constantly lacking, and hunger settled in for good.

One enemy had fled—another had seized us. Just before the Germans entered, the Soviets murdered all the prisoners.  
People came back from the prison in tears; some recognized among the brutally slaughtered their own relatives  
and acquaintances.

Under the Germans Tulu worked at the Museum—an institution they pretended to tolerate while doing their best  
to destroy it. They issued absurd orders, such as vacating the premises within a single day.  
The staff hunted desperately for another building and carried the collections on their own backs.  
I remember that Tulu earned so little that his entire month’s pay could buy no more than a kilogram of butter  
on the black market. It was sacrificial work, but the museum survived—and it stands to this day, with Tulu’s insect  
cases and huge botanical collections.

Food rations were not enough to nourish even one person, and we had three children and three adults.  
Once a week I brought home three‑quarters of a barley loaf. We ate it at once (on the second day it turned bitter  
and crumbled like sawdust). Sometimes there was a smear of vile marmalade, once in a while a few dekagrams of meat.  
I exchanged everything in the house for food: coats, curtains, leather briefcases (people made shoes from them),  
even paintings. For Grandmother’s black coat with a sealskin collar I received nearly a meter of wheat.  
That was a treasure. We ground that golden grain on secret hand‑mills, hidden from the Germans.

At times relatives from the countryside helped: Julek brought cabbage and a little groats. These trips were dangerous,  
for Ukrainians were already preparing attacks on Poles. Once Tulu traded his winter coat to a peasant in exchange  
for a goose and a bit of honey—the feast lasted us several days. Unolds—Jan from Szumsko or Apolinary from Chodaki—  
would occasionally bring meat from clandestine slaughter. I distributed it among friends, though it was a dangerous affair;  
the Germans punished such things even with death. For ourselves I kept only scraps—and paid for those as well.  
The truth is that we need not have gone hungry had we lived in the countryside like they did.  
But as the saying goes, “the full do not believe the hungry.” They too perished in the end.

For drinks we brewed tea from scorched apple peelings, from linden blossom, or from strawberry leaves  
(perhaps the strawberry‑leaf tea was best). I even tried roasting halved acorns to make coffee,  
but it was hopeless—I could not grind them fine, nor even crush them properly in a mortar.

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We ended up living on the upper floor in a small flat; after the Germans entered, Jews moved into the rooms below.  
It was a very wealthy, childless family. They wanted to store some of their things with us. Tulu absolutely refused.  
Once, when we had both gone out, they pleaded with Grandmother and more or less forced their way in  
with suitcases and those soft, beautiful blankets. When I came back I scolded Grandmother.  
Tulu returned and ordered me to take everything back at once. He was convinced that keeping—or worse, using—  
the property of Jews so cruelly persecuted would bring misfortune upon us as well. Perhaps he was right.  
I returned the things—and I do not regret it.

The Jews were driven into the ghetto—surely they perished. It was a monstrous, terrible disgrace for the Germans,  
and for the Ukrainians who with all their hearts helped in persecuting and liquidating the Jews.  
I remember how the ghetto burned, how shooting broke out because the Jews defended themselves.  
I wandered about like a madwoman; my head ached endlessly. And still, one had to live, to get by.  
I collected a whole sack of old shoes, so that we could salvage two or three usable pairs.

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In the General Government it was Germans against Poles; here in Volhynia there was another dreadful enemy as well:  
the Ukrainians. We were a minority. The Ukrainians kept pace with the Germans. It was they who handed us over,  
first to the Bolsheviks and later to the Germans. They betrayed truly valuable people to death—  
Professor Opolski, Professor Mączak, Sawojcówna, Torgoński, Szynajowiecz, and many, many others.  
The same surely awaited us—above all Tulu—had the Eastern Front not begun to move toward us, forcing us to flee.  
(Professor Mączak was the founder of the Museum; Dr. Opolski wrote a treatise on Hitlerism just before the war.)

When Ania had severe stomach pains and cried at times it was no wonder—there were days when we had nothing but rye flour  
(perhaps that is why I never liked rye bread). I took her in my arms and went to the Gebietskommissar to ask for semolina.  
I waited nearly two hours to be admitted. I presented my request to the Ukrainian interpreter; they muttered among themselves  
and did not give me even 25 dekagrams of semolina. From the very start of the war the Ukrainians betrayed us and denounced us  
to the Bolsheviks—we would never have been deported to Siberia in such numbers, never imprisoned or shot, if not for them.  
As soon as the war began they contacted the Germans by radio, murdered people coming in from western Poland, and so on.

Then came the worst news of all: at Easter, word arrived from Chodaki that Julek Unold had been murdered.  
Denunciations of Poles, arrests by the Germans, and executions—this lasted the entire time. Later the Ukrainians themselves  
began to murder Poles: at first individuals, then entire villages and settlements. After Julek, others followed—  
familiar names, neighbors—and then an avalanche: whole families with children and old people, whole villages wiped out.  
Poles defended themselves, fled to larger clusters, organized resistance. Many from the surrounding villages poured  
into Krzemieniec, entire columns of refugees moving under German guard toward the town. Day after day I went out to the  
Wiśniowiecka Gate and waited in tears for Hela with the children. I saw those poor people—some on carts, others on foot  
with bundles and babies. They slept on planks in the lycée church and then dispersed among Polish homes.  
Even from the Germans danger awaited them—deportation to forced labor in Germany.

We inhabitants of Krzemieniec did what we could. I, together with Mrs. Doroszukiewa, cooked soup by the bucketful  
several times; we pooled what we had. Most often they were potato soups with dumplings, with a little fat.  
I went to Ukrainian neighbors and demanded fat outright. Some gave—like the Skibiniecki family; others,  
like the spiteful Ukrainian woman Turkowa, would not give so much as a slice.

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The children… Little Ania often cried up to a year and a half—she must have had stomach pains. No wonder,  
considering our diet. She had no toys. When she was three or four I told her how, before the war,  
Otuś and Lila used to throw bananas and oranges under the bed—and Ania asked what such fruit looked and tasted like.  
I remember once when I managed to get sifted flour and made dumplings; Ania refused to eat them, saying she did not want  
such sticky dumplings.

In Żmigród near Jasło she was about four. Although she was exceptionally clever, she could not pronounce “r.”  
Mr. Kahl from the dairy was delighted and paid her for reciting a little verse with that childish lisp.  
I tried to send her to the nuns who ran a sort of kindergarten. I gave her a bottle of milk and a slice of bread  
with butter, but she would not play with the other children and soon stopped going. The children played best together  
in a foursome: Ania, Otuś, Bogna, and Kazek Unold (I had taken him in from Hela, who at the time was teaching near Borzęcin).  
Lila did not join. Sometimes the children romped wildly and Ania led them—she was always the bravest.  
Once Mrs. Kruczkowska (who had also fled from Krzemieniec and lived near Jasło) came to visit.  
Nusia, she, and I talked without end. The younger children played, but Lila disappeared. After a while I found her  
behind a curtain in the corner—we used the niche as a wardrobe—sitting hunched and crying… She could not bear  
the bustle and loud conversation. Our children were rather peculiar. I must return to Otuś—again he fell ill  
with pneumonia, and as always, he survived.

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Żmigród and the Eastern Front. The Home Army was strong there—almost the entire intelligentsia belonged.  
By day they worked, by night they went on missions. A betrayal exposed them and the Gestapo launched a raid.  
One sultry night we slept with the window open. Suddenly I heard, “Das Fenster zumachen, aber schnell!”  
(“Close the window, quickly!”). They burst in, searched the house, and took Tulu away to Brożyn’s.  
I stayed alone with the children and the little Halinka Brożynówna. The Germans said they would kill her mother  
if her father did not report by morning. That night they ordered me to leave the light on and burst into the house  
over and over, accompanied by an “actress” billeted nearby. Halinka’s cradle was fixed to the floor;  
I had to sit beside her and rock her. After a time I heard Brożyna’s voice from the hiding place in the kitchen floor:  
he asked me to pass him clothes, for he was in only a shirt. His suit lay in the kitchen, but I handed him another  
from the wardrobe. Toward morning Tulu returned—what a relief! When the guard finally moved off, I slipped Brożyna  
breakfast and a few cigarettes under the table and he escaped through the gardens to the forest.  
His wife and the other women sent as hostages to the front kitchens later came home as well.

Later we did the worst thing with Nusia. As the front drew near and houses shook from the explosions,  
we took our most precious things, the ailing Julek and the children, and went to Kąty, nearer the Dukla Pass,  
right on the Wisłoka, hoping the front would pass us by. It was the opposite.  
We arrived on a beautiful September day. Sun, fruit on the trees. We set up our “camp” in a new house belonging  
to the farmer Wokurka at the foot of the hill. Nusia took us there and returned to Żmigród to save what could be saved.  
Suddenly the front enveloped Kąty. We spread rugs on the floor and lay flat upon them: the sick Julek,  
his six‑year‑old Bogna, Tulu, I, Lila, Otuś, and Ania. Our hosts fled to the forest. The house shook from explosions;  
plaster fell from the ceiling and covered us in white dust. Out of nowhere the first Soviet soldier burst in,  
opened a window, set up a machine gun in it, and fired. I begged him to leave—there were small children  
and a gravely ill man. He advised us to get out, but how? Julek walked on crutches; the children were small,  
and outside the bullets whistled like hail. Where could we go? The forest was too far; the dugouts we did not know  
how to find. With aching hearts we left Julek (on his urgent request). The children put on their coats;  
we grabbed only a suitcase with documents and, literally between bullets, crept and ran, trying to reach a dugout.  
No one would take us in. Under the eave of one, a peasant magnanimously advised us to hide by the uprooted trees  
along the Wisłoka. We slid down the steep bank and pressed ourselves into a hollow under the exposed roots.  
Above us the Bolsheviks; on the far bank the Germans. A firefight. Bullets splashed at our very feet as they hit the water.  
At one point a German soldier stepped from behind the remains of a house across the river, rifle raised to fire.  
I went numb—he was aiming in our direction. Perhaps he realized we were civilians with children; we were spared.  
We stayed under that uprooted tree almost until dusk. In the meantime Tulu twice “visited” Julek.  
Though the windows had been blown out, Julek survived. Toward evening we reached the cellar of acquaintances.

[End of Part 2]