

Chapter VII

The POW Camp – “Zeithain”, Germany

*“on the freeway
there are no traces of old roads
why am I stumbling
sinking into eternal routes
covered with sand
tread in asphalt
are they projected in me
reflected in a pillar of air above
my head?”*

October 2, 1944. Following 63 days of waging battle for every inch of every street the uprising collapsed and Warsaw surrendered. Within the ruins of the city lay the bodies of 200,000 casualties whose sacrifice now seemed in vain.

The history of Europe and many future generations will recall Himmler’s barbarous order of September 21, 1944, “Warsaw, the capital, the head, the ‘intelligentsia’ of the Polish nation, which has been blocking our march eastward for 700 years, will be annihilated, stomped into the earth, and then the Polish problem of our children and those who will come after us will no longer be a predicament in history. My order to completely destroy Warsaw is under execution. Himmler later reiterated this order during an SS officers’ conference, where he stated: “The city must completely disappear from the surface of the earth and serve only as a transportation hub for the Wehrmacht. Not one stone shall remain standing. Every building must be leveled to its foundation.”

On October 4, in the last issue of the Polish Resistance Information Bulletin No. 310, “*Hubert*” [Aleksander Kaminski] wrote the following words, “The defeat, the extent of which we do not wish to diminish, is a defeat of one city, of one stage of our fight for freedom. Out of spilled blood, out of our joint work and toil, out of the torment of our souls and bodies, a new Poland will arise; free, powerful, and great. We shall live by this faith in forced exile and in camps just as we did while we worked and fought. This is the most vivid faith, the highest testament written with the blood of thousands of victims and heroes of the uprising.”

I was standing on “*Mokotowska*” Street looking towards the Square of Three Crosses, at the ocean of ruins, at the destroyed walls of St. Alexander church, at hundreds of graves and crosses where sidewalks used to be...had we been right to bring this destruction on ourselves?

Have we gone too far?

A man carrying a suitcase stopped nearby speaking to himself?... or to the world?. “Our lives have collapsed just like these houses...” Starting a hand gesture and not finishing, he walked away.

I leaned against the rubble of a fallen wall and closed my eyes without the strength to continue looking.

Where am I to go? What am I supposed to do with myself? My mother dead, my home destroyed. Here we are, defeated people who had precipitated our City’s death. Now what? All day long I wandered through the ruins, passing crowds of people burdened by loads of their bundled possessions.

I remember it so vividly even now.

In the middle of a square full of graves, a wary, pale, visibly sick woman asked me for directions to a hospital. I took her by the arm and we went searching together. Somewhere, probably on “*Bracka*” street, we came across a partially burned medical post. A doctor, pale as a ghost, was dressing a patient’s wounds by the window; he looked at us and without a word pointed to a few empty bunk beds in the hallway. Leaving the sick woman with a nurse on my way out, I observed many rooms with darkened soot-covered walls. The patients were lying motionless as if in a coma. The fear was visible deep within their eyes; what was to happen to them? These were the people who needed help the most.

I had already decided that I would accompany the wounded wherever the Germans would transport them. I returned to the Bulletin headquarters, and during a short conversation with my superior “*Hubert*” ,I formally requested my reassignment to the medical service. With peculiar stubbornness, we all continued to abide by the military code of conduct, as if by doing so we would keep the Home Army alive. “*Hubert*” looked at me in his particularly penetrating way and asked no questions... he understood my decision.

Next day I received a handwritten document from Headquarters signed by “*Borodziej*” [Aleksander Gejsztor] with my reassignment orders to the Medical Service.

The “*Information Bulletin*” editorial staff was about to disperse as a majority had decided to leave under civilian status for the camp in “*Pruszków*” (see footnote).

At the German designated exit point by the Polytechnic Institute building we had a farewell moment: standing there a group of pale, exhausted people dressed in plain, shabby clothes saying our short uneasy goodbye. Suddenly we felt as strangers with each other as our shared duties came to an end. We were all about to return to our individual shattered lives. None of us knew where and how to find our families, maybe they were not to be found alive.

All alone, I began my search for the hospital somewhere on “*Poznańska*” street where I knew my Aunt Maria Załęska had been working since the beginning of the uprising. I found her there, haggard beyond recognition, with her beautiful eyes looking at me sorrowfully, she had remained the same. I shared with her the news of our family, killed by a bomb in the “*Odyniec*” Street apartment. She also had had no news of her two daughters Halusia and Janka, who had fought in the “*Mokotów Baszta*” division, nor did she know of her sister’s Jula Szawłowska fate since they had been separated on the first day of the uprising.

She was overjoyed to hear I was to stay with her in the hospital as a nurse. We began to assist the wounded and to both my surprise and dismay, found my friend from “*Kuźnica*” “*Maryna*”, Hania Hryniewiecka, a co-worker from B.I.P. (footnote). She was a patient, with serious spine injuries and in dire need of treatment.

The head nurse of the hospital assigned me to the patrol teams that were to search for the sick and wounded among the dilapidated structures. A tricky task, as the streets had turned into ravines. We walked on loose bricks amid the rubble, the lifeless city reeking of decomposing bodies and smoldering ruins. This hellish landscape revealed fewer and fewer survivors as the Germans systematically destroyed the city remnants with dynamite. We did our best to detect the groans of the wounded during the silence between explosions, and when we could find someone, we would carry them on stretchers to the hospital, their painful moans merging with the deafening explosions. We were silent, exchanging only the most basic comments. Neither we, nor the wounded, had the strength or the need for questions or answers... this became one of my most vivid memories in life.

With the capitulation agreement, the Germans committed, according to international conventions, to recognize the “*Home Army*” fighters as regular enemy soldiers, accepting the responsibility for transporting them as well as their wounded and the sick into POW camps. Thus no longer we were considered just “*bandits*.”

Days went by as we awaited evacuation. From time to time the German patrols passed nearby, walking quickly, averting their sight when approaching. What were they thinking... were they ashamed?

Some of our soldiers, only slightly wounded, looted the nearby ruins collecting strange treasures for themselves and for others. One of them gave me a few broken gold rings and another, two packets of fancy leather gloves along with a lovely deep blue curtain made of thick velvet fabric. Later, the curtain became my blanket during captivity, the gold rings would help me survive in Paris, and the gloves were exchanged for a bag of buckwheat in the POW camp, for sure to become elegant gifts for some German sweetheart.

Military trucks pulled up to the hospital on October 11. Finally the wounded patients could be moved. We took everything we thought might be useful in the camp: operating room equipment, rolls of sheets, medications, bags of cotton wool, bandages, sewing machines, buckets, soap, basins, brooms, candles and even dirty sheets, anything that could be useful... all became priceless later in the camp, as we received no supplies at all from the Germans!

Overloaded trucks began to evacuate the hospital, each truck returning again and again. All patients went first, followed by the doctors and other medical staff.

Aunt Misia, Hania and I left in one of the last convoys, staring at the ghastly, empty city where hardly anyone remained. On the Western Train Station a long line of freight cars was waiting for us. Armed soldiers merciless shoved us into the cars, stuffing us against each other. Utterly exhausted, we squeezed ourselves in between parcels, baskets and backpacks.

It became dark! Light reflected from a blazing building illuminated us through a single narrow rectangular window high above our heads. The German soldiers closed the heavy doors and the train began moving slowly. I slid carefully towards the door and somehow managed to lie down. Surprisingly the door wasn't fully closed and fresh cold air came in through a wide gap. The train's wheels rhythmic knocking sound induced sleep, which freed us from our relentless thoughts: Where are they taking us? What will they do to us? We had good reason to doubt the Germans' promise to locate us into POW camps. We dreaded the concentration camp.

Suddenly the steady rhythm of the wheels changed and we awoke. The train was slowing down. It was still night and peering through the gap I realized we were approaching a small station. The name "*Koluszki*" was visible in dim light, a town not far from "*Piotrków*", an area I knew well. The "*Dziewuliny*" estate now taken over by the Germans wasn't far from here and nearby my cousin Władek Szadkowski had been appointed by the Germans to manage the "*Rękoraj*" estate. It was also nearby in "*Sulejów*" that my brother Zdzislaw was supposed to have spent his honeymoon. There was a place to go; all I had to do was to jump out into the darkness...the train wasn't going very fast, and the door opening could easily be made wider ... Instinct urged me to flee. Rising to my feet to say a goodbye to my aunt I suddenly became very dizzy, falling back again onto the sleeping shadows. In spite of the protesting shouts I remained motionless, over someone's outstretched legs. The thoughts of fleeing and abandoning the wounded began tormenting my mind ... I didn't try to get up again!

Next morning, the train pulled into "*Łódź*" freight terminal to join another coming from Warsaw, also loaded with sick and wounded survivors. The German soldiers slid our wagon doors wide open, but wouldn't let us out. The news of the Warsaw evacuation had reached the people and crowds stood along the tracks beyond the wire fence waiting for our arrival... as they couldn't get close to us; they tossed packages of food and cigarettes through any visible opening. This was a chance to communicate; I threw at

them a snugly folded small sheet of paper from my sketchbook carrying a message for my brother:

“Mom, Grandma, and Mary are dead, so is Baja. The house was bombarded. I am well. We don’t know where they are taking us - Zula.”

Later, I learned that this piece of paper, having no address, only my brother’s name and the town “*Sulejów*” written on it, reached him within few days...everyone was anxious to help the Warsaw survivors.

The same morning, our freight cars were hooked up to a larger train and we began moving. Through the gap in the door we were able to make out the names of all stations along the way, and realized we were traveling south. “*Auschwitz*” could still be our destination. Later, however, upon passing “*Częstochowa*”, the train turned west. Thank God, they were taking us to Germany after all!

During one of the stops, a German soldier demanded that I surrender him my boots. These were elegant officer’s boots Staszek Tomaszewski had given me prior to the journey. They were a priceless treasure. I protested loudly out of desperation and much to my astonishment a German officer came to the rescue ... “*Weg!*”...the order was sharp and brief, bluntly directed at the soldier ... and the matter was settled. I retreated from their sight, shielded by companions.

These beautiful new boots had belonged to Staszek’s teenage brother and had been his great pride as he dreamed of becoming a soldier. Staszek himself dug them up from the rubble where his young brother and mother died. They were my special farewell gift from him.

I recalled the moment. No longer a soldier, he was leaving Warsaw in search of his wife and baby. We were saying goodbye to each other at the “*Bulletin headquarters*”. We stood and hugged grasping our treasures, him with a wrapped bundle stinking from the underground sewers, and I... with the beautiful officer’s boots. Little did we know these boots would take me to the other side of the globe, and that we would not see each other again for more than twenty years.

A few days later, early in the afternoon on October 14, if I remember correctly, our train veered onto a siding leading into a POW camp briefly entitled: “*Kriegesfangenenreservelazarett Stalag IV B, Zeithain*”.

“*Zeithain*”, was a POW camp in “*Saxony*”, near “*Dresden*”, and was initially built during World War I; it had been enlarged during World War II to hold over 30,000 prisoners the sick and the injured who might recover. It also served as a hospital for the “*Offlag*” (officer’s prison camp) located in “*Mühlberg*” some 10 miles away. Right next to our camp was a huge polygon military training ground and an underground cache of ammunition, produced in a factory located in the neighboring town of “*Riese*”. Close to the training ground, there was a German military hospital and immediately adjacent were

ammunition warehouses, all bearing the Red Cross sign on their roofs. A branching railway track connected “*Zeithain*”, to a small station in the town of “*Jakobstahl*”. We only learned of these details much later, when “liberated” by the Soviet army in April of 1945.

All we knew of the campgrounds when we arrived was our section of the “hospital”. The barracks stood on a loamy rectangle, marked by deep air-raid trenches and the camp was surrounded on all sides by barbed wire. Our area consisted of approximately 20 structures: 11 for the sick, 1 designated as the “operating room”, 2 for doctors and their families, 1 for professional nurses, and 2 more for auxiliary nurses and related medical staff. There was also a separate building for pregnant women, a warehouse barracks, and a common building that converted into a chapel on Sundays.

The so called “hospital” was a compound of, low wooden barracks on a flat barren area. Beyond the surrounding barbed wire one could see more of these sad structures. The inhabitants stood motionless along fences watching the unusual commotion of our arrival.

On the southern side, beyond the tall barbed-wire fence and a wide stretch of earth, there was another camp treating sick Italian POW soldiers, who had been imprisoned for rebelling against the Mussolini regime. Beyond the fence on the western side was the road to the “*forlager*” where one could find a “*mykwa*” (the term we used for a common bathhouse). On our second day at the camp we - the women - were separated and taken to “*mykwa*” where our bodies were brutally shaved by male soldiers.

Eastward from ours barracks we could see a wide country road that was now totally deserted and beyond it, large plains of cultivated fields; further on, protruding above the trees, the pointed spire of the “*Jakobstahl*” church was visible.

Our barracks were decrepit and dilapidated, the walls were cracked, the small glass windows either broken or missing, and the worn out floor boards squeaked with every step. The stinking dark interiors, lined by primitive bunk beds, were dirty and infested with insects. We all did our best to scrub clean and delouse our rooms for several weeks. There was no kitchen in the camp; our men had to improvise by making one out of rationed wood planks, using a piece of tarpaulin for cover. Two primitive restrooms had roofs, but no walls, rendering them completely open to public view, which was extremely embarrassing for us women; thankfully, after few days of shame, the sides were enclosed. Two primitive water pumps stood on bare concrete slabs and it was challenging to extract some sluggish water from them. Roll call was performed in the center of the camp, on an open square area of bare soiled ground with a long thin pole standing in the middle. The Polish flag was hoisted there on All Saints’ Day, and in keeping with the tradition of commemorating the dead on that day we called out the names of our fallen colleagues. The list was endless, and we had to stand firmly at attention late into the night.

Under the overcast autumn sky, the entire camp was a hopelessly sad place and the German authorities' intentions seemed quite clear: the miserable camp conditions were meant to finish off the sick and the injured, not to help them recover.

Upon arrival, we were ordered to unload the wounded and to get out. The rancid bandages had not been changed for days and were infested with worms; these disgusting white maggots were literally spilling out from the dirty bandages on the terribly injured bodies. Later on, we learned that these hideous creatures actually cleansed the open wounds and kept infection away. Nevertheless, they were a horrible sight!

Everyone's belongings were dumped off the wagons and piled up in the "*forlager*", an area just past the gates in the camp's atrium near the administrative offices and the public showers. All baggage had to be registered and accounted for. My valued back pack went with Aunt Maria, myself joining a group of nurses to help mobilize the sick into the camp.

The decrepit barracks had doors far too narrow for the stretchers and tilting them sideways was the only way to enter, causing great misery to the patients. In the midst of the night darkness, they finally were wedged into awful bunk beds with mattresses as thin as crepes.

Finally I made it to the nurses' barracks, where Aunt Misia had placed all my possessions atop a bunk bed she had reserved for me. Fervently and in panic I went through the backpack fearing that the "*forlager*" luggage search had led to the loss of my priceless possessions. Indeed, some objects were missing (tooth paste!), however; the precious drawings, sketchbooks, and a tin box of watercolors were spared, even two small volumes of poetry. I had seen these petite books among the rubble of an apartment building, and had struggled precariously through the debris to reach them. As I picked them up, I remember seeing the black wing of a grand piano atop the ruins its broken musical keys grinning at me sneeringly. They reminded me of a poem by Norwid about Chopin's own piano which Russian soldiers had thrown out the window during the 1863 January Uprising.

Memories of reciting this famous poem at a school function came back to me ...Norwid proclaims the fallen piano as a triumphant ideal that has descended to every man's level on the street... "The ideal has reached the pavement he says!"... No! I did not see this broken piano as a symbol of an indestructible ideal... it stood for irreversible defeat ... myself partially responsible for this defeat ...I choked with pain and defiance.

Now, laying on a prison plank-bed in "*Zeithain*", the sight of these tattered volumes salvaged from the ruins suddenly caused me to burst into tears,...it was the first time I had cried since the outbreak of the uprising ...I was allowing myself to be vulnerable, no need to be brave anymore.

Aunt Misia looked at me with her sweet beautiful eyes, and hugged me without a word; she was aware of something I had not yet perceived: this was the farewell to my youth, the farewell to poetry and to many other things I had believed in.

The two little books have kept me company to this present day, standing on my bookshelf: *"Tales From The Black Forest"* [Rzecz Czernolaska] by Tuwim and the epic poems by Wierzyński, prophetically entitled *"Tragic Freedom"*. The previous owner's stamp reading on the cover page: *"library of Zofia Levin"*. Thank you ... unknown miss Levin! ...I am in your debt!

There was no trace of Hania Hryniewiecka in the nurses' barracks, as she had been moved to the sick womens' ward when found in need of treatment. During our crazy trip to *"Zakopane"* in the Tatra Mountains the previous April, her back had been injured in a skiing accident and she had had to wear a chiropractic corset since then. She couldn't crouch down behind low barricades or squeeze through narrow passages in between walls and cellars. She had endured it all without a word of complaint, and now she was lying among all the other injured patients.

Next to Hania's bed, a young beautiful girl named Irenka; She was laying paralyzed and brought on a stretcher all the way from Warsaw. This 19 year old didn't sustain a single injury during the uprising, but when the ceasefire was declared, she simply fell down and couldn't get up. The doctor told us she claimed her own body could feel all the wounds of her fallen friends and that she would bear them for the rest of her life. She was treated by a psychiatrist, Dr. Zielinski, and it took a long time until finally, after several months of psychological and physical therapies, she was able to make her first steps. As I helped Irenka during her extensive therapy, we became close friends. Once she told me in confidence: "You know, those two letters 'HY' on the medical record by my bed ...stand for hysteria ... I had no idea it is such a long illness." Neither did I know at the time that the human mind can have such powers over the body.

It was at this initial period that we learned that the Germans did simply regard the barracks as a normal hospital and were determined to preserve the discipline of a POW camp. One night a careless girl left the exterior doors ajar and a shard of light slipped through into the darkness. Suddenly a shot was heard and one of the sick women dropped dead to the floor, her heart hit directly with a bullet coming from the watchtower guard's rifle. The shot was just to warn us to maintain the curfew—but the sad funeral of our young patient was a grim reminder of our condition.

The first weeks of stay in *"Zeithain"*, were dark and gloomy, as we were stunned and numb ... we all sank into the camp's routine like beaten dogs collapsed in a den.

When ordered to report at barracks No.10 which housed the seriously wounded, a charming nurse, Magdalena Suszczyńska, welcomed me as one of the auxiliary nurses. Two doctors were in charge, Dr. Kazimierz Dzik, a young surgeon, and Magdalena's sister, Dr. Janina Krzyżanowska.

Doctor Janina, commonly referred to as “*Josek*”, Magdalena and Dr. Dzik were very close friends. Back in Warsaw, during the up-rising, they had survived together the “*Chmielna*” Street hospital horrors.

Here, on No. 10 ... fighting dirt, lice, bugs and other insects, scrubbing floors, changing bed linens, bringing bedpans to the sick, washing and feeding them were our daily chores. Although the work wasn't easy on our ill-nourished bodies, it helped us take our minds off the shattered city and the graves we had left behind.

Aunt Misia found her place in the sewing room, where the hospital linens were endlessly repaired, so we didn't usually see each other until the evening, when after work we gathered in our barracks (No.18), which housed over 80 women. This was the camp's “*proletariat*” barracks for volunteer nurses and women from the auxiliary hospital staff. It was cold and overcrowded, but the warmth exhaled by our breath raised the temperature at night... or maybe the warmth came from the comfort of being together. This was a barracks full of smiles and helping hands; we were women of different ages, and from different walks of life, from university professors to prostitutes. In the evenings the barracks buzzed like a beehive... the air packed with stories, quiet conversations, bright jokes, bursts of laughter, and arguments over card games of “*bridge*”, or prayers said aloud. From time to time one of the young girls, a music conservatory student and singer, entertained us with classical songs beautifully performed. One of my drawings is of her, but I can't recall her name, she was just nicknamed “*Nightingale*”.

The daily routine always began at 6 o'clock in the morning, when our door would be flung wide open with a loud crash, and one of the camp guards, a “*Wehrmacht*” soldier named Holtz, would storm in. He was a crippled man with small eyes and a perpetually red runny nose, and his duty was to maintain order by implementing rules in the barracks... His inspection would begin by looking under the beds (checking for male visitors), kicking any backpacks that were left lying around, and shouting something in German... we never paid much attention to him, and none of us would report or respond to his attempts to call the roll, so he would try to count us on his own, never succeeding as we did our best to confuse him in this task.

Outdoors, near the water pump, a crowd would always gather. Water splashed in and out of our bowls as we carried them back to the barracks, some of the girls washed directly under the pump's faucet, somehow managing to ignore the cold weather. The orderlies emptied buckets filled with the previous night's excrement and shook out the blankets and pillows. In order to keep our awful coffee warm, we used to hang our mugs around the rim of the single building's heater.

At the hospital ward the day started at 7:00 am. The whole barracks enveloped in a drowsy numbness, which was always interrupted by another “*Wehrmacht*” soldier who snarled at everybody around and seemed to be always in a hurry. One of the patients was elected as a “*barracks commander*” and was to report to this soldier the number of sick, and any changes or transfers made during the day.

Nurses chores started at 8:00 am each morning with the arrival of the head nurse Magda, and at that time we sang a religious hymn: “We Praise You God at Daybreak”...despite this enlightening prayer our days were neither easy nor bright, as the wounded were impatient, demoralized and unwilling to cooperate in any manner, venting their full disappointment and bad temper out on us... their doctors and nurses. We were all hungry, cold, and depressed ... weeks went by filled with irritation, cursing, and boorishness as we struggled through each day, as though we were trapped in a dark tunnel.

Night shifts were assigned exclusively to us auxiliary nurses, and they seemed endless. Power was switched off at 9:00 pm, and not even the moonlight was able to get through the tightly closed wooden shutters. We had to carry the bedpans and medications in pitch darkness, having to maneuver carefully between beds, trying not to disturb the sleeping patients. Only for injections were we allowed to light precious candles we had brought from Warsaw. Some of the sick stumbled noisily as they made their way to the bucket, and the commotion created always irritated the bedridden patients and produced nasty curses in the darkness.

We were constantly cold, all the auxiliary nurses used to cuddle up on the warm concrete block that formed the base of an iron furnace with its barely flickering flame. The fuel ration allotted for each day was never sufficient and sometimes we couldn't even boil the water needed to disinfect the syringes.

One of our wounded was a stray Hungarian soldier who had joined the Poles after deserting ranks fighting on the side of the Germans. His shattered leg was harnessed over the bed and he suffered greatly, shouting almost every night: “sister, sister!” begging for a shot of morphine. After some time, we were ordered to administer him injections with distilled water; it was amazing to observe the power of his suggestive mind. The effect of the placebo would calm our Hungarian patient and he would quietly fall asleep. All of us were extremely careful not to run into his outstretched leg in the darkness.

By then we knew that the Germans would offer no help; time was our only ally in assuaging the sufferings of our patients. But as we did what we could, the sick and wounded began to appreciate the efforts and care exerted by doctors and nurses; they started some sort of social life gathering to chat in the evenings, crowding a small room that was used for dressing wounds in the mornings.

Two renowned poets were in our barracks, Mieczysław Ubysz and Zbigniew Jasiński. They began the habit of reading poetry and literature to the gathered group. The barracks commander, Henryk Szachnowski, followed this lead. He was a broad-shouldered Hercules in his thirties and a music lover with a beautiful bass voice. He organized a decent choir and in resonance other barracks began dedicating evenings to the arts as well. Beautiful moments filled with poetry recited by the handsome and talented doctor Zachorowski still linger in my memories, and I also remember giving

several chats on postimpressionism and abstract art with the help of a beautifully illustrated history of art book. That was my joy for many months.

In the common barracks that doubled as a chapel a small theater group also started under the guidance of Ziemowit Karpiński, an actor, director, and poet from “*Wilno*” as I recall. A Warsaw Academy Artist by the name of Kala Gordziałkowska was my friend and colleague, and together we painted sets with anything at hand. We designed and built a monstrance and a chalice for Mass out of tin cans. Two priests assisted at the camp but I hardly recall having sought counsel from either of them. I was too numbed, I had enclosed myself inside a protective wall so strong that I could not seek spiritual help.

Everyone in “*Zeithain*” was fighting despair ... any job, any task was better than facing the past. What helped me the most, besides the consuming nursing activity at the ward, was sketching. During the spare time I started drawing everything around me and sometimes, traded the sketches for a slice of bread or a few cigarettes commonly used as currency in the camp. Perhaps some of these captive images have survived, perhaps have been presented to a soldier’s grandchildren along with a comment: “that’s me, this is how I looked like during German POW captivity, I was a fighter from the Warsaw uprising”.

Making brooches out of tin was another joy of mine, and these I happily gave away, and it became a pleasure as I discovered how popular they became. I only have one of these today, a small brigantine with bulging, wind-filled sails capturing within my dreams for freedom and the longing for open, distant space. I wore this brooch for many years and, very likely, those tin sails carried me from the shattered city of Warsaw all the way to the sunny beaches of the Caribbean Sea.

Sometimes, during off duty days, I would climb on my plank-bed and revisit my backpack treasures. Along with broken gold rings, luxurious leather gloves and drawings, there was a small icon of “*Our Lady*” which I found pinned to one of the barracks' walls the first day of cleaning. It had been left behind by one of the Italian prisoners who had been incarcerated there. This was a very touching primitive and clumsy pencil drawing of the “*Madonna and the Child*” made on the reverse side of an official pre-stamped letter (the only medium by which prisoners were allowed to communicate with their families). This rough representation of “*Our Lady*” glued to a piece of cardboard covered the printed form, and in lieu of a proper frame, the edges had been embroidered with paper thread made from mattresses stuffing material. The crown detailing, the dress and the votive offerings were all crafted meticulously, and the artist’s large sprawling signature was proudly displayed in one corner. This ill Italian POW, far from his country, must have had in his own way prayed to the Holy Lady asking for fortune to bring him safely back home.

While carefully taking this icon down, I promised myself that if ever I had a home of my own, I would entrust it to the patronage of this image of “*Our Lady*”. My sons and family prospered under her protection in Venezuela, and presently on the wall, she continues bestowing blessings in my California home.

Despite the horrible conditions of the camp and contrary to the German authority's expectations, the wounded refused to die on our barrack with 80 wounded. Only one person passed away, just a few days after our arrival, he was a seriously ill ancient doctor whose name I can't recall.

Somehow, all the others were steadily getting better, even Zygmus, an incredibly emaciated boy whose hands all the way to the elbows were one giant wound filled with pus; he survived all the misery, the starvation, and the cold. Doctor Dzik refused to authorize the amputation of his hands and patiently cleaned and dressed the torn muscles, managing finally to save the thumb and index finger of each hand. Twenty years later, when visiting my friend Magda Suszczyńska (by then Mrs. Ochman) in Warsaw, I learned that Zygmus had developed drafting skills, was able to support his family, and was living in the town of "*Milanówek*". How I liked poor brave Zygmus! ...always trying to conceal a small timid smile...I remember how gentle he was with me when once, feeding him, accidentally I spilled the soup all over... that day I was very hungry, and the smell of food made me dizzy... I just fainted flat by his bed.

The ward surgeon, Kazimierz Dzik, was a quiet unassuming young man very sensitive to human suffering, well respected and liked among us, even by the worst thugs in the barracks. His white apron and blue eyes under flaxen hair always brightened that gloomy ward.

He adored music... at times I would see his profile clearly drawn against the doctor's room window and it seemed as though he was listening to his favorite concerto, oblivious to the surrounding reality; or perhaps, his mind was at the macabre scenes of the "*Chmielna*" Street hospital in Warsaw, powerless to save the lives of so many.

Dr. Jasia "*Josek*" was a completely different personality from Dr. Dzik. She was a passionate condensed bundle of energy that would disarm everyone with her humor and optimism... and she was always there when needed. Never tolerating botchery at work, and always with the courage to tell the truth directly into anyone's face ...you either loved or hated her, but you had to respect her.

Jasia's sister Magdalena was our head nurse, She had great personal charm mixed with a gift for simplicity and righteousness. Hard on herself, tolerant of others, understanding and forgiving every human sin, offering wisdom very naturally as one would give a glass of water to the thirsty...I liked her very much.

Twenty years later, the year of 1964, we met again in Warsaw and during our long renewed conversations I learned to admire her even more, as I realized that few people in my life had shown me as much understanding as Magda did. Several days before my departure from Warsaw, her sister told me she had been arrested by the UB¹

¹ Urząd Bezpieczeństwa or **UB** (*The Office of Security*) was a Polish secret police, intelligence and counter-espionage service operating from 1945 to 1954. Its main goal was the disruption of the anti-communist structures in the Polish Secret State and combatting soldiers of the Polish Home Army (AK-Armia

during the Trial of the Sixteen², and that as a result of prison torture; she developed a serious heart condition. She died prematurely in 1966, two years after our reencounter.

It was a great fortune to become acquainted with people like her during the saddest time of my life ... their rectitude and daily concern for others saved me from despair.

Today, I look at my camp drawings: Moniczka doing laundry, bent over a big wash basin; our singer “*Nightingale*”, patients listening to a concert and sitting on the upper bunks like perched chickens; the bright face of a 13-year-old soldier; the bony face of our Zygmus; a bath in “*mykwa*”; Zbigniew Jasiński, a Warsaw’s rising poet; Doctor Dzik and his melancholic eyes; a barracks barber and the line of people waiting for a haircut; Ania Niklewicz’s expressive face, later she became a Catholic Carmelite nun; a cheerful and loud Kazio on top of the bunk... So many moments, so many images...so many lives!

There were over three thousand of us in “*Zeithain*”, the entire society spectrum was represented: professors, artists, attorneys, janitors, street vendors, prostitutes and social ladies, as well as a mix of young people from different backgrounds. There was a good reason for the German camp commandant to be shouting the day of our arrival:

“*Das ist kein Kriegsgefangenenreserwelazarett. Das ist ein Zirkus!*” (This is not a POW hospital. This is a circus!)

Memories would haunt us in this circus, the images of fires and dead bodies would resurface before our eyes day and night. But time was healing us. One day, a wounded man timidly told me: “Sister, you are laughing today...” now the comment clearly comes back to me... I was smiling and there was someone in the camp looking at me in a special way...someone helpful, kind and dear ...providing me with a reason to go on.

Parcels from families all around Poland reached the camp in November and I received two from “*Piotrków*”: one from my dear brother, and the other from the Szadkowski cousins (from “*Dziewuliny*”). My brother concealed a brief note within his parcel’s wrapping, informing me of the rest of the family wellbeing He told me that the message I had tossed into the crowd at the “*Łódź*” train station had reached him several days later and he had guessed to look for my name on the lists of POWs at camps. I knew they were not swimming in luxury (the family estate in “*Dziewuliny*” had been taken over by the Germans at the very beginning of the war). Even so the parcels contained many precious items such as sausages and lard, and these had not been stolen during the camp customs inspection, as had happened with other prisoners' packages. I had been lucky... it took a lot of self-restraint for me, Hania, and Aunt Misia not to devour all the goodies

Krajowa) and Freedom and Independence (WiN). In that capacity, MPB is known as *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* or UB (*The Office of Security*).

² Add what is Proces Szesnastu.

right away. With a thank you message, I sent my brother the only single one pre-stamped stationary form I was ever given in the camp, and ironically I learned later that the letter never reached him, it actually never left “Saxony” due to heavy bombing at the time.

By the month of April, with the Russian army front approaching from the East, we could gradually feel disorder creeping into the camp. There was no more contact with our families. Another three transports with parcels did arrive from the Geneva Red Cross headquarters, the first two contained food: powdered milk, “Nescafe”, chocolate, rice, canned corn beef and sardines... all wonderful things!... the third one unfortunately, had nothing but khaki flannel soldier scarves and men’s underwear... what a huge disappointment it was for several thousand starving people! However, the resourceful Warsaw women immediately found a good way to use these outfits: the scarves were stitched and sewn together, and within a few days, the men were happily wearing new khaki jackets in imitation of English battle dress uniforms, with pockets and epaulets. Somehow, even military insignia of stripes and stars were included, something very comforting for moral. In concert, the ladies were strolling around in fancy knitted cream colored blouses, referred to as “gaciejki”, so named after the men’s long underwear from which they were made...and I wore one of these all the way to Paris!

When the winter holidays came, we celebrated Christmas Eve (footnote) along with our patients; as on that special night, each barracks of the wounded invited their doctors and nurses. The table was covered with a white tablecloth probably obtained during the Warsaw looting, and on large service dishes (also from the looting) there was bread, purposely saved over the course of several days, garnished with a sardine on each slice. Rice was topped with whipped cream, made with powdered milk from the Red Cross parcels, and served for dessert. Some of the sick were still lying on their beds, but the faces were shaved smiling broadly. All conflicts were forgotten. The poet Mieczysław Ubyś was the master of ceremonies, and after him, marionettes made from paper staged a satire of the camp’s celebrities, with text that he had written ...and my drawings for the caricatures of the marionettes...Following this bit of humor was a beautiful performance of military songs by our barracks choir, and then we all sang Christmas carols together...as the night wound down the voices, faded, little by little, until the single candle on the fir branch died down... a night of peace amidst a heavily bombed Germany.

...And when the spring came...the bombing of nearby “Dresden” intensified. The English were flying at night, and during the day we saw above our heads clouds of American bombers, glistening in the sun. In the distance we heard a dreary rumble against the nocturnal sky, and saw the enormously bright glow from fires shining all the way from “Dresden”. The military training ground next to us was bombed one night and we realized the English pilots were receiving accurate intelligence. Only few bombs were needed to start a sea of fire, and then ammunition chambers blew up one after the other in a chain reaction, as they all were connected underground. The explosions were horrendously loud, the earth shook and the sky sparkled with gigantic fireworks...it seemed like the raging flames would engulf us all ... we spent the night standing with

water filled buckets in hand, expecting the worst. Later that morning, the firestorm subsided ... without reaching our barracks.

One day, the beginning of April, we saw a crowd of people in striped clothes moving with difficulty on the road behind the barbed wire. These were prisoners from a concentration camp, surrounded by an armed escort and we could see how utterly exhausted they were, how they stumbled and swayed on their feet. Shocked, we watched until they disappeared beyond the horizon. For a long time after, we could still hear in the distance the furious barking of the guards' dogs.

The Russians were now approaching; inhabitants from neighboring towns and villages were panicking. The German exodus had begun; we watched them go down the same road traveled by the exhausted prisoners just several days ago. Only women with children and the elderly trudged along the road, and with enormous effort carried their belongings, pushing all sorts of trolleys, carriages, wheelbarrows, prams, farm carts and bicycles. Some of carriages and carts were being pulled by people harnessed in place of horses, and the bicycles were weighed down with bundled packages. It was raining and the ditch by the road accumulated a vast stock of household objects as the refugees in panic abandoned them.

Looking at this tragic exodus, witnessing the defeat of Hitlerism, we were well aware of the people's misery, but we felt no compassion. The image of burning Warsaw was still vividly before our eyes.

The cannons' roar was approaching the camp and artillery shells were flying over our heads; afraid that we might be bombarded and our barracks set on fire, we brought mattresses carrying the wounded to the air-raid trenches, covering them with boards ripped from our bunk beds as a protection against airborne shrapnel fragments. This we did each daybreak, and our arms and backs became sore from the constant shifting of the wounded.

The day came when the Germans in the camp summoned the representatives of each nationality and announced they "were going West"... handing over the keys to the almost empty grocery storage bins as well as the soldier's control tower guns. We were now supposed to protect ourselves from undesirable visitors, such as refugees and deserters. The German army "presence" disappeared that night.

Next morning, the entire "Zeithain" hospital woke up in freedom. There were two wild memorable days beginning as the prisoners cut through the hated barbed wire. Anyone able ran out into the surrounding fields and desolate villages, and a huge and intense plundering of the all abandoned German possessions began. Everyone was looting, the Russians prisoners, exhausted, weak and barely able to stand on their feet; the Italians, cheerful and well-fed; the French officers, quartered next to us; and of course our less severely wounded Polish boys. The looting lasted until the arrival of the Soviet army brought the madness to a halt.

April's lazy daybreak was barely overcoming night when I was awakened up by a strange noise. From my bed, could each and open the shutters...the fields were still dark under an overcast sky. Slowly, I was able to make out some moving figures... small horses, with riders bent over them were galloping all over the fields... the riders, one after the other, were filling every trail and every track of our landscape. These were the Cossacks, the advance guard of the Russian army. Their raid was accompanied by muffled sounds of hooves against soft soil and there was nothing else to be seen or heard as nature froze under this wild invasion...

I couldn't take my eyes off these horsemen, who seemed to float in the air, it was the terrifying sight of a Tartar horde!. Entire generations of my ancestors fought defending our faith and our land against such barbarian invasions. I could not believe my eyes! This was the twentieth century and it was my fate to behold those primitive Mongol fighters in "*Saxony*" ... in the very heart of Europe!

Russian "*Katyushas*", mortars and other artillery approached the camp as we were caught in between two fighting armies; the fury of the battle was rampant above our heads. Finally, the Red Army marched into the town of "*Jakobstahl*" and "*Zeithain*" camp, and we came under the authority of the Russian field hospital.

Just as in Warsaw, they assigned me to a group of auxiliary nurses responsible for carrying the other nationality abandoned wounded into our hospital. Thus we could for the first time see the extent of this enormous barracks city. We observed that we were assigned the worst part of the camp. All the other barracks had better insulation from the cold weather; there were regular beds instead of bunk beds, and even cement sidewalks.

Our first priority became helping the wounded in the Russian camp. It was almost empty as we discovered that all those who could move had already fled, including the doctors and the medical staff. The Soviet Army held that a soldier taken prisoner was a traitor, and most likely would face the death penalty. The Russian prisoners were afraid of the punishment and fleeing from their own army in panic!

In the deserted Russian barracks we found only several patients in agony: Tuberculosis was the most common disease for those constantly undernourished, as the Russian sick and wounded didn't receive parcels nor any help from the Red Cross. Their barracks was shabby and dirty, on the tables and floors there was leftover food from the recent looting: sacks of flour and peas, clay pots with lard, large chunks of bacon and smoked meat. I was told later that these treasures were found by the Russian POW's inside the cemetery brick tombs, where most likely the Germans had hidden them, since they were also forbidden to stock such goods. Hastily abandoned partly eaten meats, lard and bacon were lying around amidst dirty sheets and blankets.

The sick were in terrible shape, however, we were told to leave them there as the Russian medical staff would take care of theirs part of the camp. Their previous medical staff emaciated, and scared was coming back in small groups. They have been cut off in their flight by the Russian offensive prior to crossing unto the opposite bank of the

“*Laba*” river where American troops were stationed. How terribly scared they must have been! Our soldiers found one of these Russian doctors hanging from a pine branch close by the camp. He had committed suicide. Another Russian doctor had gone crazy, wandering around half-conscious and senseless; we entrusted him to the professional care of our hospital psychiatrist Dr. Zieliński.

The Italian barracks were a different world. Beds were arranged in such a way as to create almost separate rooms; from the ceiling beams textile partitions were hung creating private cubicles and the shelves in between beds were full of various trinkets: photographs, posters with scantily dressed girls cut out from magazines, postcards with scenes from the countryside and religious cards were all merged into a patchwork. The freedom ransacked goods were lying scattered on the floor; there were bales of fabric and curtains blocking the passageways. It’s hard to imagine how they were planning on transporting these trophies. There were also sacks with flour and pasta tangled with colorful ribbons all over the floor. We found no gravely ill patients; the healthy Italian inhabitants had been dispersed around the nearby villages.

In the French camp, we were surprised by the discovery of unbelievable luxuries: these spacious and tidy barracks had the looted goods carefully stored and there were neatly arranged heaps of clean bed sheets stolen from the nearby German hospital. It was these pretty white and blue checkered linens that the female camp population converted into fancy skirts (later a piece of my wardrobe in Paris). In one of the French barrack corners there was a huge pile of tall German paratroop laced boots. Well-kept beds showed the French need of daily comforts; there was a sleeping bag on each bed, and under each a pair of slippers; coat hangers were hung along the walls, and on the shelves there were alcohol-fuelled coffee brewing machines ingeniously assembled from metal cans. Clearly the French, and particularly their officers, had been privileged prisoners.

Things were very different in our camp. Within the first 48 hours of freedom, the Polish POW hospital was transformed into a wealthy country farm ready to be transported to Poland. The roll-call square was filled with mooing cows, horses, and poultry. Nearby there were several carts loaded with farm equipment. Over several fires, there were cauldrons with boiling soup. Nobody thought of conserving food. The barracks were surrounded with bicycles and other carts. Next to our primitive kitchen, a fenced pigpen appeared.

Passing by the pigs, I met one of the wounded from our barracks; he vehemently insisted on presenting me with a live duck, which he held by the neck. “Here, this is for you, sister” he urged, “You could roast it, or make an excellent soup”. Maybe he was a chef as a civilian? I sent him along with his bird to the kitchen. Nearby, two auxiliary nurses were catching down goose blown into the wind ...for pillows!

The camp commander Dr. Colonel Strahl had to issue an order for immediate food rationing, out of fear of having the entire long-starving camp residents becoming ill due to a sudden change in diet.

Within few days, the Russian authorities completely took over our hospital and once again we were locked behind barbed wire inside our rectangle of dirt.

One sunny day of April, a large group of women entered the camp, passed the gate, and stopped in silence waiting to find out how they were going to be received. These were French Jewish women freed from a nearby ammunition factory in “*Riese*” and the sight of these horribly gaunt human shadows will never vanish from my memory.

As we welcomed them to our barracks, they were hesitant to believe in freedom, still immersed in the hell they had been through and completely oblivious to what was going on around them. As if in a dream, they let us dress their swollen legs and abscess-covered bodies, eating like robots from plates handed to them, with empty and vacuous eyes. They had no strength or no desire to talk, interested only in finding the “*Oflag*” “*Mühlberg*” French POW camp.

Colonel Strahl provided carts with horses for them and escorted by our boys they were taken to the officers “*Offlag*” in “*Mühlberg*”. We knew the French military prisoners there had already been busy working on how to get back home.

Did these women have anyone to go back to? Could they ever be cured of the terrible lead intoxication from the factory?

Later, when leaving behind “*Zeithain*” on my way to the West, I also went in search of the protection offered by the “*Mühlberg*” camp. Sleeping in a “*forlager*” room next to one of these poor women, I saw her cuddled up seating on the bed all alone, with her beautiful huge eyes frightened and full of contained tears. I knew she was grateful for the small favors we rendered her, but it was an effort for her to even smile. With her eyes fixed on one spot, she kept repeating, “*Cafard. Cafard...*” What did she mean? Whom was she talking to?... Everyone around respected the tragic figure of this woman wrapped in a scarf. I never dared to draw her and never learned her name; she remained in my memory as the “*Dolorous Holy Mary*” as if she were crouched under the cross

On May 1 there was a grandiose “*Peoples Day*” celebration. “*Bolshevik*” field kitchen units drove into the “*forlager*” and friendly soldiers boisterously invited us to join them for a festively thick and unbelievably greasy soup. Dancing and singing continued well into the night. Despite the Russians' kind invitation, few from our camp participated in their celebration. For us, the end of the war was not very joyful.

===== THE END OF CHAPTER SEVEN - VII =====