Me and the War — Full English Translation (Part 3)

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[Continuation from Part 2.]

After the fire and thunder of the front, there were still years of wandering, hunger, and fear. Later—after the war—  
we had to begin life anew.

FLOODS ON THE DUNAJEC; LIFE IN NOWY SĄCZ

The boys used to ride down the street in a bathtub and a wash‑tub. When the water receded, tons of silt had to be carried  
out of the cellars. With us, it still was not the worst of it. From the railway line I saw houses on the Dunajec flooded  
by the roaring, muddy water up to the very roofs. Soldiers ferried people away on pontoon boats. They waited to return  
to their homes in the commune whose building stood on the main road (now there are private flats there). A whole Lup family  
installed themselves with us. When it poured for several days in a row, that was already an alarm. One carried up from  
downstairs a reserve of coal, brought all the firewood upstairs. One hauled up from the well water for drinking, bought bread  
and sugar, potatoes, and waited for the flood. We would go out in our raincoats to look how the water in the Dunajec  
was rising. At home it was damp and “atmospheric.” Iwonka was terribly afraid and the whole night kept asking how many  
centimeters the water had gone down; it was exactly the opposite—there was more and more water. Here there is no flood,  
but there is almost every day a flood of smoke.

PEOPLE OF SĄCZ

There is a saying that in olden times when the Sącz folk turned to the people of Stary Sącz (a little town 7 km away)  
to borrow their gallows, they refused, saying they needed it for themselves and their children. Such, in general, is the  
mentality of the local people. Right after the war I went to the inspectorate to ask for work in Nowy Sącz. They refused me  
and sent me to the countryside. Tulu taught at the lycée, the children went to the lycée, there was no transport,  
the roads were terrible. To live in a village with the younger children and run two households?! I had to give up,  
and we had to live on Tulu’s single meager salary. In Sącz, only “their own” were employed. Tulu, too, would probably not  
have got a position, had he not already begun in January 1946, when there was a shortage of people with higher education.

Only through heavy “pull” (our neighbor Janas was an inspector) did I, in ’58, get a job in Biczyce—on contract.  
Buses already ran; besides, whenever I could I rode a bicycle. My zeal knew no bounds; I had yearned for this work  
for years. I also studied on my own, for during the years of “unemployment” I had forgotten many things through sheer  
drudgery. In Biczyce I organized plays and excursions, I had good results, and perhaps that helped me to get a position  
in Chełmiec—this time a permanent post. In Chełmiec it was hard labor! Every year I painted benches, doors, windows,  
set up little gardens, bought teaching aids with my own money—especially for history. I staged performances  
(for one of them the decorations and costume designs were made by Lila, who happened to be visiting from England then).  
The performance even found its way into the press. During the performance—really an “arrangement” of M. Konopnicka’s poetry—  
the old people cried, even the teachers. I read to the children, “from cover to cover,” Pan Tadeusz and Sienkiewicz.  
Finally, I set about building a school. There would have had to be a school there sooner or later, but my persistent  
efforts sped up the construction by a good few years. The conditions there were dreadful. Children were crammed into a former  
Austrian C.K. building at a road junction. When cars passed, the ceilings shook—until one day there was a failure,  
and a total collapse of one ceiling threatened. They cut off the large classrooms on the upper floor and two on the ground floor.

I argued with the County National Council, I was the instigator. Party people “flew in” and in the end gave us the keys  
to an old three‑room granary. One classroom had only one window. The children’s eyesight was failing. I took photographs  
of those “premises” and, after describing the conditions faithfully (the meeting with the authorities was in the evening  
at the Fire Station, so no one would have bothered to come to the school), I backed up my words with those photographs,  
which I handed to the authorities. It is a pity I did not keep copies as a memento. After that meeting a School Building  
Committee was formed, and I myself put forward my candidacy as secretary. The whole family helped me to compose various  
letters and petitions. Otuś helped me a great deal—because, as a planning‑department officer, he knew the spatial‑development  
plans for Chełmiec, and so on. There were many opponents of building a new school; intrigues and obstacles of such number  
that they could not be written even on an oxhide. But at last the building was approved, and in that same year the foundations  
were laid. Within a year a fine twelve‑class school was built. Yet such disgust for those people came over me that I transferred  
to Nowy Sącz. I got work at Primary School No. 13—“Ćwiczeń.” It was a promotion, but also an enormous amount of work  
and very difficult space conditions.

RETIREMENT AND REFLECTIONS

Since I am already on this subject, let me add my transition to retirement. It was not, despite my being 64, voluntary.  
They pushed me out by force, though I felt well and the teaching profession was the passion of my life. Foreseeing dismissal,  
I submitted an application to the inspectorate and the board of education asking to keep me in employment. It did no good.  
I began to copy my appeal here and gave up. Nothing doing! They dismissed me—end of story, period. One more word on this.  
When I defended myself like a lion against going into retirement, one of the teachers said to me,  
“It’s hard—old age comes and one must go. For railwaymen, as soon as they turn sixty, they must go without exception.”  
I was outraged at such a comparison and said that when a writer turns sixty—is he forbidden to write? When a poet turns sixty—  
is he forbidden to compose? When a painter turns sixty—is he forbidden to paint?

At least I won this much: though my period of service was relatively short—only twenty‑one years—I received a pension  
not much lower than Tulu’s. Tulu had 2,420 złoty—I had 2,379 złoty. Perhaps I will still manage now to devote time not so much  
to the children as at least to the grandchildren! Children and I! Lila was six years old, Otuś barely two when the war began.  
Ania was born at the start of the war, Iwonka a short time after the war, and my whole effort was directed not so much  
to upbringing as to keeping the children alive. By the time the situation began to improve, the children had, in principle,  
already grown up and began, one after another, to leave home. I had no opportunity to raise them in an organized, considered way.  
Besides, the children seemed to me like a part of myself, simply my entirety, and I often caught myself as if they had been  
with me from my earliest years, that they felt and thought as I did.

My father wrote into my little album—my “remembrance book”—for example: “Who rises early, to him God gives good,”  
“By truthfulness you will pass through the world,” “Love of country and honor are the highest goods,” and the like.  
I read Rodziewiczówna, Kraszewski, Sienkiewicz, Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Konopnicka. The ideals of those writers  
became my ideals. I was foolish and am foolish—though what they call an honest sort. I have written down many things  
that happened already after the war—but those too are the consequences of the war.

I would still like to write much about the children, about their youth, about their studies, and about their lives  
as adults. One thing cannot be changed: their cares, their life, constantly arouse anxiety in me; often they drive sleep  
from my eyes.