ROOTS *of* RESILIENCE

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Memoir of the Boy from the Gulag

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This book is dedicated to
Eugeniuzs Żegliński and Maria Żeglińska.
Ja was kocham.

FOREWORD

by Czesław Żegliński

To honour my family's journey, it has been my dream to share our story with the next generation. I am so very grateful for my granddaughter Amy's time, interest, and ability to bring forth the best of my recollections and for my daughter Joy's assistance with editing. I believe she has done an excellent job. In search of meaning, I have spent many decades questioning Polska's[1] upheaval that led to my own. To the best of my understanding, it goes back to the Middle Ages, when the royal line of Mieszko died out (14th century), and kings were imported from Hungary, Lithuania, France, Scotland, etc. A democratic monarchy was created in what is known as the Polish Golden Age, a multicultural commonwealth. By the mid-17th century, this massive political organism weakened as conflicts arose amongst the nobles of Russia, Prussia, Sweden, and Ukraine. A hundred years of further fighting left Polska regressed and endangered. A new king was elected. He was well-educated and brought improvements to the country. This new King tried for reforms and common ground, but the bickering continued, leaving the country vulnerable, unprotected, and ripe for the taking. Again, Polska was partitioned by her neighbours.

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[1] *Polska* (pronounced "*polska*", means "Poland, the nation" but translates literally to "land of fields") **OR** *Polsce* (pronounced "*pol-tseh*", meaning "in Poland").

As a last resort, a Polish warrior named Kościuszko (a veteran of the American Revolution) gathered the Polish people to arms. Though bravely fought, they lacked military force, and Polska vanished from the maps.

From 1795 to 1918, Polska belonged to Russia, Prussia, and Austria, but still, the people persisted, educating their children in the culture and language that was forbidden at the time. After the First Terrible World War in 1918, 123 years gone, Polska regained independence. Tired of war but divided politically, the first president was assassinated. Despite the unrest, new leaders opted for peace treaties over military defences. As a result, Polska was unprepared for the sudden two-pronged invasion, Germany on the western front in September 1939, followed by Russia on the eastern front. Though the cavalry, both man and horse, fought valiantly, they were no match for the modern machines of tanks, rifles, and aircraft. Lest we forget.

PREFACE

My family's journey begins in Polsce. We were very poor, and my mother owned very little: two dresses and two pairs of shoes. She walked barefoot to our small church to protect her best shoes, saving the soles for God himself.

Like Jesus, her saviour, I was born in a barn. Unlike baby Jesus, the barn was my home for six years! Five of us lived in a divided barn without plumbing, electricity, finished floors, nor ceiling. These were humble times. On the other side of the partition lived our flock! Without plumbing, we pumped water into buckets from a well and used an outhouse for a toilet. Daily life was simple: we farmed, slept, farmed again, and on the seventh day, attended mass. My *Tatuś*[2] inherited the indebted farm in Eastern Poland (now Yaseniv, Ukraine) from his father, a man who enjoyed his drink. Men with little means looked to marriage and dowries to fund their opportunities. In 1932, he married my *Mamuś*[3] for her dowry (a few farm animals); but they were incompatible in every way! He, a 25-year-old bon-vivant, and she, a young 18, uneducated, unsophisticated; they could not have been more different. Yet, as I later would learn, they were matched in their capacity for survival, despite little education.

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[2] *Tatuś* (pronounced *"tatoush*") = Dad

[3] *Mamuś* (pronounced **"***mamoush*") = Mom

As a child, my father ran back and forth between the Russian and Austrian army lines during the First World War, earning vodka from the Russians in exchange for bread, then trading said vodka with the Austrians for their bread. The markup in his sale of vodka to the Austrians allowed for a little extra bread on the family table. The rest of the bread he sold back to the Russians for more vodka. At a tender age, he learned an important lesson that carried through to my generation. I, too, learned an important lesson: that great fun was had with scavenged bullets tossed in a fire!

Leading up to the war, my parents sensed and often spoke of the political tension in the air. In the summer of 1939, the German fighter planes commanded attention as they encircled our sky. Like vultures, they picked off the fields and labourers; my grandmothers, father, pregnant mother, and children (myself included) were all game for their practice and sport. This was the beginning of the end to life as we knew it.

PREFACE ON POLISH DIMINUTIVES

To understand the pages that follow, it is important to understand Polish diminutives. These unique linguistic gems are used in Poland to add a touch of affection, familiarity, and endearment to words. These diminutives are created by adding specific suffixes (e.g. "-ek", "-ka", "-cia") to the ends of nouns, adjectives, and names; transforming them into forms that are smaller, softer, and often more intimate in nature.

In Poland, diminutives are found everywhere – in everyday conversations, literature, song lyrics, and even official documents. They are not merely grammatical constructs, but rather a method of cultural and emotional expression embedded in everyday communication. Diminutives allow speakers to convey their emotions, build rapport, and create a sense of intimacy in conversation. They can express not only fondness but also frustration, empathy, and even irony.

During conversations, Polish given names are frequently modified with diminutives.

For example, depending on the emotions of the speaker, a boy named Czesław would be affectionately called Czesiu (pronounced "che-shi-ou"), platonically called Czesiek ("che-sh-ek"), or angrily called Czehu ("che-hou").

Now, if Czesław was a father, he could be called Tata, or, more affectionately, Tatuś ("Ta-toush").

Similarly, a girl formally called Danuta may be colloquially called Danusia ("Danu-sh-ia") or Danuśka ("Danu-sh-ka").

AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER

I was given complete creative freedom to write this narrative nonfiction based on my grandfather's true story. Every effort was made to provide accurate facts and details. However, this disclaimer is my protective and all-encompassing legal force field if any reports prove to be slightly exaggerated. I may or may not have dramatized some descriptions in the hopes of Michael Bay turning this story into a blockbuster movie (fingers crossed).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the journey of bringing these pages to life, I find myself humbled by the stories of resilience, courage, and wisdom that have been woven into the fabric of our family's history. The task of recounting these tales would not have been possible without the unwavering support, encouragement, and the profound gift from my beloved Dziadziu. Your decision to entrust me with the task of telling your story has been an honour beyond words. The weight of this responsibility has been both a privilege and a reminder of the deep bonds that tie generations together.

It is through your eyes and your words that I have been granted a glimpse into a world that has shaped not only you, but all of us who stand in your lineage. From the moments of triumph to the moments of struggle, your stories are a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the power of perseverance.

To you, Grandfather, I offer my deepest gratitude and appreciation. You have given me a gift that transcends the written word – the gift of preserving and sharing a piece of our family's history. Your story, a tapestry woven from threads of love, struggle, laughter, and hope, will continue to inspire and resonate with all those who turn these pages.

I'd also like to thank Joy Zeglinski, my mother and in-house editor, who read many, many versions of this story with immense thoughtfulness and generosity.

I am also deeply grateful to Evan Zeglinski-Spinney for his talented marketing assistance.

With heartfelt thanks,
Amy Zeglinski-Spinney

PART 1

POLSKA, EUROPE AND BEYOND

1 JASIONÓW VILLAGE, EASTERN POLAND FEBRUARY 10, 1940, 6:00 AM

BANG! The front door bellows.

BANG!

I groan and roll over, snuggling my Mamuś.

The door opens with a thunderous crack smacking hard against the wall. I hear Tatuś grunt. Danusia, my baby sister, begins wailing. I plug my ears, wincing. My eyes sting as I struggle from sleep.

It's dark. The candles from last night have died out. I try to make sense of the shadows: in the door stand two Giants. Tatuś struggles to get off the cot, using the wall for support. "Maria!" he says urgently. Mamuś untangles our limbs, moving to stand between me and the door. I cling to her, "Mamuś!" I plead.

As I rub my eyes, the cold and the Monsters grow bigger, one after the other. I notice other shadows in the scary dark. The sun is still asleep. Annoyed that I am no longer wrapped

like a *gołąbki*[4], I pull the homemade wool blanket to my chin.

"Attention! We are soldiers of the Red Army. We have arrived to save *Polska* from the Nazis. You have twenty minutes to pack your things, after which you will be deported for your protection. You must ONLY bring what you can carry. We have orders to escort you to the train station, after which your family will lead a better, safer life.[5]" one growls.

My father looks to my mother with an expression I cannot read. He says to the Monster, "*Nie!*[6] We will stay."

He snarls, showing his sharp teeth; "*Nie*, you not understand. The Great Soviet Union owns this farm now. You have NO choice. You ARE leaving. If we find a gun on you or your property, we shoot. If you do not cooperate in any way, we shoot. Same for children; control them, or we shoot."

We freeze.

The Monsters are bad men armed with big guns. They scare me. The thumpity-thump in my chest quickens; faster and louder, I hear the stomps. Hot tears spill down my cheeks.

Tatuś grows bigger than before. His voice is hot with mad, "What right do you have to barge into my home? This is MY farm! How dare you! *Pieprzyć się*[7], leave! *Wypchaj się sianem*[8]! Get out of my house!".

I hate the men who make mercy and my Tatuś scary mad; worse, I hate that Tatuś has been so sick. It's been many days since he rose to stand! His face is skinny, shrivelled like a salty pickle. These Monsters could not have come at a worse time. Mamuś begged me all these days to be good for Tatuś. Maybe

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[4] Gołąbki (pronounced "*ga-wumb-ki"*) = cabbage roll

[5] Many Poles have reported that the Red Army soldiers lied to them about why they were having to leave, to reduce conflict and facilitate the removal of families from their homes.

[6] *Nie* (pronounced "*nieh"*) = No

[7] *Pieprzyć się* (pronounced "*piepceshe-yeh*") = Fuck you

[8] *Wypchaj się sianem* = A polish proverb that translates to "Stuff yourself with hay" (meaning "Get lost!" or "Go away!")

I wasn't good enough? I am scared and confused. I mean to be good.

I manage to catch my breath. I try hard to make out what my adults are saying. Tatuś yells, "SHOO! Get out of my house!"; this only makes the soldiers' eyes glow more yellow. I catch one of their icy gazes, sending me into full shivers.

They face each other and bark sounds I have never heard before.

A gun is pulled out, aimed directly at my Tatuś. They growl, "Stand against wall! Now! Arms up!". Tatuś weakly obeys, trapped with nowhere to go and no strength to fight. He steps closer to the wall, hands in the air. His face reflects our scaredness.

The Monster steadies his finger on the trigger.

My tummy flips.

I don't want my Tatuś to die.

All my animal friends on the farm have been shot for food. I know what a gun can do. I don't like it, but Mamuś orders me to eat everything on my plate, even my favourites. I don't care what Mamuś says; *I won't* ***eat*** *my Tatuś!*

I must be brave. I am big now. I am six and a half years old. I *must* save my family!

Before I know what is what, my body leaps to shield Tatuś. I raise my arms and scream, "*NIE!* STOP! Don't shoot my Tatuś!". I try to grow bigger. Moments stop. I float away, maybe on the ceiling, but I love my Tatuś more, so I find my feet. I pray for *litość*[9], a word from daily prayers.

I hold my breath forever. The wolfmen glare but lower the gun.

I shake and gasp and breathe again.

I saved my Tatuś! I am happy for this moment.

Later, my parents tell me I am their hero, that I have lived up to my name, Czesław, meaning honour and glory**.** For now,

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[9] *Litość (pronounced* "*lito-sch*"*)* = Mercy

there is more to survive.

*THUMP***.** The Monster hits Tatuś with the gun and orders him to stand frozen. He orders me to stand beside Tatuś.

"You," the man orders Mamuś, "pack. No one else."

Tatuś and I are in a bad dream. Our world is breaking— the clock ticks. The wolf snarls. Mamuś jumps. Her trembling shakes our small home. She is fast but frantic. She grabs pots, pork, and clothing. She wraps our lives in sheets and blankets, stowing the pork fat in a wooden pickle barrel. Danusia is wailing. I might be crying with her. Maybe we're all crying.

"Why, Tatuś?" I whisper.

"Shush, Czesiu."

"I'm cold, Tatuś…"

Tatuś asks the Monsters if I may dress. I am told to put on my coat, hat, and goatskin boots and to shush-shush the baby. I am shaking all over, so it takes me longer. I wrap Danusia in her blanket and pick her up as I've seen Mamuś do many times. Mamuś does it better. She's heavy in my little arms. Her hands are wrinkly baby pink. I squeeze her tight.

"Enough," the wolf men say as they push us out into the bitter morning. The sun is barely yawning. Gold-pink clouds illuminate all that we are losing. I climb into the open sleigh; I am too tired to protest. I cuddle inside my Mamuś for warmth. I think of my newborn horse, a gift from my Tatuś, still asleep in the barn. Glancing back, I watch with tears as *my* horse, with knobby knees, a brown coat, and a white-specked forehead, is yanked away by rope. I am so mad! I want to bite and fight and scream. I breathe smoke, pretending I am *Wawel the dragon*[10].

The corners of my lips quiver. With wet eyes, I look at our farm for the very last time. Tatuś began building our home a year ago. It is a small, simple house with 4 rooms, 3 of which remain unfinished. We live and sleep in the kitchen on a ledge

[10] The Wawel Dragon is famous in Polish folklore.

over the coal stove to stay warm in the winter. Our farm has fruit trees, a large wheat field, a cattle barn, an underground well where we keep our meat, and a broken, rusty car that I drive in my pretend. Unlike Baby Jesus, who was *only* born in a barn, I was born and lived in a barn for the first five years of my life. We shared the stable with my Babcia Zofia, Prababcia, and our collection of farm animals.

My world is as big as our farm. All I know are the animals that live with us. I am six and a half years old now so I know almost everything, and I am smart enough to know this could be the forever kind of goodbye. I say *do widzenia*[11] to the resilient rabbit, annoying duck, shepherding sheep, heartless wolves, generous cow, conforming chickens, unappreciated donkey, devious rodents and the beets they are always stealing from our garden in the middle of the night.

I'm pulled from my thoughts as the horses carry us down the old snowy road toward my sleeping grandparents. There lives my Mamuś' family, the Barans: my Babcia Zofia (Mamuś' mom), my Dziadziu[12] (her dad), and their two sons, Dolek and Gienek (her younger brothers, also my uncles). I love their last name! It is easier to spell than mine, and it means '*sheep',* which is very silly! I don't understand why Mamuś traded her funny maiden name for *Żeglińska*, meaning '*beetroot'*. She says it means we're strong and resilient because beets can thrive even in the harshest of climates. But sheep eat beets, so I still think I would prefer to be a sheep.

I watch as the predators jump down from the sleigh, kick in the front door, and strike again. I can hear a voice cursing and another crying. We wait. I try to sleep; my eyes are so scratchy and sore-heavy. But I am also strangely awake, curious but sad and scared. I have never left the village of Jasionów, *Polska*.

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[11] *Do widzenia* (pronounced "do vidz-enia ") = Goodbye
[12] *Dziadziu* (pronounced *"jaju"*) = Grandfather

My brain is busy with questions.

"Shush *synu*[13], not now," Tatuś cuts me off as I leak my worries.

"But Tatuś! What's happening?"

He sounds defeated, mumbling, "I don't know."

"When are we going home?"

"Czehu, I don't know!… We might never come back."

My chest breaks and my eyes water. "But why? Who are they? What do they want? Why did they come? Where are we going?"

Sighing, he says, "They are Russian soldiers. They are here because of the war. They captured eastern *Polska* while Germany took the west months ago. It started in the fall around the time Danusia was born. We tried to fight but lost. They have come for our farm— and are stealing all the farms in the area to create a *kolkhoz*[14]. It is good for them and bad for us. There is nothing we can do to fight back; they are armed and many."

I think about this, "But Tatuś, we can fight! You have a gun, and you are strong! You must shoot them! I'll help!"

"Shush *synu*! They must not know we have weapons on the farm. When *Polska* was invaded, we were told to hand over our guns. They will shoot us immediately if they find out we didn't obey. And besides, it's not that simple. I am sick… I am weak, and here we are, a family, not an army."

"But it's not fair!"

"I know."

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[13] *Synu* (pronounced *"sinu"*) = Son

[14] *Kolkhoz* is a Soviet state-owned collective farm created through forced expropriation, deportation, and imprisonment.

I feel cruelly uprooted. We are interrupted by grunts. I look at my grandparent's home, now drained of life. Babcia Zofia, Dolek, and Gienek sheepishly appear loaded down with lumpy bedding while my Dziadziu carries piles of papers. For the first time this year, I hear Mamuś laugh.

"What, Mamuś?" I ask.

"*Jezus Maryja!* All Tatuś packed to survive in exile are his *mortgage contracts*?!"

2 THE WAWEL DRAGON
FEBRUARY 11, 1940

Hours later, with the sun now high in the sky, I am lifted off the sleigh. I cannot read, nor can Mamuś, but Tatuś tells us the sign on the building, '*Dworzec kolejowy*' means railway station. Without turning back, I start a stiff run toward the log building. My legs and breath are sharp with cold. It's hard to move well, but I'm hungry for warmth, food, water, and relief.

"Czesiu!" my Mamuś yells.

I stop and turn. I see that my family follows, struggling hard, burdened with belongings. Lucky me, my arms are free! Tatuś carries the barrel, panting, while Mamuś holds the baby and more.

"Czesiu, come carry Danusia inside," Mamuś orders. Annoyed, I run back, take my sister in my arms and stagger to the shelter. Her bum smells like an outhouse. On the stairs, I

nearly trip over my frozen feet, but I manage to keep us both from tumbling. Entering the station, I stop dead. Many families like ours, all huddled in fearful shivers. Voices echo in all directions, filling the air with the noise of despair. But I'm relieved to catch some words of quiet hope; "A better life," I hear someone say. Better in what way? Will there be animals where we are going? Ponies? *Pierogi*?

Once we are settled, I sit wide awake, frozen to my spot on the cold dirt. I look about the room. There are 1-2-3-4, *four* guards blocking the exits. Mamuś sees me wiggle. She tells me to stay still; she "does not need more trouble." It's hard to sit in such a miserable way. I feel a tingling in my toes. I want to explore!

My Tatuś and Dziadziu approach one of the soldiers. I envy his thick winter coat and *Uszankę* fur hat[15].

"*Halo*[16], can you tell us where we are being taken?" Tatuś asks.

"A better, safer place," I hear the soldier mutter; his face is flat and careful.

"Where, may I ask!?"

"Classified."

Tatuś shakes his head and mumbles a bad word that I am not allowed to say. Next, they walk towards a group of men near the centre of the room. I can only see their backs, and their words are drowned by the heavy noise of the room. I give up trying to listen. My stomach roars. I am very cold and restless.

"When do we eat Mamuś?"

"I only have pork. Do you want some now?"

"*Tak* [17]."

Nibbling on a piece of salty pig fat, I watch Mamuś struggle

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[15] *Uszankę* hat (pronounced "*ou-shan-keh*") = Traditional Russian fur cap with ear flaps worn in the winter.

[16] *Halo* (pronounced "*haloh*") = Hello

[17] *Tak* (pronounced "*tak*") = Yes

to change the baby's diaper. She unclips the pins and removes the rags. "Eww! It's green!" I say, grinning. She looks around for something wet or clean. "*Jezus Maryja!*" she mumbles. Sighing, she wipes the poop off with her fingers. "Ewww! Mamuś!?" I giggle in horror. She tells me there is nothing else to use. "Why can't she use a bucket by now like me?" I ask. I am tired of waiting for Danuta to grow up. I used to be *the* baby. Sometimes I long for that. "*Nie, synu*…" she says, shaking her head, "Not yet. She is too young. Here, hold Danusia for me." Mamuś then walks toward a bucket on the other side of the room, dunking her hand and the diaper in the water. I watch her return and fix another cloth around the baby's bum, Babcia helping to secure it closed with pins. She takes them out of her wool head scarf, permanently knotted under her chin. I'm sure she even bathes and sleeps with it on because I have never seen her without it. I like to imagine what other treasures she has hidden under her scarf.

Tatuś and Dziadziu return to our huddle with new information, but I lose focus as their words grow heavier. I am so weary of this long, strange day. I hear my Tatuś murmuring words of family, my cousins, Władek and Tadek, who live a few farms from us. They aren't at the station. No one knows why. Their Mamuś, my aunt Helena, died last year of tu-ber-culo-sis. Tatuś hopes his Mamuś and brother Marián, living in the northern part of the village, will be spared from this uprooting. Marián is a teacher, not a farmer or landowner. Similarly, my uncle Janek (my Mamuś older brother) is nowhere to be found. We pray; it is Sunday, and God's help would be most welcome. On Sundays, we wear our best and go to church. Church is very long and for children, very boring; I get wiggly in my seat. I don't like going, but I am a good boy— or *I try to be*. I never wished for church, but I do now. After praying together for possibly hours on the cold floor, with nothing to do and nowhere to go, I curl into myself and drop into a strange sleep.

12

* * *

I am stolen from my dreams to a new reality. The ground under me starts to shimmy. I open my stinging eyes, confused. I startle when I remember that we are not home.

The vibrations grow bigger.

A roar breaks my little ears.

The station might fall, I'm sure of it.

The Dragon is coming! I freeze, panicked.

"Mamuś!" I cry out, stricken.

"Shhhh," she soothes, "it's just a train, not a dragon"

"A train? Oh! Can I see?"

"Stay close, don't go far."

I leap up and run toward a small window, pushing and struggling to see over the heads of taller children. Finally, I get a view. Long and powerful, she breathes smoke. Her body is coated in rusty scales. Soldiers open the wide metal doors. I squint to see inside the belly, but all is black. I'm scared-excited. I want to ride this moving train!

I get my wish! A wish I regret!

Families are ordered to climb aboard. One by one, we are pushed like an offering. Men with rifles lose patience, yelling for us to hurry. I carry the baby, and the grown-ups carry our belongings. We are one of the first families to walk the plank, so Tatuś picks the top platform for our family, a spot near the middle of the car to shelter from the creep of cold. There is no insulation, no seats, no beds, no comfort. I sit shivering, watching either fifty or fifty-hundred worried people fall in, packed like cattle.

Towards the centre sits a sleeping coal heater. Near the opposing wall, I notice a hole in the floor; I make a note to avoid this hole.

My lips are cracked, and my throat hurts. "Mamuś, water?" I ask.

"*Nie*, *synu*."

"Why?"

"There is none."

"Why?"

She sighs, "Because there is none."

The doors suddenly slam with a sharp bang, leaving me alone in the dark. I want out! There is no air. I struggle inside myself. Reaching into the emptiness, my hands grasp Mamuś. I will myself to never let go. Ever.

Time passes. My eyes adjust. I run my fingers along the back wall, tracing the ridges of the wooden panels, looking for tiny cracks of freedom—the cold bites back with a high-pitched whistle.

Eventually, I climb from our platform and approach the heater. Other children join me in a small, chilled huddle. We sway a little. We're mute. The cold, the hunger, the thirst, this was not the adventure I had imagined.

In the dim light, I take notice of the shapes of families—some dressed in their best, holding photos, precious objects, maybe jewels or money. My Mamuś and Babcia packed blankets, clothes, food, and pots. My Dziadziu Baran packed *papers*.

"All you packed are your mortgage and lender contracts? Tatuś! What good are they?"

"It's all I have…" he says.

"Well… we'll need toilet paper to wipe ourselves.…" Mamuś suggests with a strange laugh-sob.

* * *

I wake confused. I don't remember falling asleep. I sleep-wake for many days, nights, and days. I lose track of time. Day or night, it's all the same.

I listen for the sound of Mamuś, nursing Danusia. "Mamuś, I have to pee," I say pulling on her sleeve, "*gdzie jest toaleta?*[18] " I ask. Scanning our hurriedly packed belongings, she offers a bucket. "Here, Czesziu," she says, "use this. It's all we have". My cheeks feel hot as I squat in the corner. I barely see the shape of things. It is so cold. I try to go fast. I think I miss the bucket a little. Mamuś hands me a paper. She says it reads, "600 zł[19] lent to Ivan Oliynyk, March 1939." Ivan Oliynyk was one of the neighbours we saw stealing from our farm. She tells me to wipe my bottom with his name. My Tatuś laughs. Others use the bucket too; as it fills the air with stink, a grown-up tosses the contents through the hole in the floor; it spills a little because the train is moving hard.

Returning to the platform, I reach up for a hand and a tug. Even when standing on my toes, my fingers can barely reach the top level. Once hoisted, I find a spot to sit and hug my legs.

"*Boję się. Boję się.*[20]," I say, my voice shaky. My fear grows with my words. I want to go home. I want to be sick. This is all too much.

"Shush, *synu*. I know. We must be *strong like borscht*[21]. Let's pray." She pulls her rosary out of her pocket, but my hand reaches for hers. "Are we going to die Mamuś?". The thump-thump gets faster. I am scared she will say yes. Though

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[18] *Gdzie jest toaleta?* (pronounced "bijeh yest toaleta?") = Where is the toilet?

[19] Polish currency is the *złoty* (zł).

[20] *Boję się* (pronounced "*boye sheh*") = I'm scared

[21] Borscht is a pink and sour soup made primarily from beetroots. Eastern European tradition believes it has the power to heal, comfort, and bring people together on cold days, making it a beloved and timeless culinary treasure.

barely visible, I sense her eyes avoiding mine. Her lips are stitched with fear. I hear it in her voice, "God will protect us," she shivers after a painful pause. I try to believe her. I squeeze my eyes closed and wish for home, my animals. I hear myself begin to cry. She reminds me to pray. We bend to God, but all is silent in the black. Will he hear us? My thoughts are big. No one has answers. Was God sleeping? Did he not hear our pleas? Why are we prisoners? Why have we been stolen? Why are we being treated worse than animals? On our farm, animals are respected and given food, water, shelter, warmth, and sunlight.

I push away my questions. We are taught to believe, pray, wait, and trust. We must not question the Church.

Another wave of terror; it makes me weak and wobbly. I whimper. "I don't want to die, Mamuś." The words tumble from my leather tongue.

She wraps her arms around me and whispers, "I know, Czesciu." After a pause, she says, "*Ja ciebie kocham*[22]," as she kisses the top of my cold head. She pulls me close and embraces her littles, one arm around me and another for Danusia. I breathe out my mads and sads. She coos a wordless song, rocking back and forth, calming the three of us. It soothes me; my eyes grow heavy, and my mind melts. The dark, the rocking, and her warmth bring comfort. The sounds of crying fade away. Sleep and my mother's arms bring relief.

* * *

[22] *Ja ciebie kocham* (pronounced "*ya chebieh koham*") = I love you

16

I am startled awake by a blast of noise. The train is howling for us. Slivers of pale sun creep through the slats overhead. I feel a forward pull on my body. The hum and whoosh and crunch of the train are changing. The beast is slowing.

I feel for Mamuś beside me. She smells of home: hay, soil, animal, milk and sweat.

"Mamuś, are we here?" I ask her.

"I don't know, Czesciu, we will have to wait and see," she says in my ear.

I try to see, but it's still so dark. The train stops. After a long while, the doors grind open, impatient like me. I wince. The cold morning light blinds my eyes. I shut them tight but only for a moment.

"Can we get off?" I ask Mamuś. I am hoping for food, water, and warmth. She shakes her head, "I don't think—"; the soldier appears. We turn our attention towards him. "Only two men are permitted to de-train, to fetch pails of water. Select amongst yourselves. You have one minute," he orders in Russian. The grown-ups exchange silent looks. Mamuś quietly urges Tatuś and Dziadziu to volunteer, look for bread, and get our bearings. They speak up first, so they are chosen. All the grown-ups agree to take turns should there be more stops.

My Tatuś and Dziadziu walk stiffly down the plank and disappear out of sight, followed closely by an armed soldier. I worry, and Mamuś and I both watch. We are scared. I breathe a choking, crying sound when they reappear. My Tatuś and Dziadziu plunk down buckets filled with precious hot water. Again, Tatuś and Dziadziu leave to get more. The grownups ration the water, not knowing how long it will be until our next stop. I am very, very grateful. I say *dziękuję*[23] to God. I squirm through the crowd, cupping my hands tight to scoop up the water when I reach the front. My mouth is so dry that it's hard to swallow! I drink and scoop and drink and scoop. My tongue

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[23] *Dziękuję!* (pronounced "*jien-ku-yeh*") = Thank you!

and throat rejoice. I let Mamuś take my place, and she drinks the same way, careful not to lose a drop. She is drinking for two.

My aim with the bucket is still not so good. I try to clean myself as best as I can, but there is no soap, and the water is cold. I give up fast. Shivering, my skin is bumpy, and my hairs stand tall where the water splashes. I should have asked for help because I only feel more chilled. With help, I clamber onto our shelf to guard our possessions while my family drinks. Tatuś tells me to be careful, or else someone could steal our food. We don't have enough to survive if we share. "In THIS world, *synu*, it is everyone for himself." I rehearse this in my head.

The doors are shuttered, and the dark returns. I sleep because the dark tells me to.

Groggily, I wake up sometime later. The air is darker, so it might be nighttime. With a squinty eye, I look through a crack. I miss my stars. I wonder if I will ever see them again, the stars, the sky, my animals.

I remember the water, and I crave more. I hop cat-like down from the platform, growing more familiar with my surroundings by sound and feel more than sight. I tiptoe to the pails, shocked to find the drinking water gone. I strain my eyes at the shapes of Mamuś and Tatuś, but they sleep on. My Babcia Zofia, holding a crying Danusia, beckons for me. Sitting between my grandparents, Babcia and Dziadziu, I ask her where the water went. "It's still there, Czesciu. It's just frozen."

"Why?"

"It is very cold, Czesciu. Without fire, the water has returned to ice in a short time," she tells me.

"Why?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"That's just what happens in the cold. Water freezes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

She looks annoyed with me (or herself) but has no answer.

I sit with this. "Oh," I say, "so I can't drink anymore?".

"*Nie*, someone tried putting the pail on the coal heater off the floor, but it only slowed the freezing. I hope it's not too long until we get more. We got very little before it froze again," she explains.

I feel thirsty and very bored. Reaching my fingers deep into my pants pocket, I feel my cool, smooth bullets. Together with my cousins, Władek and Tadek, we would hunt for these treasures around the farm like baby easter eggs. We'd light a little fire, throw the bullets into a metal pot, put the pot on the fire and RUN! Screaming and laughing, we ran until we were out of breath! Panting, we would turn around in time to see a great show of sparks and kabooms! The animals never liked the show. They would run in circles and *moo, baa, neigh, cluck, and quack*! We would roll in the grass, laughing and laughing until we were dizzy and our bellies ached. Thinking of this makes me happy and sad. I want to be there again, at home, with my cousins, my friends. Where are Władek and Tadek? Are they home in their own beds, wondering about me? Why were we taken? I wish I could play with them again.

I miss running.

I miss fun.

I miss laughing.

I miss sun.

No, I tell myself. The sad hurts too much. It's too hard. Hunger and cold are more painful when I let myself feel. I try to push deep down all the *wants*, *sads*, and *mads* to a place of no pain. Sometimes it works. I practice.

* * *

19

Time goes by like this: praying, toileting, drinking if there is water, eating cold pork fat, sleeping, sitting by the dead heater, whispering, praying, sleeping, feeling too much, feeling too little. During the day, our world is very dark; at night, it is much darker. The features of my family's faces blur. I wonder if my face has also disappeared. I don't remember what I look like. I know from what Mamuś has told me that I have fair hair and green eyes, and I know that I am smaller than other boys my age.

I am no longer scared of imaginary monsters; I have real ones to fear. Hope is a vanishing needle of light, a sliver between boards, a freezing pail of water. We live now with the twins, death, and dwindling hope. The cries are weaker, and the sick are sicker. The dead freeze forever mute. The music is one of desperation. I know these sounds will never be forgotten. My body and mind have made a recording.

I have learned to play inside my head. I am listless. When I am not sleeping, I am praying or remembering food. My tummy growls hard. It hurts bad. Mamuś instructs me to pray with her, bead by bead. It helps a little, the words, the rhythms, the repetition. For a time, I'm somewhere else, if only for a moment.

I have seen many animals die on the farm; Tatuś would make it quick so they didn't suffer. Seeing people near death is different. Tatuś says it is part of life. I don't like this part. The dead people smell. I wish it would stop. The air is thick with a horror we can't escape. I wonder if the dead are better off, no more suffering. They are free from the train. I never thought that way before this ride to hell. I think six and a half years is plenty enough if this train is forever. I hear Dziadziu say he'd rather die than suffer another day only to face worse ahead. I agree. It is very hard to keep hope.

Without opening my eyes, I come to know the sounds of the train, the stops, the clang of metal, the yell of men, and the keen of families as the dead are discarded. Bodies accumulate

at train station landings without ceremony. Adults, children, whole families, gone. It is the new normal.

As the days pass, the smell intensifies. It's the worst smell God created, enough to kill a skunk! Tatuś says it is "more horrid than buzzard vomit." We choke on it. We are that smell. I can't remember the last time we washed or changed our clothing. My sister's diapers are reused, dry but dirty. If there is water, we must drink it, not use it for bathing.

We eat salty pork fat Mamuś brought from the farm and bits of hard-to-chew bread. The fat is congealed and chewy. I hate it, but I am so hungry I eat it anyway. It makes me thirsty, so I try to eat it when we have water. No one cares that we are hungry. No one gives us food. It is every family for themselves.

3 WELCOME TO *CHOLERA:*
IN POLSKI, REFERS BOTH TO THE DISEASE AND PURGATORY

I am alive.
My pain tells me so.
The beast is slain.
The light pulls me out of the deep dark.
The air around me is visible, little puffs of cloud.
Inhale, exhale; the Siberian cold burns like fire.
I am Czesław.
I am a good boy.
I am numb.
I am alive.

The train slows and then halts, interrupting my thoughts. “What now?” I hear male voices, the loud clunk and grate of metal on metal. The cattle door opens painfully. The sun is sharp. It says ‘*Halo!’*.

“Disembark! Everyone!” a guard yells in Russian, not nicely, never nicely.

I turn to Mamuś and whisper, “What is *dis-em-bark*?”. Her lips tell me we are to leave the train. Her face tells me she is scared. I search her eyes for a place to land.

We gather our few, sad belongings and stumble out of the box, too weak to flee or fight. Climbing down, my legs wobble like a new colt. I am blinded by the pure white of snow and sun. Where is this place? It is much, much colder than I ever knew possible. I inhale the sharp metallic air, so cold it burns my nose. My feet are gone, dead, held stiffly in Tatuś’ old boots many-many sizes too big. I stumble. Outside the beast, in the visible air, I smile for the first time in forever (30 sleeps). My mouth moves wrong.

Is this the promised land?

4 NEXT STOP: KOTLAS GULAG
MARCH 14, 1940

Tatuś tells us that we aren't in *Polsce* anymore.

He says something about Kotlas Siberia to Mamuś.

"Tatuś, who is Kotlas Siberia?"

"*Nie synu*, we are in Kotlas, Siberia. It is a place. Part of Russia," he tells me.

"Why is it so c-c-cold[24]?"

[24] From November to March, the weather in Northern Siberia ranges from —40°F to —58°F! (—40°C to —50°C). Interestingly, Gabriel Fahrenheit was born in northern Polska. Siberia is known as the "Pole of Cold" since it surpasses temperatures at the North Pole; if poorly dressed for this weather, humans will freeze to death within minutes.

"We are North, far, far from home."

We are herded into an open sleigh. I fold into myself, curled between Mamuś and Tatuś. Mamuś lays a dirty blanket over us. We lean in close to keep warm. Mamuś holds Danusia against her chest, frightened for her survival. She is so tiny. This is no place for a baby. The wagon, filled with shivering families, goes nowhere. We wait. The cold is unbearable. Our breath makes little clouds. My Tatuś has tiny ice all over the hairs of his face. My eyelashes are heavy with crystals. Time stands still until my head nods off. Finally, hours or days later, the horses pull us toward the unknown.

We travel deep into the forgotten, deserted land– populated by more snow and evergreen trees. There are no people. Nothing moves but us. The snow is so high that the horses struggle. Everything outside the sleigh is white, a brighter white than I have ever known. The wind bites my eyes and makes them cry. I squint, but still, the light is blinding. I nestle into my Tatuś.

Gradually, the sun sets and the colours of bright white turn to shadows of grey blue purple. My nose, ears, fingers, and toes are gone. I check to see if they fell off. It's hard to be sure. I'm reassured to see my parents still have all their pieces. I try to speak, but my mouth and cheeks won't move right. It is very dark now except for the moonlight and sparks of flying stars. Time freezes, and my thoughts slow.

I find myself playing near a fire. I eat and drink. Suddenly I am flying above fields of summer. I am happy. I wave to Mamuś. Flying higher and higher, the sun warms my cheeks. The horses stop hard, hoofing, panting. I open my eyes with a start.

Snow swirls, white washing a grim wasteland of broken buildings arranged in rows. Surrounded by a fenced perimeter, I feel like a caged animal. There is no one in sight, no animals, no life. Is this our final destination? The sleigh enters the enclosure and stops before a tall, weathered tower. We hold

our breath. Eventually, a weathered soldier appears, carrying a gun. He yells at us in Russian; I only understand a few words. My parents translate:

"This is camp *Przewodnia*, a gulag[25] on the Dwina River, of which I am the chief Commander. This is now your prison. There are rules you must follow, or you will be executed. One — you are not to leave under any circumstances. Even if you try to escape, you won't make it far without freezing, AND we will shoot your family. Only those with explicit written permission can leave the camp. Two — All those 12 years old and above must provide labour in return for food. Every day, you will work cutting and logging trees to be sent downriver to the town of *Arkhangelsk*. We don't waste any food rations on the weak and lazy. You will be punished with less food if you do not work. Adults who meet their quota will receive 400g of bread and soup per day. Children will receive 200g. Some allowances will be given to buy more food and items in the local prison store[26]." He pauses, a fierce expression on his mean face. "That is all for now. Hail the Great Stalin and the motherland!" he howls.

I scream inside myself. I wonder about the man they call The Great Stalin and the Motherland. I don't like him or his mother.

My family is ordered to descend the wagon.

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[25] Stalin created many forced labour prisons, known as *gulags*, to rid the country of political prisoners who opposed his dictatorship. He capitalized on free labour before the prisoners died of exhaustion, illness, or malnutrition. Kotlas was a common region for prisoners to be deported for forestry labour. In the 1940s, it again hosted political prisoners and refugees, namely deported Poles and their families. Slavery was compulsory for all, regardless of age or physical condition; some children were given duties such as collecting food, water, and firewood. Prisoners lived in dire conditions in the gulags, made worse by the harsh weather, lack of medical care, and nutrition. As a corollary, vast numbers of people died every day; the mortality rate was 20-25% during this time.

[26] This system meant that the camp always got their money back!

We are assigned a *barak*[27]. In front of the hut, a pole perched in yellow snow and decorated with a worn, white flag flaps incessantly. We enter the little room. Large cracks breathe winter. The cold has made itself at home. Danusia cries. Maybe we all do. I run my fingers over and under the boards. Bare wooden bunks line the walls; there are no straw mats or anything to cushion or warm the benches. The floor is hard, frozen mud. In the corner of the room is a rusty bucket, which I use to relieve myself. I have been holding it forever. It is not so hard because we have not had any water today. Thirsty, I step outside to suck on the snow, but it sets off violent shivers I can't control. Mamuś unwraps one of the pots she packed, steps outside and fills it with snow. She sets it down on the dirt floor, and we sit to watch and wait. I know I will not get a drink anytime soon.

Not a home, not a house, just a structure with four thin walls, a roof of sorts, and a small dead window. I hate it.

Sometime later, still in shock, a horn blares from beyond. Tatuś opens the door of the *barak* and steps out cautiously. I run to peer from behind. Others do the same, opening doors with fearful faces. The soldier climbs down from the tower, yelling for everyone to assemble.

We gather stiffly in the bigger building, a poor room with old tables and benches and a small stove in the corner. People take their seats as commanded–except for a few restless children, who move to the stove, moths to the flame. Too soon, Mamuś motions for me to join them. As I do, my eyes land on the ripped and ugly posters. I ask Tatuś to read them aloud, "Labour in the USSR—it is a thing of honesty, of glory, valour, and heroism," and another, "The USSR is a land of peace and pride." Confused, I ask, "Can we go there instead?".

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[27] *Barak* (singular) or *Baraki* (plural) = translates to army barrack, which is a military-style hut built for labourers & prisoners.

The grownups speak in muffled worries, interrupted by a snarling soldier. Standing large, he commands with fear. An awful grating sound startles my attention. A rusty cauldron is pushed on demand toward the chief Commander. He announces, "This campsite retired many years ago. It has since been abandoned and worn itself out. If you want to freeze, do nothing. If you want to die, do nothing. If you want to live, cut wood tomorrow and the next day and the days after that. You will be given a few days to prepare your *barak* — patch the holes, etc.— then you will begin your work in the forest to complete your daily quota. Two male volunteers may remain to build fireplaces for all the *baraki* over the next week."

Tatuś gives Mamuś a look and stands up, raising his arm to draw attention. "I can do it," he announces. The soldier nods, "You have a week before you must join the others in the forest." As Tatuś sits, Mamuś argues with him, "But Gieniu, you know nothing about building such a fireplace!".

He whispers, "I know! But let's hope the other prisoner will! Besides, it has to be a better job than cutting wood in a deep freeze," he whispers. A man across the room, surrounded by many somber children, stands up. "Me," he volunteers in Russian.

Nodding, the soldier orders us to line up. He says soup will be served. I hope it is borscht soup, just like Mamuś makes on sick days. I dream about eating meat and sauerkraut too! I am so hungry, thirsty, and cold that I feel I will die. All I have eaten for 30 sleeps is pig fat and very little water. For that, I am considered lucky. Many have had no food. Some are near death. I can almost taste the hot food: meat, potatoes, bread. In a sharp voice, Tatuś tells me to stay close as we hurry to be served. I am handed my thin broth and bread first in my family. My uncles (Mamuś' brothers) are much older and told to wait like the adults. Gienek is 10 and Dolek is 13.

I scurry to the table, trying hard not to spill. The mud soup sloshes and I slow myself, afraid to lose a drop. The cold air

bites my tongue as I thrust it forward to steer my focus. I stop breathing while I eat. I don't spill and am very happy with myself. The world blurs at the edges. Nothing else matters. The soup is barely warm. The grownups hesitate; I hear their objections and pause to fish out the rotten potato and wormy cabbage. It tastes bitter and bad, but I am so hungry I don't care. I finish the slop. Next, I break my bread in two, shoving each piece into my mouth. I think I will choke. It is very hard. My small teeth struggle to chew. My jaw aches, but I manage to force it down.

"Mamuś, more?" I say in my good boy *voice*.

"I don't know, *synu,*" she says between mouthfuls, "…wait."

We watch as another child, all bones, approaches the guard. Hurling the child's bowl across the room, we have our answer. There will be no mercy here. Apart from the sounds of chewing and slurping, the room beats with fear. I remain in my seat, my stomach awakened and rumbling.

We stumble outside, still very hungry. The night wraps the camp in a mysterious banner of colours. We stare upwards as colourful lights dance to the edge of all we know. We consider this moment of beauty and try to forget everything else.

When I climb the bunk, it creaks, old and tired like Dziadziu's knees. We have one thin blanket. We sleep in our clothes, coat, and boots. I am weak; sleep comes quickly. Too soon, I wake. My skin itches, and I scratch through my coat without relief. I tense. My insides fill up, and I boil over. My itchy anger melts to tears.

"I can't sleep!" I sob in a hushed wail. Mamuś burrows into me, sharing her comfort.

"Shush, *synu*. It's the bug bites from lice and bed bugs. We all have them. There is nothing we can do now. Quiet Czesiu, quiet now," she says softly.

She lies next to me, and I rest my head on her arm. The bugs are relentless, but for a time, I feel safe in her world[28].

* * *

Over the week that follows, dawn till dusk, my Dziadziu, Dolek, and Mamuś are gone to cut wood. Babcia is allowed to watch over Danusia, Gienek, and me. Tatuś stays back to assemble fireplaces. Neither man has ever built such a thing. In the end, they successfully construct a square wood-burning fireplace out of bricks, in the middle of all the *baraki*, with a chimney and a wide rough platform above the fire large enough to roast a family. Luckily, I am small, so my feet don't hang over the sides.

To insulate us from the deadly creep of winter, Tatuś also patches the holes between the wooden walls with whatever he can find, chunks of wood and pieces of moss and rags.

We smell so bad it makes me laugh! Eventually, we are allowed to visit the *bania*[29] and get clean; we do this once a week. When I undress, lice fall off in *handfuls.* I discover red spots and long bloody scratches everywhere. My body isn't my own; it belongs to the bugs! My home, my animals, my sky, my skin— all stolen!

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[28] Crowding and poor sanitation resulted in gulag vermin infestations. As a result, it was not uncommon for louse-borne typhus to spread quickly through these areas, which resulted in countless deaths.

[29] *Bania* (pronounced "*bania*") = Russian bathhouse

Steam fills the *bania* room, released by the heated stones being dropped in a barrel of water. It is comforting but not warm enough to bring total relief. There isn't enough warm water for our family to bathe in, so we sponge off instead. I barely manage to get clean with only a damp, dirty rag and no soap. We also don't have any clean, spare clothes, so I re-dress in the same soiled rags.

Because my family works hard, we are given a small allowance for the Gulag store. Mamuś buys potatoes, cabbage, cigars, and *walonki*[30]. I wish for socks and underwear next time.

Time stops during the dark of winter. I hibernate inside myself. Maybe one day, freedom, food, and kindness will grow again. I struggle to imagine that. While my parents work in the woods, Babcia herds and cares for us with little means. She talks, teaches, and sings– but the days are long and without amusement. There are no toys, no books, and no distractions beyond itchy bug bites. To fill the time, I sometimes pray but mostly dream. Days pass. I wait, scratch, cry, and worry for my parents. I wipe my eyes, scared they will freeze forever shut. I'm scared I'll go blind like the *living dead*, who stumble about the gulag, haunted; their eyes are open, but they cannot see[31]. They wave their arms stick-like, feeling their way as

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[30] *Walonki* (pronounced "*valonki*") are traditional Slavic footwear are made of thick wool felt that rises to the knee. They are valuable winter boots so only those fortunate enough could own them. If families couldn't afford them, they would instead wrap their feet in rags or trade with those who had money.

[31] Commonly referred to as the "night-blind", many prisoners suffered from partial blindness due to malnutrition and vitamin deficiency. Some believed it was the result of bearing witness to haunting tragedies. In a way, they became prisoners not only of Russia but also of their bodies. Many slang terms for the dying were used, such as *fitili* or "wicks" (like the wick of a candle, soon to die out). In their last days, they stopped being seen as people at all: they were delirious, demented, and dehumanized.

they move surely toward death. Ghost-like, I worry they will pull me under. This place would make a good Hell if God is searching for new locations!

* * *

It's late night and nearly pitch black when I am pulled from sleep by whispers and smoke—my nose wrinkles. I hear the adults whisper the escape words.

"Why don't we try? I think we could make it," he says quietly, probably pulling on his cigar. I imagine the ribbons billowing as he breathes. I imagine it warms the air around us.

"Where would we go? It's fifty below, and the nearest railroad is twenty kilometres through high snow," she pushes, "even the horses struggled." The smoke dances a deep sad sigh, "I just know I can't do this much longer," he says, "…this isn't living. It's dying."

"What about the children?" she insists.

"*What* about the children?" he asks.

"How can we leave with small children? Danusia is only a baby," she pauses. "Gieniu, I cannot lose another baby. I won't survive if I bury a tiny body again.…" Silence fills the air, followed by the sigh of a bitter wind. "Jezus Maryja, Jezus Maryja. I don't have it in me." I hear the familiar soft sound of Mamuś hands coming alive. When upset, she rubs her forehead. Worse, when her nose begins to wrinkle and twitch, it's never a good sign. I am brought home for a moment, remembering when her hands first started that now-familiar movement. Motionless in the kitchen corner, I see her in my memory. She's holding Leszek's body. I hear her terrible scream for Tatuś. He runs in from the field; the baby is grey, his lips a deep purple, and his little face swollen with effort. His coughing and strange grunting has stopped. There is a

scary silence. There is no air left for him to breathe. His fight is over. I feel big feelings, remembering how I'd wished for silence and my brother's crying to stop. I never meant forever! I worry it is my fault. He died because of me. My thoughts killed him. I feel sick. I can't tell anyone, especially Mamuś. I think a part of her died that day. I promise God never to think those thoughts again, even about Danusia. I don't want to kill anyone.

I pull my knees to my chest. The room is airless and crushing. My heart beats fast. I feel helpless and sad. I don't want to lose anyone ever again.

"*Nie*, we must stay…" she says, "too risky."

"Maria—" he says.

"Gieniu, we've got to… for the children, for my parents," she says. Quieter this time, "We die… they die. Orphaned, they will not survive. But if we stay here, stay strong, and stay smart, we might survive."

"I think we can do it," he tries again.

"What's the point? We wouldn't get far in this weather," she says.

He sighs, "We could start a life in *Przewodnia* if we have to. We could walk to the village at night; no one would suspect we escaped until sunrise. We'd be in the clear."

"*Nie*, Gieniu. I've walked the distance. It's not possible with the children. They would send police or soldiers to search."

"We need to try…" he insists, "Why are you fighting me? Don't you hate this too?".

The talking bounces between them.

"Be reasonable. We are farmers, not soldiers. It's a death sentence to leave the camp."

"And it's a death sentence to stay," he says. With that, I fall asleep.

5 GULAG
SPRING & SUMMER 1940

The world has thawed, and the frost has melted! The grass wakes up, and I taste it, new and sweet. I collect longer, soft strands to make mats for the bunks, twigs for kindling, and mud to fix holes in the walls of our *barak*.

It is not long before I learn that wolves, foxes, and bears aren't the only life that has thawed. The bugs are huge and plentiful, rabid for new meat. The bite of horseflies, gnats and mosquitoes brings a new torment. The *ZZZzz* of mosquitos at sleep time is crazy making. The spring and summer mornings unfold like every other. I rub my eyes awake and lay in the bunk, tummy growling and hoping for food.

This morning is no different. I venture outside on an empty stomach for the second day in a row. I see Gienek tracing a pattern over and over with a stick in the small, slushy patch of dirty snow. With little energy, I move toward him–nearly slipping. "*Dzień dobry*[32]," I say, before asking if he will play with me. As usual, he says no. Gienek has always been a lost sheep. Near the edge of the camp, I see barrels poking out of the snow melt. They invite me to climb them. I call for Gienek to join me, and surprisingly he does.

"What do you think is in these?" I ask as I do a big twisty jump off a barrel. I fall into the soft snow, cushioning my landing.

"Food?" he says, his eyes growing wide.

"Maybe it's filled with warm donuts like Mamuś makes for dessert," I say, excited.

"Don't tease! I can't bear it!" but he laughs in spite of himself.

"Or toys!" I suggest hopping back on a barrel.

"Really, toys? That's for babies. You have to think bigger, better. I bet it's a treasure, gold, diamonds or —"

"Money?" I add. I can feel my eyes widening, hopeful. Tatuś would be so proud of me! I would be a hero again and save my family! Maybe we could buy our freedom home?

"*Tak*… loads of treasure!" he says, a grin growing on his face. He might be teasing, but I hope not. *What if!* My heart beats faster. I pray for it to be real.

"Let's open it!" Gienek says. He tries to pry the lid with his hands but finds it stuck. I try a stick, but it snaps in two. We have no other tools. At dusk, after Tatuś and Dziadziu return to the *barak*, Gienek and I take turns telling them about the treasure, excited, pleading for help. The grownups are equally curious, and eventually, a barrel succumbs to their measures.

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[32] *Dzień dobry* (pronounced "*jien dobreh*") = Good morning

A thrill courses through me! I peer inside, greeted by a strange, smelly substance. Maybe the food has gone rotten, like in this camp. Tatuś gingerly dips his fingers in, feeling the goop.

"Grease," says my Dziadziu.

"*Grease*?" I say flatly, deflated. I'm little, but I know it won't feed my family.

Our collective silence is interrupted by the siren for meals, and I drool on cue. We cover the barrels and promise to return.

With everyone in a huddle at the table, slurping our meagre portions, Tatuś shares his ideas about the barrels. He believes the grease might have been for the trains but was likely forgotten years ago.

"What can we do with it?" Dolek, my young uncle, asks.

"It is not edible," adds Babcia.

Mamuś chimes in, suggesting we make soap since we have none. Back on the farm, because we were poor and couldn't afford to waste anything, Mamuś would save fat for fruit and meat pies, candles, and soap. I watched her do it when I wanted to play near her. First, she would boil the grease outdoors in a large black pot over an open fire. With a long paddle, she would stir and stir forever, and all available adults would take a turn. Once the animal rind and meat began to float, she would pour it through a *lard press*. She would let me snack on the floaty bits, and I would share them with the animals. Buckets of red-hot fat were then stuck in the snow to cool. To make soap, she would boil the cooled ashes into a mixture called *lye*; she would add this to the animal fat and cook it all together. Like magic, this would become the hard soap we used for everything around the farm, clothes, linens, pots, and skin.

Mamuś and Tatuś plan to make the soap before sunrise, but God has other plans. We all fall ill that night. “Cholera” bleats Babcia. No one sleeps; Danusia is howling, the room smells terrible, and our stomachs hurt more than ever. Seeing Mamuś and Tatuś very sick scares me a lot. Mamuś is very worried; Danusia has lost her tears, and her eyes look strange. Mamuś fusses and flutters over my baby sister’s misery. Without diapers, clean clothing, and soap, we smell like the devil himself. We finish all of our water and crave more. My stomach is being run over by a train. *If this is how I die, Jesuz, please make it quick*.

At sunrise, I am still alive, but I think I will die. My head hammers.I am very thirsty and very weak. There are no sick days in the Gulag. The adults must still work to complete their quotas or die. Determined, however ill or exhausted, they plan to make soap that evening. Babcia says the soap will protect us from sickness and help with our healing. We can use it to wash our hands before touching our food.

The adults labour the grease into soap that evening and into the late velvet night. Though still sick, our moods lift a little. Everyone celebrates! Eventually, they trade some of the precious soap with other families in exchange for rations, food, and clothing.

Despite a little more food here and there, my stomach is always hurting and empty. Food is so scarce that good potatoes (like soap!) are currency. The potatoes are almost always rotten in the camp, and the dark rye bread is usually stale and mouldy. The food and water that we depend on make us sick. That doesn't stop us from eating; we have no choice. As one adult says, “Pick your poison: cholera or starvation. But both kill”.

But I learn that if those don't kill you first, then desperation will. Such is the fate for some men in the gulag, so overcome by hunger that they steal from the gulag or village. It isn't long, however, before they, too, vanish. Some say they are killed or sent to a much worse gulag if that exists. Gienek says they are probably fed to Stalin and his wolves.

To forget their troubles, on special occasions, the adults trade a meal for vodka, a magic juice they drink together on warm nights. I love how their talking turns to goofy songs. They even laugh! I don't understand why this drink makes them so happy; I try a big sip and choke – it's not a happy feeling!

For the children, happy times are found in the river, splashing each other. This changes the day it is my turn to be Finder in a game of blind tag[33]. Swimming and searching through the water, I feel something brush my fingers. I cheer, "Got you!". Opening my eyes, I expect to see the face of another child. Instead, I am greeted by a white foot with purple toes.

I freeze in horror at the sight of the floating corpse attached to those toes.

All the screams pour out of me then.

A chorus of children screams with me.

Grownups arrive. They pull him out, bloated and blue.

I hear he was a man from the gulag who left behind a wife and children as little as Danusia.

I decide to never, ever swim in the river again.

However, the next morning I completely forget and jump in belly-first!

[33] Where one child, the "Finder", must keep their eyes closed and call out to find by sound, then touch the others.

6 GULAG
FALL 1940

It's been 6 or 7 months since we arrived in Siberia, and my bones are starting to show. Mamuś is more worried than ever. With coins that Tatuś earns from the sale of our soap and unexpected permission from the gulag, he and Mamuś decide to send me to the Russian school in the local village. More than education, they hope the school will feed me. Babcia leads me there the next morning, taking a shortcut through a gap in the fence and across a flat field of snow that stretches forever. She trudges in front of me, breaking ground. I make it a game to step only in her big, hoof-like footprints. She carries a sleeping Danusia on her back, head bobbing with every step. I struggle to keep up and my little legs quickly tire. I begin to stagger and beg to turn back, but she presses on. I try to ignore my feelings

by thinking about the meal that awaits me. I imagine a table covered with *kielbasa, pierogi*, and *kaszanka*[34] as far as my eye can see. This reward keeps me going.

We meet the children in the warm school. Many are my height, but they seem younger. In a blur, Babcia hands a woman coins and gestures towards me; "Czesław," she tells the woman. I ask Babcia if we are in the right place. I don't see food. There's nothing here! Ignoring my cries, Babcia lifts my chin with her soft, woolly hands, tells me to be polite, eat as much as possible, and that she will return later. My heart triple beats as I watch her go, scared and alone. I have never been away from my family. Panicking, I look from the woman to the other children. I feel like a rabbit surrounded by wolves. Maybe I am the food!

The day goes by like any other: miserably. But uniquely so.

The bravest children eventually approach me, curious and talking, but I don't understand most of what they say. They use words I've never heard before. Why can't they speak Polish? This must be a very bad school. They stare like I am dumb! The teacher tries to talk to me, but I cannot understand her words or gestures. Her thick brows sigh; she gives up and turns away. I am the only Polish child in the class. Nothing in this frozen place is easy. Fortunately, when they feed me better bread and soup, I forget for a moment how scared and bad I feel.

Over the following weeks, the teacher sits me down to teach the Russian alphabet, but I don't want to learn Russian– I don't want anything to *do* with these people. I hate this room and how it makes me feel trapped for long hours. Alone but not alone. Being different feels bad. Now when I am spoken to or asked a question, I smile and tell them what I think about this "*stupid stupid stupid school"*. I tell them what I think about

[34] *Kielbasa* are pork sausages, *Pierogi* are stuffed dumplings, and *Kaszanka* are blood sausages.

this country. I repeat the things I've heard Mamuś and Tatuś saying about Russians. I share my anger, and it feels wonderful. I am a skin-covered landmine! The teacher looks surprised but confused; she does not know what I am saying! I will not be punished!

Back in the camp, I beg Babcia and Mamuś not to make me go back. I only want the food. Mamuś begs me to stay with the school just a little longer to graze and to add meat to my bones. I am saved by the cold weather moving in thick and fast.

7 GULAG
DECEMBER 1940

I learn of bad news from a late talk between Mamuś and Tatuś, who look weaker by the day. With luck rarely on our side, I learn that our soap has lost its value; most families have enough. Tatuś suggests that we ply our trade beyond the prison. Perhaps the villagers in Kotlas, the neighbouring town, might welcome a little soap.

"What if we are caught?" Mamuś whispers, "they will kill us and the children".

"The children will die of hunger if we don't," he says, "we

will be careful– go late at night, quietly."

"Okay, you go," she says worriedly.

"No, I should stay to protect Danusia and Czesiu in case you get caught," he says.

There is a long pause, then she asks, "When?".

"Tonight."

My heart speeds up machine-gun fast. "Mamuś, don't go," I cry, welling up. She kisses my wet cheek and whispers, "*Ja ciebie kocham*".

I cling to her, using all my strength to make her stay. "Mamuś no, please! Don't go!"; I am sobbing hard now, my tummy flipping. She cups my chin, peels my hands, and tells me, "*Dobranoc!*[35] Be good, be *strong like borscht*". She packs up the soap, pulls on her furry *walonki*, and opens the door to the blackness. Gone. The hairs on my arms stand in wait. I refuse to sleep, though my head falls and my eyes close. The space she fills in me is empty and sharp.

I awake to the wind and the creak of a door. My Mamuś is back!

But this Mamuś is broken and empty-handed.

"What happened? You couldn't trade?" Tatuś asks.

"I did," she says bleakly. The slivers of moonlight show me her cheeks are shiny.

She is rigid and slow as she sits on the bunk. Tatuś repeats his question. She doesn't speak.

He jumps down. "Maria. Maria?" he says, cupping her chin for a better look; "Why are you crying?". My heart thumps. She flops onto the bunk.

"I can't," she whimpers, "not now."

Tatuś reaches for her again, maybe trying to bring her back to us. His hand hovers over hers, pausing before pulling it back.

She lays, unmoving, for the rest of the night. He sits at her

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[35] *Dobranoc!* (pronounced "*do-brah-nots*") = Goodnight!

feet, silent and still. My questions boom loudly inside. “Tatuś?” I whisper.

“Sleep, *synu*”, he orders. It is not hard to obey. I fall hard into sleep.

I open my eyes the next morning to see Mamuś surrounded by the family. She speaks like she just ran, pausing every few words to breathe. Too slowly, she describes her many-kilometre trek through the waist-high snow to Kotlas and her trade with a farm woman. While trudging back with potatoes, she passes a building with chimney smoke. Cold and tired, it beckons her; “I promised myself only a few minutes inside… until I could feel my feet again,” she says, “I was desperate.” She pants with ragged breaths. I only now notice how raw she looks, her clothes a mess. She does not seem like herself.

“But I was not alone…” she says, pausing to look away. Continuing now, with eyes shut tight, “The room was full of Russian soldiers.”

The news chokes me. I forget to breathe. I imagine my Mamuś alone with those mean men: the thieves who stole our farm, the soldiers who shoot fathers in front of their children, the terrible men who locked us in a train without food forever. I hurt all over.

“They all stopped and stared; their eyes were dead and hungry. I had nothing on me, no way to protect myself. I couldn’t move or think. I was frozen, my legs stunned-still. I was a hare in a wolf den and they knew it too,” she says, haunted, part of her still trapped.

“You’re okay now, Mamuś,” I remind her, again and again, to still her trembling.

Finally, my Babcia asks, “Maria, did they hurt you?”.

“*Mmh mmh,*” she mumbles, nodding her head. “They didn’t kill me,” she shivers and her nose twitches, "they let me go. But… the potatoes, the soap, they took it all,” she says flatly. What is she not saying? I am scared.

I never want her to go trading again; it’s too dangerous. I

tell everyone this, but nobody listens. Babcia busies herself cleaning the blood stains. Mamuś doesn't talk or move at all until evening mealtime. She walks very slowly, with a big grimace, to dinner. Watching her in pain makes me feel like I am going to be sick.

In the weeks following, always after full days of logging trees, she takes many more dark trips to Kotlas. Why she goes, I do not understand. With every parting, I worry it is the last of her. Luckily, she returns to our burrow every time with some combination of potatoes, stories, tips, or news. I take this to mean that she has not been cornered again. I hope that is true. I choose to believe this and do not ask.

The adults in the gulag wonder if the world has forgotten them, never to leave, forever trapped. But, after one of her village ventures, Mamuś shares a new perspective. As I listen in, she relays her story to Tatuś and Babcia.

"The villagers envy us!" Mamuś says with intensity.

"Why?" asks Babcia in disbelief.

"They say we may be prisoners now, but we have a chance for freedom, perhaps sooner than later," Mamuś recounts, "the villagers say they, Russian citizens, are the real prisoners. Prisoners of the system –they cannot speak their minds or live their dreams. They must conform to the communist party. Neighbours spy on neighbours. No one dares to dream or talk of escape. There's no hope. They are serving a life sentence… in a chicken coup surrounded by wolves… and no one is coming to save them…".

8 GULAG
FEBRUARY 1941

I wake to a noise in the hut, with the adults, Dolek, and Gienek huddled around Dziadziu's bunk. Babcia Zofia is crying, praying, and cursing; "How could he do this to me?" she wails.

"What's wrong?" I ask, wiping away the sleep. My words are visible puffs. The frost greets me that morning with a kick to my hurting chest. Mamuś walks over and sits close to me. "Czesiu," she says, "your Dziadziu, my Tatuś… he—" her voice catches at the edges, "he died last night of a broken heart." She places her hand gently on my knee, averting my stare.

I have never known an adult I love to die. Despite our surroundings, I never believed it was truly possible. It happens

to other people, cows, *sheeps*, and chickens. I thought I understood everything now that I'm seven, but I woke up today, and everything has changed again. Where did Dziadziu go? Will he remember me? Does this mean that Tatuś and Mamuś might also die without saying *do widzenia*? Could they leave me in the night when I am asleep? My head is sick. I whimper, squeeze my eyes hard, reach for Mamuś, and throw up.

I search through the noise of words and feelings; "Mamuś, w-why, what happened?". Mamuś tearfully tells me his story of heartbreak: "All he ever wanted was to be rich. He worked his whole life towards this dream, scrimping and saving his *złoty*. As you know, after my oldest brother, Janek, and I were born, he left our family for America to work and earn money. He left when I was just little. He was gone for many years, doing terrible jobs for little pay— like stoking a foundry furnace in Chicago. It was back-burning labour. He spoke no English and had only ever farmed. He sent money home and eventually returned. I think I was six years old at the time. I didn't remember him at all; he was a stranger, with new rules…" she pauses, sadness in her eyes, "He would not allow my brother Janek nor I to remain in school past the third year. I loved learning and never forgave him for it. All he wanted in life was to be rich. He put us to work on the farm, guarding our animals against thieves. After my little brothers, Dolek and Gienek, were born, he packed up our home and moved the family east to Jasionów, where he rebuilt the house, brick by brick, from the ground up. There, we farmed. Recently, he became more financially successful, lending people money for mortgages. You may not know this, but he was the wealthiest person in the village; his dream had finally come true. And then the Russians arrived and took it all. It was all for nothing. Heartbroken, his dream vanished, as did he, overnight" Her lips quiver, "He was only 45 years old." I sit on the edge of the bunk, my legs swinging nervously. I don't know what to say,

so I pat her on the shoulder and sing, "Shhhh-shhh *Mamuś*. You have to be *strong like borscht*."

I lie back and curl into the straw. I lick my lips, tasting the salt of loss. I watch the grownups struggle. When a catholic person dies in *Polsce*, there is a funeral with a long church mass. The body is placed in a coffin and buried. From what I've seen in the gulag, there are no coffins, priests, or ceremonies. The adults agree that no blankets can be spared to wrap his body. Tatuś pulls off all the outer layers that Dziadziu has been wearing: his wool coat, shirts, pants, and the cloth wrapped around his feet. They lift him up. I shiver. He has no clothes, and I worry he will be cold. I jump off the bunk to follow, leaving Danusia in the *barak* because I don't want to carry her. I pad behind them, watching from a distance. My feet and legs are trapped in the snow piled high around my knees. The grown-ups place his body on the stack of frozen, naked bodies at the side of the camp. Babcia leans down and moves her fingers from her lips to his forehead. I'm afraid to get close. Looking up, I say a prayer for my Dziadziu. I hope he can hear me and will watch over us. I scan the big sky, expecting to see him flying above. I hope he is with the angels and never feels cold or hungry again. Maybe he is eating a feast in Heaven at this very moment. That brings me comfort.

9 GULAG
SPRING & SUMMER 1941

This morning, unlike any other, I awaken to the sharp, familiar sound of *bleats* and *baahs*. For a moment, I am in *Polsce*. I squint to see Mamuś closing the door quietly. Two small shapes stand beside her. "*Baah,*" they greet us as Mamuś begins to speak. "I traded for goats!" she says excitedly. I am awake now! With a tingle of curiosity and delight, we gather around to see and touch.

I try to think up names for my new friends, but nothing good comes to mind. I feel so dull[36]. I eventually settle on

[36] It has been reported that during times of war, traumatized children living in dire conditions can lose their sense of imagination and creativity.

"Potato" and "Soup"; things I see every day.

The warming weather excites me a little. I begin to roam for adventure. I explore everything within the barbed-wire fence of our camp. I mostly walk in circles until I tire myself out, my feet sore and cold. I pass by the dead every day, where I make out my Dziadziu's still frozen hand. As the snow melts, the winter's toll is revealed. None will be buried until the air warms and the ground thaws. I pray for spring.

Each week, the pile of bodies grows larger, and with it, the retched smell returns. The sight is terribly disturbing and yet no different than a pile of wood or stack of hay. I forget that life was different in *Polsce*. I can't remember the day I stopped caring or being bothered by it; it must have happened gradually, without thought.

I no longer see the children I played with last summer; Mamuś says most died over the winter, taken by disease and malnutrition. The man who helped build the fireplaces with Tatuś lost all eight of his children. I am quarantined in the *barak* and told not to play with those that remain. She's afraid I'll catch the *sick*. *Always a prisoner.*

Being trapped in the *barak* with my goat friends has its upsides. They are naughty and goofy and fun! I chase, tease, and imitate them. They even teach me to butt heads! I am very attached; they're nearly as good as a ball or a friend! They make me giggle, especially when they charge at everyone who enters the *barak*!

However, I don't enjoy being stuck in a small space with a baby all day. I feel cranky around her! She's one and a half years old and no fun at all. She's a tiny, weak little thing: she drools and rolls but mostly fusses or cries. My head hurts each and every time. The adults worry because she is too small and cannot crawl, walk, or talk. I think she must be dumb because it is very easy for me! I say, "Repeat after me," but she does not! I tease her. She blinks back. Maybe she is broken? I make goofy faces – but again, she only stares, unamused. Not a

giggle, not even a smile! I think she's a waste of food! I want a different one, preferably a boy closer to my age– one who can run, play, and tell stories! We could butt heads together, fall down laughing, and do it again! I try to reason with Mamuś, "You can take Danusia back now. She's useless. I'd like a brother instead, please." She frowns in response to me. More than a blink, at least I get a reaction from someone!

Soon and fast as a blink, Danusia is covered in tiny bubbles of pink. She screams so loud I must head outside for breaks. Babcia says she has smallpox. They tell me I had the disease when I was little, but I don't remember it. I'm sure I did not cry like my sister!

One mysterious day, Potato and Soap vanish. My heart hurts, but I don't stay sad for long; I am handed tender meat that evening! It tastes like summer, laughter and happy days all rolled into one bite. My headache lifts. Soon after, my missing companions are replaced with a bigger and better treasure: a cow! From this generous friend, we drink delicious, warm, frothy milk for the first time since we left the farm. Like magic, I feel calm, full, and sleepy thanks to the camp commandant that gave Mamuś permission. We keep the cow with us inside the *barak* at all times. The people in the gulag are so hungry they would not hesitate to eat my new friend if given a chance. There is no heart in a place like this. Everything is a transaction for survival. And so, just like the goats, the cow becomes our most treasured and most smelly roommate. It poops everywhere and all the time! And if stepping in poo all day is not bad enough, its "derrière fills the room with fresh *dairy air*" (as Gienek calls it)! Without fault, the adults groan and cough every time it farts, but I giggle uncontrollably. Tatuś bets the beast gives off enough dairy gas to fuel a small Polish village in a single day!

As the days slush and soften towards late spring, staying locked in a fart-filled *barak* becomes harder to bear! Eventually, the adults decide the cow has lived its milk life.

It's too big a risk to move it again for mating. We eat (and breathe!) like kings that night. Still, I am confined inside for fear of infection. I crave fresh air and real friends to play with. From my tippy-toes, I watch the outdoors through the small window. It seems blindingly bright after the long dark of winter's death. I watch as the world changes, the snow vanishes, and the birdsong returns.

Now that the ground has thawed. Tatuś suggests a proper burial for Dziadziu. I am excited to leave the *barak* for the first time in forever. The evening arrives after a very long wait. As darkness approaches, we step into the night.

We walk quietly towards the forest with my Dziadziu, carried and covered in old rags. I see many mounds of dirt turned and decorated with leaves, rough carvings, wildflowers, or other markings. The forest is unsettled with the dead we once loved. At the first available spot, Tatuś, Dolek, and Gienek begin to dig a shallow grave. I stand, watching and shivering with Mamuś, Babcia and little Danusia. The grownups eventually lower my Dziadziu into the ground; we pray in whispers as we take turns throwing handfuls of the cool forest onto his body. After my turn, I glance at Mamuś, her face in pain. The wind plays harmony to our breathy whispers. I wrap my arms around my Mamuś, and together, we sway and pray. The trees seem to join us. The whole of the forest cries with us that night.

In the days that follow, the evidence of our grief, and a quiet reminder of my Dziadziu, is the dirt beneath my nails. I leave it there, afraid to lose the last of him.

The months creep into the mosquito days of summer. They find their way into our *barak*. Despite her scare with smallpox, Danusia survives. We two are the only children to survive the summer.

10 GULAG
WINTER 1941-1942

"Scurvy," a "*vitamin sea deficient sea*," is our next battle, and we face it together. My gums are swollen, purple, and bleeding; Tatuś loses a few teeth. I tell him to put them under his pillow for the Tooth Fairy; she leaves little treasures! I hope she can find her way to the Gulag.

Some days, I feel too dizzy, tired, and short of breath to move or stand. We are starving. Sleeping is hard. My skin is covered in cuts and painful sores that do not heal; my entire body hurts. Danusia, now two years old, has stopped growing, crawling, walking, and talking– she has even lost some hair! Mamuś, determined but empty and dry, continues to nurse Danusia. Even I can see it is not enough; my little sister is tiny

and once again dull like a dolly.

On one of her trading expeditions, Mamuś learns from women in the village about an elixir to treat scurvy. Inspired, she strips and pockets the bark from the freshly logged evergreens. She boils the bark, and we drink a dark, bitter tea. Once the tea is made, she teaches us to chew on the inner layers of the boiled bark, like beef jerky. I don't mind this part so much; the wood is slippery, smooth, and almost sweet. By eating trees, we survive scurvy and hunger.

11 LEAVING THE GULAG
FEBRUARY 1942

In the game of war, played by heads of state, civilians are the pawns. Suddenly the odds are in our favour, and *Polska* is no longer the enemy of Russia[37]. We are free! However, we must be granted permission to leave from the soldier-in-charge. My Babcia and her teen sons, Dolek and Gienek,

[37] The USSR joined the British Allies in June 1941 after Germany invaded the USSR, betraying the secret non-aggression pact of August 1939 (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). Due to this newly forged alliance, Polish prisoners in Russia were no longer considered enemies of the state. After many months, they were finally released from gulags to travel vast distances again. Of the 1.7 million exiles, approximately 10% survived to travel to unknown places.

receive their freedom papers. Everyone hugs and they leave the very next morning without us. We watch them go. I am filled with feelings bigger than me. We have no idea if, when, or where we will see them again.

Tatuś asks permission for our family to leave, but we are forbidden. We are ordered to stay longer than most so that he can draw a detailed map of the forest. This way, the Gulag will remain operational if more prisoners are brought in. Eventually, my family and I – the 4 of us remain alone in the camp with the chief guard and his gun. Will *Polska* be a friend to Russia long enough for us to escape?

Tatuś does what he's asked, and a very very long time later (like two weeks or two weekends), we are granted "am-nest-tea" for our crimes against the motherland. "Sins that were never committed," Tatuś sputters. I wonder how it can be a sin to breathe, to be Polish. Religion and war muddle my mind. Is it worse to be dead or alive? They say my Dziadziu is in a better place. I hope I can visit. If God loves me, why am I here? I shake off these too-big thoughts. I say a happy *do widzenia* to the past.

In a familiar blur, I watch Mamuś pack. This time, I know it's for the better. Away from the gulag must be better.

We are given food ration cards and a sleigh ride to the nearest railway station. I await my new life—destination: unknown.

As the sleigh pulls away, the camp's gravity releases its hold, shrinking back into itself. Our scurvy smiles grow larger. Millions of snowflakes dance down and around, but I don't feel cold. Instead, I tingle with hope, an unfamiliar feeling. Free and light and happy. We were prisoners, now allies, now free! My heart quickens, scaring myself, fearing we will be stopped and sent back. I try on a deep breath from my toes to my nose for the first time in years.

* * *

After many long hours, the train arrives in a burst of noise and smells, the familiar stench of cattle and waste. A whistle blows. We are no longer prisoners, but still, we are shuttled, forced to ride the cattle cars in far worse conditions than our arrival. We are propelled forward by the desperate stampede of the starved. To leave is to live. Box 14 is tagged with surnames, including ours, Żegliński. I hesitate, and Mamuś calls for me to wait; she is changing Danusia's bum.

"Do we have to get on the train Tatuś? Is there no other way out?" I plead. Tatuś begins to shake his head but then grows still. Something catches his eye.

"You see there, that one? We can maybe… but we might get caught…" he thinks quietly in my ear. Next to the packed boxcar, holding dozens of people, sits one that is empty.

Suddenly the air fills with screams. Monstruous raptors encircle us overhead, dropping bullets and bombs our way. I freeze.

Once I realize how real this is, I scream.

Find Tatuś.

I need to find Tatuś.

I force my legs to move. They don't.

I don't breathe.

He finds me frozen as a deer. He grabs my hand and pulls me to motion. Unstuck, we run to the train, with Mamuś and Danusia in pursuit. Tatuś quickly lifts us high into the train and hoists our belongings into the empty Box 15. He is the eye in our storm. Mamuś cups my face, intensely asking, "*Jak się masz?*[38]*"*.

"I'm okay, Mamuś," I say, wanting a hug. She nods and

[38] *Jak się masz?* (pronounced *"yak sheh mash*") = How are you?

pulls away too soon.

I search for Tatuś, who I realize isn't in the box with us. Still on the station platform, I watch as he quickly switches the boxcar's name tags before pulling himself up to join us.

"Tatuś, what did you do?" I ask, walking closer to him. He grins at me with his goofy Tatuś smiles like he has the world's best secret. He whispers, "*Synu*, in life, sometimes you have to think outside the box," and winks. Although confused, I decide to treasure this wisdom. I engrave it in my memory, saving it for a day when I may understand.

A few remaining people struggle toward the box cars. Tatuś motions them over. "In exchange for money or food," he bargains, "we will share our cabin." A handshake, two loaves of bread, and 22 rubles later: we have companions. The train stirs, and the grownups slam the door shut. The familiar darkness settles within.

As the dragon begins to heave forward, pulling us further from desolation, cheers erupt. We laugh, cry, and laugh.

12 TRAIN THROUGH RUSSIA
MARCH 1942

After two-many days rotting again in the belly of the beast, we make our first stop. The doors open with a bang loud enough to wake the dead. The sun has risen to greet us. Its warm, pink glow fails to hide the reality of this bleak place. I watch Tatuś and the other men rise quickly. They jump off to find villagers, trading ration cards for food and water. Sometime later, Tatuś returns with a corner piece of blackened, bitter bread and a saucepan of warm water. He rips the food into pieces and hands me my portion. I eat the stone-hard bread too fast, sad when it is gone. My stomach now

growls, wide awake. I forget what it is like to feel replete with basic needs: warmth, food, water, comfort, and safety.

Shouts call from nearby. I am pulled out of myself as the train begins to chug. I steal one last look before the door is latched, catching a glimpse of a frail man limping toward us. His face is haunted. He is panting hard as the train gathers itself, without kindness, moving faster and faster. The man's legs are thin and weak, his face hollow and grey. Thump, thump, thump; I'm not sure if it's the train or my heart. Tatuś and I run over to the door. With one arm anchored to a handle, Tatuś cracks the door, reaching down to help the man. Too late. The dragon lurches and the man is lost.

Some days later, now in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the train stops a second time. I stand watch, remembering the man left behind and willing my Tatuś to return. The train begins to move without permission. Tatuś is nowhere in sight. Frantic, Mamuś and I cry his name. We are helpless. But no Tatuś.

I cry. How can this be? How will he ever find us? I interrupt a moaning Mamuś, but she has lost her words.

"What's going to happen?" I ask. I wait. I ask again.

"I do not know," she cries, "there are no train schedules.". I am shocked. I expect my Mamuś to have all the answers.

Days later, I dream of his voice, "Maria! Czesiu!". I am wide alert now. Wait, it's real! I shake Mamuś awake as he runs towards the train. "Gieniu!" she yells. "Tatuś!" I scream, crying with relief. Just as Mamuś pulls him towards us, the train begins to move.

While hugging my Tatuś, an anguished cry shatters the air. I snap my head around. A blur of blond hair, a girl my size, soars high and pitches into the space between the train and the platform. The screams are deafening. They might be mine.

A man jumps from the train to the platform, reaching to pull her from the gutter. With a look of horror, he holds the girl by her armpits. Her eyes lock with mine, and her head falls to one side.

Blood pours out of her by the pail.

Her legs are gone. Gone.

Alive one moment, gone the next. I look down at my own legs and start to shake, shaking inside myself, maybe forever, until I barely notice the hum anymore.

Lives come and go; here, they end abruptly. They mean nothing. My eyes are glued to the girl as she grows smaller and the train picks up speed. We keep moving; that's all we can do.

* * *

The girl with no legs is burned into my brain. The more I try not to think of her, the more she is with me. Dreams are nightmares. Life is death, pain, and uncertainty. I learn that lesson very young. Sometimes I am so tired and hungry that I want everything to stop. Some days I wish for death. I never thought like that in *Polsce*, but I do now.

13 TURKMEN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (NOW TURKMENISTAN), APRIL 1942

With each minute and mile away from Siberia, the air softens; each breath warmer and lighter. Cautiously, I relax a little but remain mentally alert for the next shock.

As if on cue, the train stops, and two Russian officers mount. They speak Russian, and I understand a few words: "Give… food… rubles…. Russian army." While one officer points his rifle, the other grabs at our possessions, searching for money, jewels, gold, and more. They do not seem to know of our journey. He pats the men quickly and the women with interest and a little enjoyment. I watch in disbelief, but I am not surprised. First, they stole *Polska*, then our farm, our horses, our lives, and now the little we have left. Mamuś grips

my wrist, opens my hand, and slides something cold and hard into my palm. It feels like metal. She looks at me intensely, and her eyes tell me this is important. "*Ukryj to*[39]*,"* she whispers in my ear. I do as I am told, slipping them into my torn and dirty sock as the officers approach. I fear they have seen me. "Bags," they bark; Tatuś yields. They find nothing of value on Mamuś and Tatuś. Done with their hunt, they stand at the car's centre and announce: "Choice… stay… USSR… work on *kolkhoz* farm." When they finish, noise erupts around me. Families go from whispering to talking to yelling. I wonder what this all means, what this means for us. I curl up near Tatuś and Mamuś, protecting the precious coins. Tatuś says we should take the offer, but Mamuś says it is a lie. "They steal. Always," she insists with urgency, "our children, our future is the only thing left. We cannot lose that too". Though less educated, Mamuś is a fighter and wise like my Tatuś; in many ways, more so. The families that decide to work on a *kolkhoz* disembark with the officers. We stay put.

Next, we are joined by two other men who board the freight car. They speak to us in Polish and seem decidedly friendlier. They proclaim that all men 16 and older must join the Polish Army to serve with General Wladyslaw-Anders under British Command. They will fight on the Italian and African fronts. In return for their service, their families will be refugees with help from the Red Cross.

Again, I will lose my Tatuś. This means Dolek, wherever he is, probably joined too. "When will I see you again, Tatuś?" I say, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist, willing myself to go where he goes, to never let go. I bury my wet cheeks into his coat.

"I do not know, s*ynu*, not long, I hope," he pauses, "be a good boy for your Mamuś and little sister." I panic as I realize more fully the loss. I can't breathe. My throat burns. My

[39] *Ukryj to* (pronounced "*oukry toh*") = Hide this

stomach flips. The tears rain hard and fast. “No! Please don’t leave me, Tatuś!” I beg with hot sobs. I do not know how to stop him. There must be another way. This is not right. Who will protect us? More than half my family is gone or missing since the Gulag. Except for Mamuś and Danusia, I am alone. I feel ripped apart. I scream inside my head.

Crying, Mamuś hands me Danusia. She says *do widzenia*, and I watch him disappear off the train. Gone to be a soldier. But he is good, and soldiers are mean; they hurt people and take things that do not belong to them. This confuses me. Mamuś is still crying; maybe I am also. Still holding Danusia, I muster my energy to help; “Stop crying, Mamuś. What good does it do?”. We sit in silence in a box full of empty sadness.

I am numb when it is our turn to disembark. I follow Mamuś closely, nearly in her footsteps, afraid to lose her too. We are led to a truck with others packed tightly from the train. I wish everything would stop; the pain, the hunger, the fighting, the dying, the fear, the loss. I wrap my arms around myself to hold all my bones together.

On the journey by truck, we see strange new sights. Cotton plants stretch forever in a dry, baked land. There are mountains in the distance. Eventually, we arrive at a small brick building. I wake from my deadness to a buzz of energy.

14 POLISH REFUGEE CAMP - THE RED CROSS (NOW TURKMENISTAN), APRIL 1942

With Tatuś gone to war, days are grey, no matter the sun. We live with other refugees in a big communal *barak*. Except for the warm weather, the conditions are no better than the gulag. The mood is one of despair. Everyone is broken, starving and sick. Fathers are gone, some forever. The food is bare, and there is little to share. Most days, the camp tries to provide a little food and water, just enough to stay alive but not enough to *feel* alive. I am so hungry I think of nothing else. Many sleeps have come and gone since our last meal. Mamuś tells me I will need to beg, that the camp has run out of food, and we are too far from any village to trade or buy our own.

"Why me? I cannot," I plead, feeling very little and scared.

"Czesiu, do as I say. You are a small child; they have more

heart for children, for you and Danusia," she says. She pulls my hat off, hands it to me, and points to an army camp in the distance; "go there, by that fence… and please return with food".

More than a little scared, Danusia and I leave the compound. We walk through the rough field in search of food. The diaper cloth rags peek out like a duck tail behind her, shaking side to side when she walks. At age 2, her legs are wobbly and slow, so I carry her for a time on my back. Arriving at the fence, we stand watching the men as they practice drills over and over. We stand for a long time, growing tired and bored. Danusia begins to cry, "I want Mamuś." I try to stop her tears. "We need food first," I tell her. Her cries alert a man in uniform on the other side of the gate. He walks over. "Stop crying," I say through my teeth, beginning to shake, "if he is bad, he will hurt us." She hiccups loudly, trying to quiet herself.

"What are you doing here?" he asks in Polish.

My heart booms, and my blood roars. I wonder if he, too, can hear the scared in me.

"Please, sir, we are very hungry. Can you give us food?" I ask in a small voice. I wish I could hide. I hate that we have to beg. I feel smaller than nothing.

"Stay here. I will return, but it may take time," he says kindly and walks away. We sit in the brittle grass, waiting forever. Danusia falls asleep, her gold hair resting peacefully in the sand. I don't understand how she can sleep while separated Mamuś. My worries are much too loud.

The sun begins to fade.

My panic sharpens.

By the gift of *Jezus*, I see the man from before approaching us with something in his hand — a bag of tea biscuits. The holes in the fence are too tight, so he throws them overhead. I nearly miss it but do not. The offering is minute but better than nothing. We yell, "*Dziękuję! Thank you!*". Renewed by the

win, we run back to camp to show Mamuś our prize. I never want to beg again; it is much too humbling. In the following weeks, Mamuś sends us out to beg every day. Sometimes we earn a few bites; other times not.

Every morning, the people who expire overnight are tossed into trucks. They die of cholera, dysentery, typhoid, smallpox, and more. Mamuś says, "If we don't get out of here, we will be next." So, with nothing to pack but pots and sheets, Mamuś, Danusia, and I leave the camp. We set out for a village. There, Mamuś asks many people if they have a place for us. Finally, with sore feet and a setting sun, we find luck: a cotton farmer agrees to rent his donkey house.

He leads us to a small wooden shed where our roommate sleeps. It reeks, of course. I step in poo. Fortunately, the man is generous and gives us fresh straw for sleep. Mamuś is not pleased to share the shed with a donkey, but we don't have a choice. That night it is hard to settle and sleep. I itch all over. I roll in the straw to scratch my spots, carefully avoiding the donkey and his offerings.

As the sun rises, Mamuś wakes me to comb my hair for lice. Meanwhile, I squish each louse between my nails. It is fun to pop and flatten them! I discover using rocks to smash them into a lice soup is even more satisfying! Danusia copies me, stealing my idea and trying it for herself. I am very annoyed, but she offers her mashed lice soup to me, so I decide to forgive her. Mamuś says we need to boil our clothes to kill the rest of the lice, but we do not have wood for a fire. "We only have what is on our backs, two pots, some blankets, and a damn donkey that shits everywhere…" she mutters.Itchy, with no place to shower, I roll in the grass like the donkey! Danusia copies my idea, which annoys me again.

After we finish the last of our little bits of food from the camp, it begins to rain! It is very refreshing! I run in the rain, unable to hide my smile! I even stick my tongue out for taste! Meanwhile I notice Mamuś quickly plastering fresh dung

patties from the ground onto the shed walls! I watch, stunned, as she covers the whole outside of the shed in dung patties! "Mamuś, why are you doing that?" I ask. She tells me *we can't let anything go to waste, who knows if we might need it*!

In the days following, she devises a clever plan. "The donkey dung! We will wait for them to dry in the sun, and then we can burn them as fuel for a fire. After that, we can boil our clothes and cook our food," she shares. The donkey, our hero!

The next day, Mamuś goes to the village in search of food or trade. We are afraid to follow and afraid to stay. Eventually, we sleep. She returns sometime later, leading a man in a Polish army uniform and, behind him, a woman.

"Czesiu, Danusia, come outside," she says, holding a loaf of bread. We obey, more hungry than curious. She brings the donkey out with us and gestures for the strangers to enter. As we eat in the grass, we hear strange sounds from within. Mamuś reassures us to pay no mind. We turn to our bread, chewing fast and hard, holding out grubby hands for more. Finally, I swallow. Together, we consume half the loaf. Stopping is not easy, but we know there is tomorrow.

"Who are they, Mamuś? What do they want with the shed?" I ask when my belly is happier.

"He gave me money and bread to borrow the space for a short time," she says.

"But why? What are they doing?"

"Talking," she says shortly. Confused, I want to ask why they need a barn and a donkey to talk —but her tone says not to push.

* * *

Weeks or days go by during which several men and the same few women come to visit our dung-covered donkey hut. I still do not understand why they would choose a smelly hut for talking, but I look forward to their food.

One day, Mamuś runs back from a trip to the village, telling us to pack our few things quickly, “We are leaving Russia!” she says with energy. I cannot tell if this is a good thing or a bad thing. To avoid heartache, I prepare for the worst but pray for the best. I hope my Tatuś will know where to find us!

15 SHIP ACROSS THE CASPIAN SEA TO PAHLEVI, IRAN (NOW BANDAR ANZALI)

Mamuś brings us past the village and towards a dock at the water's edge. We are quickly approached by Russian soldiers, demanding we give up our possessions because "Russia, the motherland, needs our help." There is little for them to steal. I slip the few rubles we have protected so far into my loose underwear, but what we can't hide, they take. This includes our pots and the last of our bread.

Thank you, *Jezus!* We are leaving Russia today.

We join a group near the water's edge and wait for a man to read off our names. One by one, people step into a small fishing boat. We follow. There is no room to sit, only stand. I can barely see, packed tight like cattle. I feel the boat jolt, so we must be moving. We sway together. It's hard to catch my

breath. The bigger people elbow my head more than once. I squeeze the hand of my Mamuś so as not to lose her. We stand forever. The night falls. Still, we stand. I am so tired. My legs give out, but there is no room to sit or lie. The mass props me up. Eventually, I'm lapped to sleep by the sound of the waves. Seconds or hours later, the boat rocks violently, and I grab for Mamuś —but tumble with others. Without warning, I am sick on myself. All around me, people are sick—Mamuś and Danusia too. The smell makes my stomach spin again. There is nothing left inside, and still, I retch the air I breathe. With no toilet onboard, I and everyone else empty our bladders and bowels onto ourselves. I watch with horror as some fall out of the boat. Splash, they vanish into the dark pitch. It frightens me to think of it. The sun breaks, offering a welcome view of the shore in the distance. In the morning glow, I see how few still stand among us.

Finally, we climb off the sick boat, but my brain refuses to land. I am lopsided, weak, and wiggly. They call it sea legs; I worry my land legs are lost forever. I feel dizzy, and my head hurts badly. We are malnourished and dehydrated. What happens next is a blur of voices, movements, and organized confusion.

We are told to strip, shave, and herd ourselves into a big tent. I peel off my badly soiled clothes (the same ones I've worn every day since *Polska*). They are thrown into the fire. In my naked hand, I hold the precious coins. My undergarments are gone. We have nowhere to hide them. Mamuś trusts me as she would Tatuś. I grip them tighter.

In the tent, I stand with my arms wrapped around me; we are all naked, hairless, smelly skeletons. Gone are the plump cheeks, round bellies, bums, and smiles of happier times. Suddenly, warm water rains from the ceiling, and I thaw. *If there is a heaven, it is surely this shower*. The water feels so good I feel dizzy. I sink down, too relaxed to stand, and hold onto Mamuś' strong calf with two hands. I close my eyes and

smile without limits. It is amazing to feel clean again. I shed the stink and decay, welcoming the delicious rebirth.

When the water turns off, I realize I have lost my Mamuś. Terrified, my heart slams heavily and I feel I could be sick again. I search with my eyes but cannot see her.

"*Mamuś*!" I whimper.

"*Mamuś*!" I scream.

"Czesiu, I'm here," she says over my right shoulder. I turn to see, but the woman before me does not look like my Mamuś. She has no hair. She holds an equally bald little girl. Before I fully process the transformation, I am also shaved efficiently bald. I can't take my eyes off my new Mamuś, whose ears look much bigger and goofier against her bare head. We are ushered out of the tent and past the smoke of burning clothes.

"Why are they burning our clothes, Mamuś?" I cry, alarmed and confused. We have none to replace them!

"To kill all the lice. It will make us less itchy," she says, taking me by the hand to join the others rummaging through piles of used clothing. I haven't worn other clothes since we lived on the farm. I look for the warmest pieces I can find; I never want to be cold again. Shivering, I hurry to find clean underwear. They feel amazing, soft, and not stiff nor stained like the pair I've worn for years. I find a long soft shirt that tickles my knees and pants that would fit my Tatuś. I hope to grow into them. Barefoot, I search for shoes. I try some on, but they are all sized for adults, and my feet fall out as I step. I eventually dig up two mismatched left shoes that look smaller. I shake and jump and giggle and wiggle, but they stay put! I am beyond grateful for all the donated gifts. Once the rubles are safely stashed in my shoes, I continue my hunt through the donated treasures. Satisfied, I finish my outfit with a goofy green fedora and thick, beet-red bathrobe around my shoulders for extra warmth.

Meanwhile, Mamuś is wearing an odd collection herself: enveloped by a thick, rabbit-fur coat for warmth and bath

slippers! She bundles Danusia in an oversized shirt and a massive sheep's coat that reaches her feet. Looking at each other, all clothed, we look clean but very weird! We laugh and laugh until our hysterics become silent and spring tears. I work to catch my breath but can't remove my permanent and aching smile. I feel woozy!

She links my hand with Danusia's, who manages only to grip my fingertips and tells us to stay put while she obtains our first official identification documents. I panic.

"Mamuś! Wait!" I yell, grabbing for her, "I want to come."

"*Nie*."

"Okay, but first, before you go, I really have to tell you something very important! I say, stalling. She sighs, waiting. I search for something to say, something really clever; "...The thing I really wanted to tell you… is…" I say, pausing to think of something, *anything*. But I take too long, and she turns away. "Oh! Mamuś! You look like a bald rabbit!" I inform her. She turns back around and walks towards me. *That worked*, I think. *Oh no.*

"Czehu! Enough! Stay here. Don't move, and protect Danusia," she scolds, then disappears into the busy mass. My head and stomachache.

We wait, unblinking, until we see Mamuś reemerge. I begin to sweat heavily under the intense sun and my many layers of winter clothing. I shake off Danusia's surprisingly strong yet tiny toddler fingers and search for shade. I test my agility in my new shoes and run towards a nearby tree, not looking back. I reach the trunk, now completely soaked in sweat, and watch as Danusia waddles to catch up to me but trips over her long shirt! I laugh, forgetting to be good, but I do my best to shake my smile as I console her cries and wipe the dirt off her little hands.

Passing the time as we sit in the shade, I find the best stick and start drawing in the dirt. Danusia grabs it from me, insisting on having a turn because it is the only good stick. She

is always annoying and copying everything I do! I wish she would go away! I grab the stick back, harder, to make a point. I am bigger and I found it first! She says she will tell Mamuś, who would be mad if I do not share. Victorious and only guilty if I get caught, I glance around but do not see Mamuś anywhere. Remembering how scary my Mamuś looks, I decide it wise to be extra good today. I snap the stick in half and hand my sister the smaller piece.

Keeping my gaze on the crowd in search of Mamuś, I notice a vendor selling mountains of pancakes. I cannot help but stare, wishing for just one. He sees me and, after a few minutes, walks over to us with a tall stack. My mouth probably hangs open, drooling. I can't believe it! This is the best day, so many gifts! I reach out my hands, but he doesn't offer any; he speaks in a language I do not understand. I reply in Polish, asking please for a pancake. He tries again, gesturing this time. He points to Danusia and then himself. He then gestures to the pancakes and back at me, rubbing his belly and grinning. This time he says slowly in broken Polish, "Trade – girl – pancakes?".

I am shocked. He wants Danusia in exchange for a stack of pancakes!? How is that a fair deal? A fair deal for him, I mean.

I hungrily consider the offer, looking from Danusia to the plate of heavenly pancakes.

I have never been so tempted in my life!

My stomach says yes, but my head says a very big no. How would I explain where Danusia has gone? My bald-as-an-egg Mamuś would kill me for sure. Sadly, I shake my head. But before he turns to walk off with my pancakes, I remember the rubles. I offer one in exchange for the biggest pancake, and he

agrees.

We are busy drawing shapes in the dirt and nibbling on our last bites of doughy bliss when Mamuś returns. I don't dare tell her about the man. I fear she would spank me forever and ever (*Amen*) for the temptation to trade Danusia for a stack of pancakes.

I follow Mamuś toward an old warehouse. She shows me the documents we have been given, but I cannot read them. I notice, however, that our birth years are different; "Mamuś, it's wrong," I whisper, "I'm 9, not 8!". She takes the paper and shushes me. I do not understand why.

Mamuś says we are being "quarantined". I look around quietly, eyeing our new prison. No windows, no sunlight, just a very large, bare room. We and many families spend days in this room; no one is allowed to leave. The doors will not even be opened to remove the dead. Under this heavy heat, it is not long before a foul, nauseating smell joins us. I know this smell. Bodies are piled in a corner as the living scurry to the far side of the warehouse. The pile grows bigger by day, as does the toxic smell. We, the living, are cramped unhappily together. This way of life is all too familiar. But the rations are larger than before, and for that, I am grateful. I shovel the food into my mouth. It feels so good –until it does not. Soon my stomach begins to hurt like never before, and I make continuous trips to the waste bucket. Once, missing the bucket by a little, I look down to see a puddle of red on the ground; dysentery, too, has joined us.

The noise in the room echoes and grows. The endless crying and moaning make my head pound forever. I fall asleep briefly with my fingers in my ears, but the pain presses on. The room was warm when we first arrived, but it is not long before my bones feel icy cold. I dream of the Gulag. Everything hurts. I think I will die. I hope for it.

After days of this special torture, we are told to pack up and board an open truck. We huddle weakly on the floor without a

word. Shipped again like farm animals without notice or choice, we do not protest.

The dry air feels nice in my hair. My spirit and I welcome deep, fresh, warm breaths. As the truck roars to go, something flies towards us. It hits someone in the head and lands with a small *thunk*. Another object flies up and onto the truck. It looks like a small rock. I hear the next one. It lands somewhere behind me. Yelling erupts. I cover my head with my arms and curl into Mamuś. Someone screams, "The Iranians! They're stoning us!". I am so scared; I do not understand what is happening. One hits my shoulder, and I whimper, more afraid than hurt. I uncurl myself to find not a rock but a heavy cookie. I look up to see more sweet sand candies raining upon us. Confused, I grab a few, passing them to Mamuś for inspection. Danusia smiles a toothy grin as she licks at a candy that stains her tongue. I crawl to the side of the truck and watch as villagers throw happiness by the handful! Children smile and wave to me. They are thin, but still, they share their blessings. I chew with delight! We wave back and watch them disappear as the truck gains speed. My heart and stomach are full.

16 TRUCK FROM PAHLEVI TO TEHRAN, IRAN SUMMER 1942

Hours of dirt roads later, the truck slows for the last time. I peer about, enchanted by the massive, snow-capped mountains. We enter a camp, expecting a bare warehouse cell like the previous one. We are relieved to find bunk beds instead. We are told in broken Polish that many refugees are expected to join us; some will stay a few weeks, others longer until arrangements can be made for transport to camps in Africa. They tell us there will be a children's school near the building and to use the dugout as a toilet. We are handed ration cards for food.

The toilet is less of a toilet and more of a deep dirt trench with a wooden plank stretched across it. I watch many try it

before daring myself to use it. We squat over the side of the plank to poo and pee. We shake to dry. It is not long before toileting is dangerous. It has filled with waste quickly. After hearing the frightening story of a child who slips, falls, and drowns in the dugout overnight, I try to hold it for as long as possible. I walk the plank with a full bladder, but it is so slimy and wet that I nearly slip. I gasp as I stumble but manage to avoid the abyss. I catch my breath with great relief.

Each day, I visit the little chapel with Mamuś and Danusia, then join the other children for school. We learn to read the Polish alphabet and words, but our progress is limited without tablets, chalk, pens, or books. We are still hungry and do not have access to showers or baths, but all is more bearable than the last.

On the morning of my catholic confirmation, Mamuś uses her spit to clean my face and smooth my hair.

I *shine* for God!

He blesses us with the gift of my very first orange. It is the most delightful fruit ever. Fresh, sweet, and juicy! Someday I vow to have my very own orange trees!

As I begin to feel a little more settled, we are packed up and shipped off again. We journey by truck, train, and truck. With each passing day, it grows warmer and sunnier. I know this means something good.

Me (on the right), age 9, on the day of my First Communion. Notice the prop to grow me taller!

17 TRAVEL TO KARACHI, INDIA (NOW IN PAKISTAN), SUMMER 1942

The sign says we have arrived in Karachi, India.

At night, we sleep in white tents surrounded by sand dunes outside the main town. I love it here! I never shiver. I eat a banana for the first time; it is so ripe that while peeling, I am greeted by a sweet yellow sludge inside the skin. It is sweet like honey and makes me smile. We do not get them often, but bananas are my favourite. I lick the peel to get all the goodness.

We do not stay long. Some weeks later, we pack up and follow others onto yet another ship.

I am frightened, remembering how scary and rough the previous trips were. I cannot see the night sky as we travel

below deck, in steerage with crates and cargo. Remembering the sick on the last boat, I do not sleep well the first night. I wait and wait for the waves to grow big, for the ship and my stomach to flip. But it never happens. A long time later, I fall asleep dreaming of sunny days and bananas.

A huge booming splash wakes me sometime later. The boat tilts and rocks from side to side. I sit up and am almost immediately thrown, smashing my shoulder into the wooden floor. Yelling and panic explode within and around me. I anchor myself to a crate next to Mamuś. Within minutes, the rocking lessens, but not before I am sick. The puddle runs side to side with the ship. My stomach is still rolling about when a man in a captain's dress climbs down, holding tight to the sway of the railing. He talks, but I do not understand his language; it's neither Polish nor Russian.

"What is he saying, Mamuś?" I ask quietly.

"I do not know," she says.

Mamuś discovers from others that the man is a British Captain. We are on a British warship, a target for German Nazis. Their U-boat caught up with us and launched a bomb our way, a warm welcome to the Arabian Sea. Mamuś reassures us that the Germans missed our boat. The captain plans to zigzag the ship the whole way to Africa to evade a direct hit, just as a rabbit cleverly does to confuse a predator. This means the trip will take much, much longer than anticipated. I groan, my heart sinking.

I am so scared. I don't want to die! Hot tears warm my cheeks. There is nothing to do but sit and wait for a bomb to strike and pray it misses. We cannot run or swim. There is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. We are stuck on this big, floating target holding our breath for days.

Two weeks trickle by like this. Asleep, awake, moving, floating, waiting, but always scared. I am startled by every sound and sudden shift to our watery home.

There is not enough food since they didn't prepare for this

five-day trip to take two weeks. What food there is served to us by men with black skin. Like the oranges and bananas, I welcome these discoveries with curiosity and interest. I can’t wait to meet Africa!

18 DAR ES SALAAM TO DODOMA, TANGANYIKA (NOW TANZANIA)

Weeks later, we arrive at Dar es Salaam alive, tired, and hungry. We disembark. Walking feels weird. My brain believes I am still out to sea. For days, I feel myself lightly swaying. The sun is intense, bright, and happy on my skin, a warm welcome to Africa. Mamuś discovers through the Polish grapevine that we are scheduled for a train to a camp in Dodoma. We have a full day to wait, and the water beckons. Still struggling with sea legs, Mamuś guides us towards a beach. I copy others and remove my shoes, sinking my sticky toes into the creamy sand. It is warm and silky; my feet take delight. I have never been to a tropical beach before! I have never felt anything so heavenly in my life. My skin is brilliantly hot. I watch the other children splash and laugh in the water. I take my cue and run headlong into the sea.

Danusia, as always, follows in my footsteps, and together we splash over and into the little waves. The bright blue water feels refreshing. I venture a little deeper, soaking my pants and shirt; I splash the water and twirl around. I love it here! The water cools my skin. Tempted, I drink it. *Bad mistake!* Cheeks full, I spit, cough, and laugh. "It's bitter, Mamuś! Don't drink the water," I teach her. I love the sea, and the sea loves me! Mamuś and Danusia join me to clean themselves. Danusia ducks her head underwater to look for *fishies*, her bum popping up to the surface. I join her in the hunt!

We swim, play, and explore the beach until Mamuś says we must go. We drip to dry. I sprint to get my shoes, but they are not where I left them. I dig in the sand; *maybe they sank into the sand or got pulled into the sea?* Danusia helps me dig. Mamuś searches too. After a long while, my heart sinks when Mamuś says someone probably took them. *It's not fair!* Why do people *always* do these things? My cheeks burn with mad. My bare feet burn hotter atop the scorching sand. After sufficient whining, Mamuś gives me her shoes. She hops barefoot, with us in tow, towards the train station. Her broad, strong calves carry her forward without complaint.

When we board the passenger train, I am still upset but glad for shelter. My skin, dusted with salt and sand, ripens to a beet red. I want to cry. I probably do. I fall fast asleep without a thought of food or water. This is a first in a long, long time.

The next morning, Mamuś wakes us as the train slows and blows its horn. "We are in Dodoma now," she says. "Next, we will take a truck to the Kidugala camp, where we will be settled for the duration of the war. We are almost done the trip!". Eager to greet the end, we move from train to truck, where I nod off again. The gravel road is bumpy and does its best to wake me.

19 KIDUGALA REFUGEE CAMP, TANGANYIKA (NOW TANZANIA[40]), FALL 1942 - 1947

Africa is unlike anything I've ever seen or experienced. For shivering, starved refugees, the camp is a haven. We thaw and thrive! When the midday blaze is overwhelming and unrelenting, we seek refuge in our huts, the walls built simply of mud and sticks. We share our hut with a woman and her daughter, each with our own cot and mosquito net! Our roof is made of long elephant straw. But for one small, glassless window through which a thin light enters through wooden

[40] Before WW1, Tanzania was owned by the Germans. After WW1, Tanzania was ruled by the British Empire; the unchanged village settlement –ironically once German– became a temporary home for Poles seeking refuge (from the Germans and more)!

slats, the hut is dark. We can do little but sleep inside, especially when the door is shut.

The savanna is also warm and welcoming. We wake from the dead of war, eager to explore. Danusia (age 3) and I (age 9) run barefoot, fast and free, zipping through the dense elephant grass; taller than me, it rises high to an impressive eight feet. We go on safari and introduce ourselves to the creek: greeting *halo* to the bugs, snakes, frogs, and fish! We dip our toes in the warm water. We soothe the hot ache from our adventurous feet. It won't be long before our soles adapt and thicken. We toss our shoes, feeling freer than ever in our human hide, which cannot be taken. It will be six years before I wear shoes again and eight before I try a toothbrush for the first time. We do not brush or floss our teeth; no one does. Paste and brushes do not exist here. We do like the locals: picking at wedged food with tiny twigs or chewing on fibrous sugar cane.

The camp is roofed with eucalyptus trees. Their crisp smell tickles my nose as we climb them—swinging and jumping from branch to branch like little monkeys. It is not long before we can swing with surprising speed, our hands toughened up for the challenge.

Mamuś works hard. In the fields, she helps with planting potatoes (and sometimes I help too). Our settlement houses a kitchen, school, church, jail, and orchard. In the communal kitchen, where the temperatures reach well over 120°F (49°C), she helps with cooking. She is required to contribute to the camp but is paid a small stipend. The cooks serve plenty of soup, potatoes, cabbage, oatmeal, and fruit of all shapes and colours. They even have oranges here! Although food is no longer in short supply, I do not have the heart to waste it. If I spill or drop a piece of my bread in the dirt, I will of course still eat it. Sinning is very easy as a Catholic; I assume wasting food during the war is a big one. One never knows when food will disappear, and any meal could be the last. In the kitchen,

there is a radio—our only source of news about the war. I like to sit and listen when I am missing my Tatuś. I try my very best to be a good boy like I promised. Somehow, that never seems enough.

Every morning that the sun rises, Mamuś whips me with a rope. It knocks the sleepiness out of me. I plead, "I have not done anything wrong!". She replies, "Not yet. This is so I can be sure you won't find trouble". She *gives me a beating so I remember NOT to forget.*

I begin to think she is nuts, whipping me for no reason! Worse, she only spanks me, never Danusia. I do not understand why. Is it because I am a boy? Or just unlovable? Worse, despite gifting Mamuś a real severed rabbit's foot (*don't ask*) as a gesture of love and luck, she doesn't get any nicer. What more can I do for her? I begin to think I hate Mamuś. I quietly take my gift back.

After the morning ritual of pain, I go to mass at 6 am for a lively lecture on sin. If the licking does not wake me, the chilly air does. I am an altar boy at Church because Mamuś says so. I am to be a priest when I grow up. I do not like it, it is boring, but I have little choice. After church, I attend school until 2 pm. At that time, the day is too hot to exist, so we retreat to the hut to sweat or nap, or both. When the sun is bearable again, we continue our day. Mamuś goes to the kitchen to help with dinner while I do my chores. I earn a small allowance (4 shillings/month) by sweeping and working in the garden. As Danusia grows, she, too, is given chores.

All done, we are free to play and seek adventure. I fill my afternoons by joining boy scouts, climbing trees, playing soccer, swimming in the river, playing with animals, making toys, flying kites, collecting stamps, listening to the radio, competing to see which boys can pee the furthest and more! In the evening, we gather to eat and once again attend church.

We must remember to use the outhouses before sleep, our final opportunity until morning. The outhouses are kept

furthest from the huts since the stench and flies are overpowering (which get worse as the aroma bakes under the hot sun). In the dark of night, we use buckets inside our hut to the toilet. Our slow legs and sleepy eyes make us prey to whomever or whatever lurks in the dense black of the night: a hungry lion, hyena, or boa constrictor, all predators with a talent to see and smell long before we know their presence. We know because animal prints encircle our hut with a fresh 'good morning' each new day.

All the children are old enough to attend school from 8 am to 2 pm. We begin with grade 1, most having missed any opportunity for schooling until now. Within two weeks, I am moved up to grade 2. We learn math, geography, history, music, Polish, English, and Latin; it is easy, and I enjoy it. We greet the school day with an assembly where we pray and sing. Tone deaf, I prefer to be goofy and loud! The teacher offers a reward, "If you keep quiet, I'll give you good marks!" but I cannot be silenced so easily! We learn to speak English by repeating after the teacher, "How do you do?", "How are you?" and "Do you smoke?". Through older peers, we learn to curse. School teaches me many things, but most of all, I learn to *minimize my efforts*. That is a fancy way of saying *it is stupid to work hard*. I learn this lesson when I must write the biography of Józef Piłsudski, a Polish hero who is credited for *Polska*'s political independence in 1918. I work very hard on my project. The teacher is so impressed with my work that she makes me stay late after class to rewrite my whole essay in a tedious calligraphy for all to read. After that, I decide never to outshine my peers again for the reward of more work and less play. For an active boy who prefers to climb trees, it's a lesson I take to heart– *work smarter, not harder*!

Teachers and students in the refugee camp school

I find it hard to sit still most of the day, be quiet, and focus. It is a lot to do all at once and for hours at a time! I try, but I can't help but squirm. My boredom and energy bubble over. I say silly things in class to make others laugh or throw notes to my friends when the teacher turns around. I cannot help it! I already know what the teacher will say before she says it. Soon, there is not a single day that I am not punished for misbehaving. Much of my time at school is spent sitting outside the classroom door, waiting for my friends to join me. Sometimes Stasiek and I plan how to misbehave for a swim in the river! Mamuś will be angry, but good or naughty, I expect to be punished all the same.

I have so much to explore and build! I love summer vacation because, apart from Church twice a day, I have ample time to play! On one memorable adventure, Stasiek and I wander far outside the camp in search of treasure. We follow the bellows of cows. Their plaintive din is louder than usual. We come upon a gathering of natives dressed in red, chanting, jumping, and dancing. After a short pause, they gather intently

around a young cow. A few men hold the animal down while another punctures the cow's neck with a small arrow. As the blood pours out, a tall child rushes to catch the stream with a jug. Curiously, we stare as he fills the jug, followed by a smear of mud over the puncture wound. The bleeding stops, and the cow is gently released. The boy raises the jug to his face and takes a giant sip! I am transfixed as he lowers the jug to reveal a toothy red grin. Satisfied, he wipes away his *blood*-stache with the back of his hand and passes the jug on[41].

Afterwards, feeling brave and terrified, Stasiek and I approach the group. They wave and welcome us with bright red lips. The boy offers me a pink drink in a tin cup. “For you, milk and blood,” he proudly shares. Flies dance hungrily on the rim; my stomach gurgles, upset. All eyes on me, aware this is a gift, I gingerly sip. The strangeness greets my mouth: a warm, milky tea of sorts with a sharp, metallic after-taste. I take another, bigger sip. Not bad!

* * *

Occasionally, Tatuś sends us letters with well wishes and updates. Unfortunately, we cannot reply because he is never in the same place for long. One very special morning, we receive a package in the mail. I am so excited I think I will explode;

[41] The Maasai people in northern Tanzania live off both cow milk and blood. The sacred blood-consuming practice is believed to be nutrient dense and vital for maintaining the health of the tribe. They drink the thick cattle blood either on its own (freshly harvested) or mixed with food, milk, or alcohol. Fortunately for the cows, they are treated humanely, and the bloodletting process is minimal enough to preserve their long lives. Cows are not killed or harmed but rather collected and nourished like precious tokens. The larger one’s cattle herd, the higher their social status.

Danusia and I rip it open in tandem. There is a letter, a doll, and a real soccer ball! Mamuś reads the letter aloud: Tatuś misses us and hopes to see us soon, begs that Danusia and I be good for Mamuś, and best of all, he gifts the doll to Danusia and the ball to me! This is the first gift I have ever received in my whole life! I am so happy; I have my very own toy! I grab the soccer ball and squeeze it tight. I run to play with it outside, but I'm careful not to kick it too far, afraid to lose it or have it stolen. Always trying to be involved with everything I do, Danusia follows me with her doll and sits in the shade. Her doll looks boring, I think I should feel sorry for her, but I am too busy being happy with the better prize. Eventually, she realizes my ball is much more fun and begs to try it.

"No, play with your doll! The ball is mine!" I tell her.

"If I cry, I can have whatever I want," she teases back, beginning to pout. She often does this. If whining doesn't work, then crying will. She is babied by Mamuś and given everything she wants –even if it's mine! When Mamuś hears Danusia crying, even if from miles away, she will be angry with me.

Before I can respond, Mamuś is there next to us. She orders me to share. I inform her that I should not have to share because Danusia is very annoying. I bite my tongue, knowing I will be punished. She looks at the two of us, and instead of reaching for the rope, she sighs and says, "Czehu. Be nice. She looks up to you and wants to be your friend. Don't take each other for granted. You and your sister have each other and that is a gift, trust me. When life is hard and lonely, you won't ever stand alone. Together, you can survive any harsh frost. You share the same roots, and it makes you stronger together than apart. Now be good and share the ball."

Mamuś doesn't know what she's talking about. I sulk outside, still a little puzzled by what she said. Thinking distracts me, and before I know it, Danusia and I are kicking the ball back and forth to each other. Maybe it is more fun than

playing alone, but I do not admit that. We play for many hours.

Soon, I discover this soccer ball makes me very popular with the other children too! I feel special! But that ends abruptly when another boy receives a bicycle from his father in the army. I am not happy; I want a bike too! He rides around the camp to show how fast he can go. After a few days, he allows other children to ride for an hour in exchange for 2.5 shillings (2-3 weeks allowance!). I badly want to try the bike, so I hand over my precious coins. I climb on like I've watched the other children do, but the bike is already in motion before I realize I am too small and the pedals are out of reach! I eventually tip over and land hard on my side. I gasp and gulp back my tears. Stasiek holds the bike steady, and I try again, this time with my leg under the bar and bum in the air. He pushes me, but because I cannot pedal with the bar in the way, I rest my feet on the center frame to balance and coast. It is fun, but I cannot go far before crashing. Now my arm and leg hurt. I am so mad! I want to ride the bike! I hate being little!

I am sad about losing my shillings on the bike. I worked hard for them and am down to my last few. I prefer to trade my coins for pets and almost always have one pet at any time. That's how I obtain my first rat, by trading with the locals. Mamuś is not happy with my pet. She says it is a dirty thing. It makes her queasy, but not enough. Eventually, fed up, she serves him to us for lunch. Another pet I enjoy is Big-Bird, who stretches a full meter tall— almost as tall as me! Sadly, it disappears like all the others. I try not to become too attached to my pets because a time will come when I either lose them or *eat* them! The same ordeal happens with my baby pigeons. Their fat little bodies are tender and delicious food. Squab is a delicacy. It melts in your mouth. My most favourite pets of all are my two miniature chickens; they follow me everywhere if I let them. When I return from school, they greet me with clucks and pecks, and I give them bugs to eat. I like finding the bugs, and they like eating them. If only I knew their limit,

I would not have fed them a full jar, and they would not have eaten themselves to death… I am extra careful that week to ensure I also do not overeat. A similar fate frightens me.

Other times I barter with things I find around camp, like scraps of wood and knickknacks, for special treasures! I love collecting stamps of all sizes and patterns! With the wood that I keep, I use it to build my very own kite! Since there is no string available in camp, I have to use sewing thread, which proves difficult— it keeps breaking! Soon, with more wood, the kite becomes a wooden wagon; built with old nails and a rock as a hammer. I feel very proud of myself as I walk around the camp, pulling my wagon, collecting rocks and bugs along the way. Sometimes I let Danusia follow when I go treasure hunting, but only if she doesn't annoy me. On one particularly hot day of solo scrap adventures, I seek refuge beneath the trees by the side of the road. A ripe fruit, made in heaven, hangs heavily from the branches above. With the lightest touch, the heavy delicacies drop into my hands, a gift from God. I rip it apart and enjoy the fresh tart sweetness. In love, I quickly add more to my wagon. Once I've collected enough to share with Mamuś and Danusia, a woman approaches me.

"Hello dear! That's an impressive wagon you've got!" she says sweetly.

"I built it myself!" I tell her. She looks surprised.

"Good job! You must be a brilliant boy! It looks like you may grow up to be a great engineer someday." she says. I feel myself grow a little taller. "I see you've found this wonderful fruit; it is delicious, is it not?" she says, smiling, showing her full set of teeth.

"It's my favourite! What is it called again?" I ask.

"It's an orange," she tells me.

"Oh, right! I love oranges!" I say to my nice new friend, grinning with sticky juice coating my face and hands.

"My name is Adla. What is yours, dear?"

"Czesiek," I say.

"Well, smart Czesiek, can I see your wagon?" she asks. I nod, and she steps closer to inspect it. I would usually fear a stranger up close, but she is nice, so I trust her.

"I built it so I could carry home my treasures in one trip," I tell her.

Still smiling, she snatches my wrist.

I freeze, confused. I look at her big hand encircling mine.

"Hey!" I say, alarmed when her gaze bears down on mine.

"Please let go!" I whimper, my wrist struggling for air.

"Come," she says with a growl. She yanks me hard. I start to panic. I feel dizzy. I lose my words. I can't think. Where is she taking me? I don't want to go with her! There is no one to help me.

"No! Let me go!" I cry.

"No. I am the camp police! You stole and ate the *forbidden fruit!* This is the Commandant's orchard, and it is his fruit in your wagon. That makes you a thief! A criminal! And criminals go to jail. Didn't your mother ever teach you that stealing is wrong?" she barks.

"I did not know! I'm sorry, let me go. Please! I'm just a child!" I beg.

"No, you will not learn if I let you go. I will make an example out of you," she bangs out her words, then drags me to a hut. I am pushed into a small hot room without windows. She locks the door. I sink to the ground and sob. My head throbs. It makes me horribly sad that I will never see Mamuś, Danusia, Tatuś, Stasiek, or my pets ever again.

After a very, very long time, hours or days, the door finally opens. Mamuś and the policewoman are on the other side. I jump up and wipe my tears, "Mamuś!". I am both relieved to see her and scared of the licking that awaits me. I begin crying and shaking all over again. "I'm s-s-sorry," I hiccup, "I didn't

know! I won't do it again, I promise", the words fall out of me.

Mamuś takes my hand and glares at the policewoman. "What are you thinking? He is only a small boy! Go fight in a real war instead of picking on children! Don't you ever take my boy again, or I will write to the army. My husband is high up the ranks and will be very angry to hear how you treat our children. He would see to it that you lose your ranking."

Mamuś pays the woman a small fine, and we leave the tiny prison. I am reminded never to trust strangers, police, or people in charge. People with power are thieves. They want everything for themselves and don't care a lick about others. Fruit is for everyone, not just those in charge, but I would not dare to say that out loud!

Within hours, my day of punishment turns ever more hellish. I lay in our hut with my head split wide open. The weight of the world crushes me. I throw up. I writhe. I sweat. I sob. Mamuś is alarmed. I have the shivers from Siberia despite the savanna sun. She helps me as I stagger, disoriented, towards the camp doctor, where nurses murmur, poke, and prod. I learn that I have the dreaded *malaria*. They give me pills. I take them, but weeks pass with little relief. All I can manage is to sleep or lay still, pinned down by terrible vertigo that reminds me of the ships. I think I must be dying. I pray for it to be over. After many weeks, maybe a month, I slowly begin to feel better. I learn that Danusia had to do my chores on top of hers while I was sick and was not pleased. Though happy to see me when I am allowed home, she says I must never get sick again.

Unfortunately, the camp has no shortage of mosquitos, injuries, and illnesses. I catch malaria twice more. I also grow a tree-burl-like bulge on my leg, *nearly* as big as an orange! So it must be cut off. The abscess, that is, not my leg! I also survive a burst appendix. I am invincible! After all my surgeries, I even receive star treatment. The camp doctor (a medical intern with only two years of basic training) stays

glued to my bedside, day and night. He tells me I am both his first surgery and first patient ever. He forbids me to die!

* * *

Now, I am 12 years old. Strong enough to kick a ball high into the air and no longer afraid of the dark. I am tired of being powerless and told what to do by grownups. I feel myself changing and growing. This day starts like any other but ends on a high note. My friends and I play tag in the big Acacia tree. I'm really good at this game! Being smaller than a postage stamp has its advantages. I can jump, climb, and swing like a monkey. On cue, Mamuś walks under the tree at sunset, calling out, ''Time for Church!". I do not want to stop; the fun is brilliant!

"No, I'm playing! I am not coming!" I yell down, shocked by my bravado. Immediately my heart races. She glares up at me, anxious, hands-on hips, lips pinched. She is making the face I have learned to avoid. I scuttle further up the tree. She looks up and down the trunk, then back to me, perhaps contemplating the climb in her church finery.

"You come down, Czehu! You are being bad. I promise you will get a spanking!" she threatens.

"*Nie*! I'm not coming!" I yell back, enjoying my vantage point.

She glares, turns around, and walks home. Not one to be deterred, she returns with more threats and a rope to spank with. I decide now, and forever more, that I am most definitely NOT climbing down. I will stay up here for as long as I have to! Seething, she gives up and leaves for church with Danusia. I am very pleased with myself. I continue my game of tag with my friends, high in the tree, for a good while longer.

After Church, she returns to visit me, still safely perched in

my tree. This time, however, she is conciliatory and offers sweeter, softer words. I am guessing the priest had a hand in this. She tells me she is worried for me, that I could fall and get hurt. I stay high and out of reach, intrigued with my power!

"Why should I come down? I prefer to stay in this tree forever!" I yell back. Suddenly, it occurs to me – I *actually* have negotiating rights! During my whole childhood, I never felt I could protest or stand up for myself. Like a broken horse, I was always obedient! No longer!

"I want my rights!" I yell down.

"What?" she yells back.

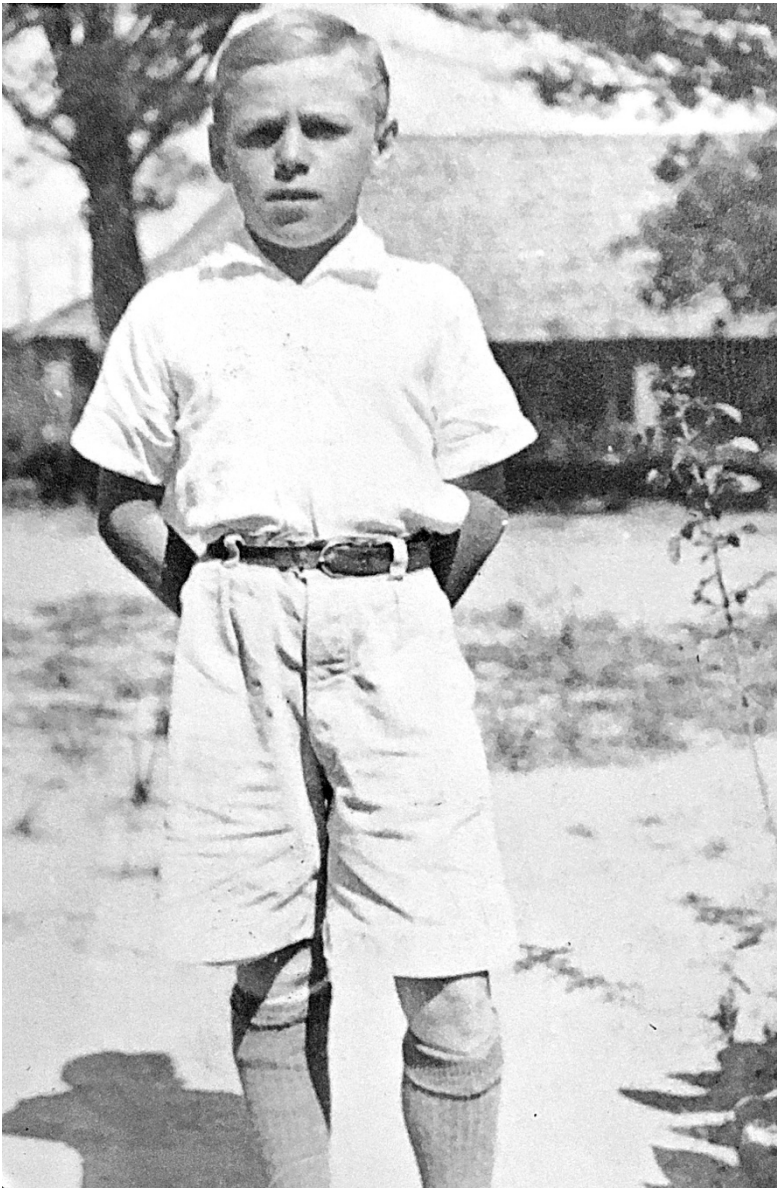
"I WANT MY RIGHTS!" I scream.

"What do you want?" she sighs, defeated.

"One, I don't want to go to evening mass anymore! It takes away from my time with friends." After a long pause, she agrees, but only if I go to morning mass and remain an altar boy.

"Deal, but only if I can spend more time playing after school!" I bargain.

She agrees! *Victory*! I climb down, knowing I cannot wait much longer. The lions will sniff me out. That night, I get a licking, but it is worth it. I feel awake, sizzling with power. I promise myself to grow up to be rich, have power, and someday if I am lucky, own a bicycle!



Me (Czesław), age 12

Mamuś, showing the camera her classic Polish smile.

In Eastern Europe, smiling for no reason is a sign of stupidity and a lack of understanding of the harsh realities of the world. Even more, smiling at someone in Poland without a good reason (greetings and friendliness are NOT acceptable reasons) is perceived as an indication of deceit, ridicule, and malice. That's not to say they do not smile, they certainly do, just not without a valid reason.

Mamuś, Danuta, and Me (Czesław)

We would have been reminded to "not grin like fools" before these photos, as is the common advice given to children in Poland.

Mamuś (center) in the communal kitchen

Religious procession

20 IFUNDA REFUGEE CAMP, UGANDA 1947–1948

We hear about the war's end in 1945 over the radio. We are filled with relief and hope. I miss my Tatuś terribly and hope to be reunited soon. It has been a year since we've received any letters from him. I miss him more than ever. I imagine he must be very busy. I hope he is unharmed and remembers me. Long after the declaration of peace, we remain in our refugee camp. For reasons unknown to me, we move to a nearby camp in 1947.

In the Ifunda camp, as in Kidugala, we are a thousand or so refugee Poles. In such a small settlement, news spreads quickly. One morning we wake to the story of a local African woman who was found mauled by a lion near the creek. Away

at war, there are no Polish men here to hunt – only women, girls, and young boys. Instead, the men in charge of the camp organize a hunting party that same day. *Once a lion discovers easy prey, they do not forget.* Later that evening, news spreads that the lion has been shot. We are relieved, though annoyed, when the hunters refuse to share the tasty trophy.

I also want to go hunting but do not have a weapon. If only I had a gun, I could shoot lions, boa constrictors, thieves, and anyone else with malintent. I decide to make a gun to protect our family. I have a pipe and a rock but lack the know-how. I ask older children, my best source of reliable information, how to make a gun. They instruct me to make an explosion or fire inside a pipe with magic, a mousetrap, or a rubber band. I ask my teacher too, and she says, "With gunpowder," – which is not helpful because I don't have any. I do have plenty of dirt; I wonder if that would work? I also wonder if using a slingshot to fling the rock might be simpler, so I test this with a rotten papaya for target practice. From a distance, my aim is poor, and my target is tiny. Persistent, I keep trying until finally I hit the fruit– though the result is awfully disappointing! The rock just bounces off the perfectly intact papaya; it was not the explosion I envisioned. Not even a dent upon closer inspection! I decide a slingshot is no match for a lion.

I try again, but this time, I plan for a zip gun. Without gunpowder to ignite a fire inside the pipe, I consider match sticks (which I bartered from another boy in exchange for a colourful beetle). I bend the copper tube pipe back on itself to close off one end and wrap the pipe and a scrap piece of wood together with string to form a handle of sorts. I drop bits of dried grass and paper down the pipe barrel, followed by rocks. Proud of my ingenuity, I realize I cannot reach the grass and paper to light them! I dump the barrel and begin again. I decide to make a hole, just big enough for a match to fit through. Hammering for hours and growing callouses on my hands, I eventually pierce the metal with a nail and rock. Again, I fill

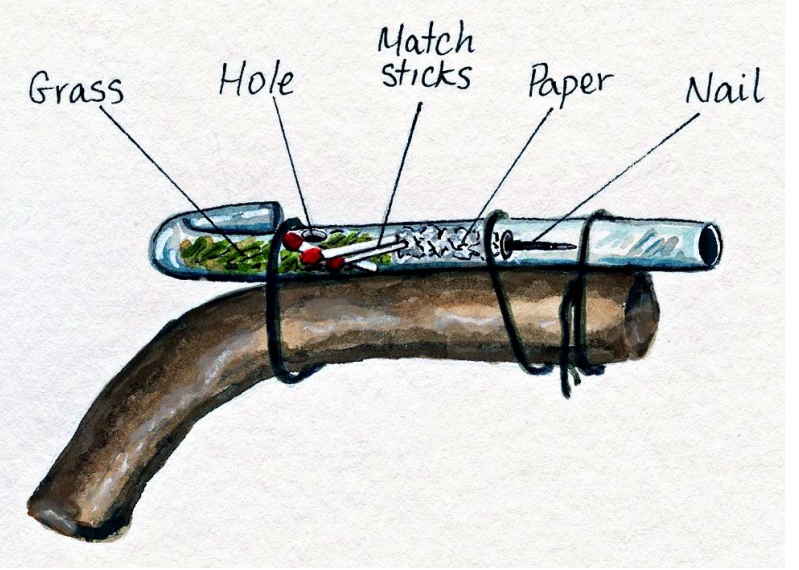
the barrel with paper, grass, and rocks. Holding the gun as far away from my face as my short arms can stretch, I plunge the small nail hole with the lit match. Instantly, the whole weapon blows up in my hand! I discover the rocks didn't shoot out at all. I need to improve my design, so I conduct more experiments as follows:

Trial 1: I try filling the barrel with extra match sticks, paper, and rocks. I light it and wince; it explodes again, but no rock-bullets shoot out.

Trial 2: I decide to improve the bullets, so I replace the rocks with a big nail I scavenged for. As I am peering down the barrel and forcing the nail down with a stick, the gun suddenly goes off with a loud *bang*! The nail shoots straight up, whizzes past my forehead, and lodges into the straw roof. I stand in shock, staring at the nail and the roof it killed. My heart gallops. I cannot believe it. Had the nail flown an inch closer, it would have pierced my brain.

I decide to retire my gun. I do not want to test my luck and end my life with a nail in my head. But I stash it under my straw mat just in case the Russians return.

I am very proud and pleased with myself for crafting a *real* working gun! I want to announce my success but decide to keep it a secret to avoid trouble with you-know-who. She would surely kill me!



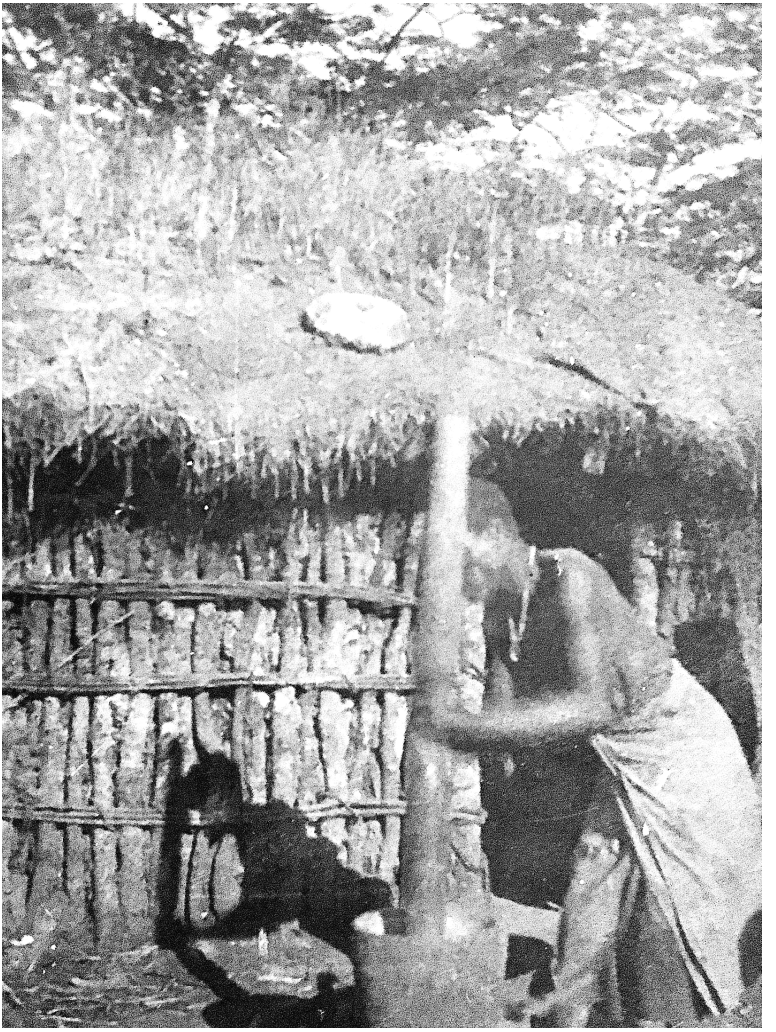
The pipe gun I engineered at age 14

However, there are few secrets I can keep from Mamuś. Somehow, no matter how stealthy or sneaky I am, she always sees and hears everything I do. She gives me a spanking to remember, yelling, "Guns are the reason for all our problems!". Little does she know I nearly shot myself. Had she known, she'd have killed me for sure! I count myself very lucky for escaping death twice in one day!

* * *

One of the boys I play with is black, not a Pole like me. He has lived in Africa all his life. *Lucky.* I envy him.

His father, an odd sight with clothes so darned they are sewn entirely of patches, is one of the servicemen for the camp. He cuts wood for the stove in the communal kitchen and whatnot. Sometimes, if I can shake Danusia off my trail, I join his family for dinner in the village outside of the camp. On our way, his father shares his plans for the money he earns. His dream is to buy two additional wives to add to his collection of five. Each wife costs 210 shillings, and he prefers them young, around 12 or 13 years old, which is my age! He waits a few years to buy each wife. As such, they grow progressively younger than his original collection. Each wife lives in her own hut. The huts are arranged in a circle around a central fire pit, and every night he rotates huts. He wants seven wives, one for each night of the week. The women make a cooked corn mash, which we eat one at a time by scooping our right hand, and only our right hand, into the pot. There is no question they would throw me out if I were ever to put my left hand into the pot. Also, if I offer my left hand to shake, they would be deeply offended. It is very important not to confuse my left and right. The left hand is reserved for toileting, and the right hand for eating and drinking. Since soap is reserved for bathing days, the left is dirty, and the right is clean.

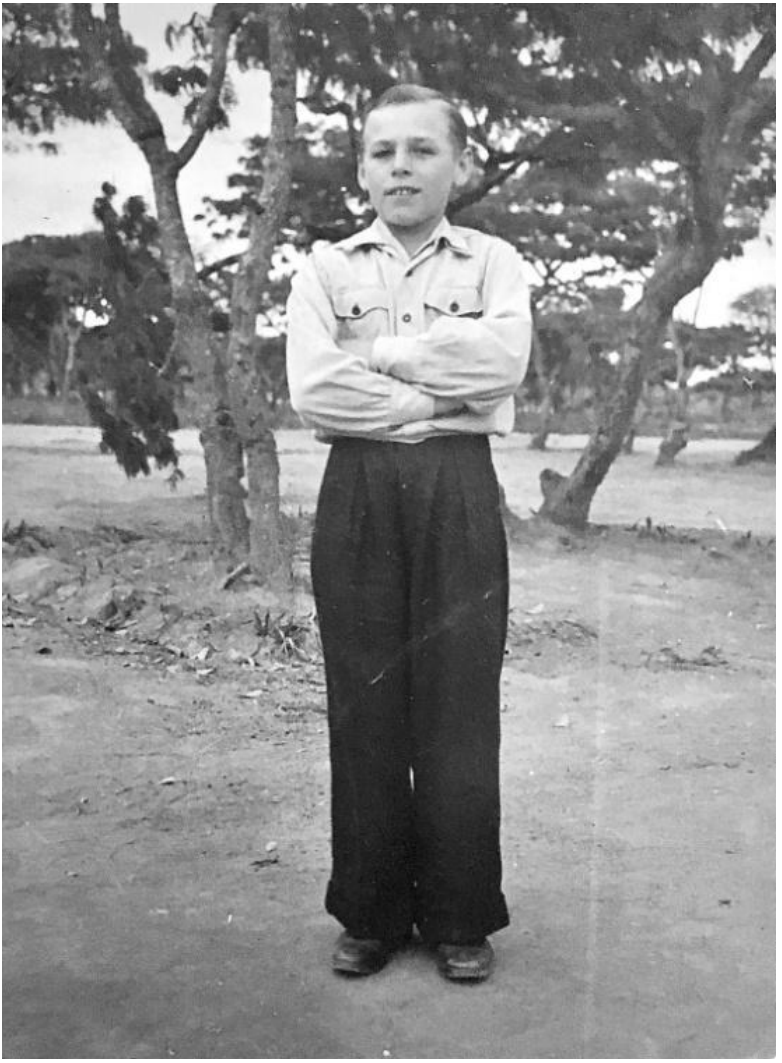


One of the wives making food in front of her hut

* * *

By the time I complete grade 7, we receive a letter from Tatuś. We learn that his unit is being demobilized. The British government will arrange for us to be reunited in an army base in Iver South Bucks, London, England: *another unknown*. I am so excited to see him but hate leaving Africa. Life is pleasant here. Compared to Siberia, this camp is heaven! The warm weather is as predictable as our meals, and I'm sad to say goodbye to my friends and pets. I wish he would join us here, but the camp organizers make it clear that our home in the camp will be gone; we cannot stay even if we wish to. With soldiers being discharged from the military, the camp is running out of funds. We pack and prepare for hardship—returning to Europe with mixed feelings. By now, Mamuś knows how to survive; she fills a large, abandoned gasoline container full of leftover lard from the kitchen. We can eat this during our travels and use it for trade.

And so, we move again.



Me (Czesław), age 15

Danuta, age 9

21 IVER BUCKS, LONDON, ENGLAND MAY 1948

My head, still a little sore, is my souvenir of malaria. My head *gives me a beating so I remember NOT to forget.*

The pit in my stomach grows heavy as I spot the ship that awaits us. I swallow the waves of nausea as they wash over me. All the more reason to stay landlocked!

As I anticipate, the travel is hideous. It's an 18-day boat ride to England and I am sick every single day. It leaves me weak and wretched. If only the nail had been an inch closer to my head.

Had I known how bitterly cold and rainy England would be, I might have run off to seek my fortune in Africa. Or so I

fantasize. As it were, the move was deeply unsettling.

Eventually, we step off the boat, feeling barely human. In disbelief, the journey is over. I struggle to find my footing, swaying on weak sea legs. The streets buzz and bustle with crowds, trucks, and energy. Postwar England is breathing itself back to life. It is intensely disorienting. Monumental buildings crowd the grey and foggy sky. The next thing I know, I am on a bus or maybe a truck, my gaze transfixed on the moving parts outside my window.

We gather at an army base, joining Polish veterans with their families. I watch as people reunite, crying, hugging, and kissing. I look for my Tatuś but worry I might not recognize him. Will he remember us? After six whole years since we last hugged, another lifetime, his face is a soft blur in my mind. Danusia, now 8, says she does not remember him at all. She was barely walking when he was drafted. I wonder if the war has changed him. I wonder if he will be pleased or sad to see me all grown up. Now, my Tatuś is a soldier, a hero to me. I think highly of him for his bravery, but I wonder what he did during the war. Did he hurt anyone? If he did, I know he is not evil like other soldiers. I am sure he would have had a good reason to shoot. Allies are good, and Russian and German soldiers are bad. They shoot for sport. They shoot innocent families.

Across the crowd, decorated with ribbons and medals, I spot a worn, weathered version of the father. Pointing, I ask Mamuś if *it is him?* Without reply, she draws an excited breath and shouts, "Gieniu!" rushing forward, leaving me with Danusia, and our few effects. I look at Danusia, and together, we gather our belongings, take a deep breath, and swim through the animated crowd. My heart is beating fast. I am nervous and excited all at once.

As we approach their hugging forms, Tatuś lights up. "Czesiu! Danusia!" he beams. His grinning eyes lock on mine before pulling me close for a hug. I fumble as I wrap my arms around this man, a familiar stranger. His voice is unmistakable. I watch, still stunned, as he scoops up Danusia. Her hands cup his cheeks, and she smiles as she learns our father's face with her little hands. Time stops as she stares, photographing him with her eyes. Someone else hugs me from behind. In a daze, we are reunited with Dolek, Gienek, and my Babcia Zofia. My Mamuś has a mother again! Hugging her, I am surprised she still smells of home and ovine pastures. Our family is nearly complete, but for my lost Dziadziu—forever in Siberia.

After many hugs and more tears, we tell Tatuś about Africa, and he does the same, recounting his six years of service and travel. From 1942-1948, he served as a radio transmitter in the Polish army (under British Command). He fought in several campaigns against the Germans in North Africa and finally in Italy at the famous Battle of Monte Cassino. On a sombre note, he shares that in return for his six years of service, he has nothing: no country, no money, and no pension. Not a złoty, not a pence. Worse even, he feels betrayed by the Allies, who sacrificed *Polska* to appease Russia without permission from the Polish people. His greatest disappointment was not being able to liberate *Polska*. Though the war has ended, *Polska* is not free[42]. Many poles are still cooped. And worse, he tells us we have no home to return to.

Tatuś (far right)

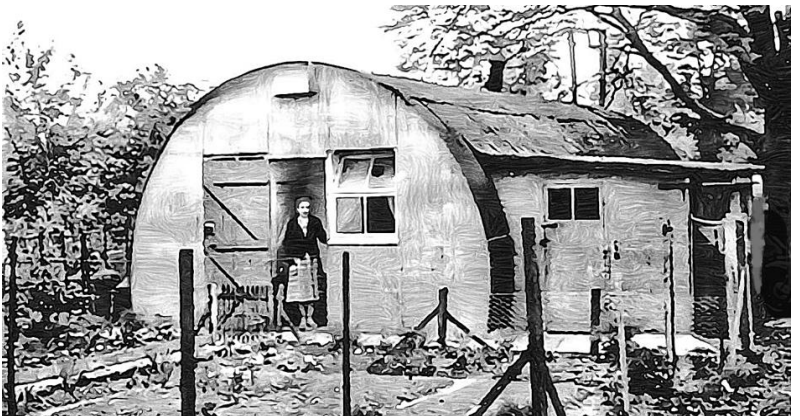
[42] After the war, *Polska* was forced into communism under Soviet control until 1989 and was subjugated to many years of gross economic devastation.

My Tatuś

My new school in Slough, decorated with small, barred windows, looks as inviting as a prison. If being unable to understand or speak more than a few English words does not already make me an outcast, I am enrolled in grade 6 *again*, with 10-year-olds (despite that I am 15)! They make this decision based only on my stunted height. To make matters worse, mean boys sniff me out in the first week. Silently, size me up. I must fail to intimidate them because they begin tormenting me every day. I am locked in a lion's den, and there's nothing I can do. I cry every single day at school and at home. When the bullies see me crying, they roar with laughter. Fodder for their cruelty, I am at the bottom of the school food chain. I am an exile, a prisoner, and now an outcast. Despite this, I make up my mind never to cry or let myself be seen as weak again. I train myself to hold it in. Still, I protest, plead, and negotiate with my parents to stay home. Fortunately, I do not need a tree to assert myself; I now have an ally in my father. I successfully put up a sufficient fuss that Tatuś seeks out a new school for the fall. My expectations are low, but to never see those horrible boys from Slough would be a reprieve. Luckily, school is out for the summer, and I can breathe again. On the final day, I am met with a dream I had long forgotten. Passing a garbage dump, I spot a glimmer amongst the trash: an old, rusted bike frame. Excitedly, I pull it towards me and take off for home, feeling buoyant with my new treasure. It is missing essential parts, such as tires and a chain, but I can figure it out. Over the summer break, I work hard to collect and recycle beer bottles, earning 3 pence apiece. I don't have to scrimp and save for long because the displaced veterans seem to have a reason or two to drink; they are shell-shocked, sad, angry, and numb. Soon I have enough money to buy the missing bike parts. I assemble my scrap bike all by myself, feeling very accomplished. I have wanted a bicycle forever. I cannot believe the day is finally here! This is my first ever actual adult possession.

With this bike, I have transportation. Now I can efficiently complete my chore of water collection from the communal *barak* to our Nissen hut.

Me (Czesław) on my first bicycle



Our Nissen hut, with no plumbing or heating,
and shared with another family.

In the fall, I hug Danusia and Mamuś goodbye. Tatuś and I take the train to my new Polish boarding school, the Lilford Polish Technical School, in Peterborough, Northamptonshire. Tatuś says it is designed for adolescents like me to catch up on their missed school years. I will even be with other Poles! Finally, I won't be different or alone. All our classes will be in Polish! For this, I am hopeful but still scared to be separated from my family. No one can know this, of course. I cannot stomach the dread and loneliness as the time comes to leave my father again. I hold my breath and push the feelings down deep. *I will not cry*. I repeat this over and over in my head to the rhythm of the train.

The school is very different from anything I have experienced to date. I settle in despite my fears. We sleep in our classroom; each *barak* is equipped with bunk beds on one side, desks on the other, and bathrooms flanking another. I soon learn this comes at the price of always being in school, day or night. Even when sick, the teacher brings school to your bedside. The advantage, however, of boarding school is that

our commute is measured in seconds, and there are no bullies lying in wait. In the morning, we merely roll out of bed to take our seats in front of the chalkboard. We are taught everything from the humanities to mechanical engineering and the trades. By midday, we get a leisure break. I prefer to be outside, playing soccer, baseball, tennis, and sometimes canoeing on the river Nene. Once the winter fog arrives, sports become an exciting challenge! Some days I hardly see my hands at the end of my arms! I learn to duck fast from rogue kamikaze soccer balls and potatoes whizzing past my head! Afternoons are filled with more learning, followed by mandatory chores like harvesting and peeling potatoes, taking out the garbage, etc.

Some of the boys in my class are not boys but young men who never received schooling because of the war. I pick out a friend early on; he is my age (15) but much taller. I am the smallest boy in my class but not the youngest. I am teased for my size, but at least I have a friend, so it is bearable. With all of us boys living and learning under the same roof, it is not the least bit tranquil. It's orderly disorder; fights and arguments erupt quickly among us. It's inevitable when you quarantine hormones in close quarters. Punishments are a decrease in grades. Sports are a salvation.

Despite the food shortage in England, the occasional food fight does erupt. We spear potatoes with long sticks to launch them further and harder at each other. It's a great game! To ensure everyone is fed equally, we create a fair system to alternate who gets the first helping of food. Those who cut the pieces are the last to receive one. Equality is ensured. While we are all very tempted, one dares eat the lion's share. I always try to take only my share and not a spoonful more to be sure the last boy gets enough for himself. When it's his turn to start, he will return the gesture, and I will not starve. Despite the rationing, the amount of food is much greater than what I am accustomed to. I eat everything I am given, even when I am

not hungry. For this reason, I begin to put on weight. I worry that if I continue to gain, I will be fat and little. I panic as I think back to my dead pet chickens. I decide to wear my belt as tightly as possible to band my stomach and prevent overeating; this leaves sores on my skin.

Overall, this is my favourite and most challenging school to date. My best subject is geography, and I know Tatuś will be proud when he learns I have the highest grade in the whole class!

In the late spring, before the school year is complete, Tatuś arrives. I am happy to see him but very disappointed when he tells me to pack for a new beginning, this time overseas. I am sad to leave a school where I excel and feel at home. On the train ride, Tatuś explains that the military has given us a choice to stay in England (we are entitled to British citizenship for his 6-year service), immigrate to a Commonwealth country such as Australia or Canada, or return to *Polska*. For the first time since before the war, we are given choice and control over our lives. He adds that Mamuś cleverly reached out to the Red Cross, discovering an unknown relative residing in faraway Winnipeg, Canada. His name is Ben Zeglinski; it turns out he is my father's uncle. He wrote to my family describing the country as rich with opportunities and is offering to sponsor us. After a short deliberation and an ultimatum from Mamuś (who refuses to return to *Polska* and the hard life of farm labour), Tatuś tells me they agreed on Canada. However, his army service benefits –citizenship and a small pension– will be annulled in doing so. To fulfill the immigration requirements, which include the purchase of farmland, he buys a 100-acre *swamp* for $100. It qualifies as farmland, though he has no intention of farming or settling in a swamp. I am relieved to hear that! "Ben says we can live with his family for two weeks while we look for a house of our own," he promises, hopefully. My Mamuś is smart; I feel lucky to have her.

Tatuś and I return to the army base to pack up our lives once again. However, my Babcia Zofia and my uncles, Dolek and Gienek, refuse to join us. They are tired of being uprooted and prefer the familiarity of the refugee camp. We hug, not knowing if or when we will meet again. but it's not a big deal. It could be worse. I don't waste my energy being upset like Danusia, who is crying like a baby with her arms locked around Babcia. I don't want to cry or watch the tears. I walk off to retrieve my bicycle. As I fix the chain and take one last look at the hut, Mamuś approaches to tell me, "You can't take your bicycle, Czesiu. You have to leave it." My heart drops like a bomb. I panic at the thought of leaving my bike. *No! This can't happen! I don't want to be separated from my bicycle!* No amount of pleading works. *I hate Mamuś! She is ruining my life.* I try Tatuś. I beg. I grovel. I nearly cry. Tatuś suggests I sell the bike for money to use in Canada.

I find a man who buys it from me in exchange for 1.5 British pounds. He promises to send the money to Canada as soon as he is paid. Little did I know that the bike and the money are gone for good. I checked the mailbox for years to be sure. From this person, I learned a painful truth in business: that trust is *earned*–not assumed. My naivete, size, and youth are weaknesses that I work hard to overcome. I am without means to enforce his promise. I lose a bike, but I gain an important lesson.

From Southhampton, with only $400 and a sliver of hope, our boat tickets, and a few articles of castaway clothing, we board the steerage class[43] of the *RMS Aquatania Ocean* liner, Cunard Line. Oh, how I hate boats! Mamuś promises this one will be different, but I sense her hesitation. She tells me the vessel is affectionately known as *The Ship Beautiful* in her prime. That is, during the roaring twenties.We sail the vintage

[43] The steerage class is the lower deck of the boat used to store cargo and the lowest class of immigrant passengers.

ship near her breaking point. I come to learn my suspicions were right when a *piano* reportedly falls through a deck! In addition, steerage class is far, *far* from 'beautiful'!

We travel the Atlantic for a week– destination: Halifax, Canada. As expected, I am sick every day. The trip is miserable and long. *I vow never to sail again!* By the time we dock to shore, I am a scrap of a boy, 15 years old, 5 foot nothing, and less than 90 lbs of bone.

Aquatania Ocean Liner, 'The Ship Beautiful'

From left to right: Danuta, Tatuś, Mamuś, and I on board the Aquatania.

22 ARRIVAL IN CANADA
MAY 1949

Still dazed and dizzy from the voyage, we embark on a train to Winnipeg for another week. The Canadian Pacific Railway is no more comfortable than *Aquatania*, with its wooden benches that convert into *harder* wooden beds. Luckily, my nausea has downgraded to fatigue and boredom, which are far more tolerable. Fortunate to have a window, I watch in horror as it snows every day of the journey.

Finally, we arrive at what I later learn is called *Winterpeg* by most Canadians. We descend the stairs from the platform to our new, snow-covered land. It's a *balmy* -5°C in May!

My brain has goosebumps! My breath escapes me in cloudy, white billows–and with it, my hope. Winnipeg is colder than England, much much more so!

"Tatuś, why the hell are we back in *Siberia*!?" I ask.

He looks at me, chuckling, then stares past to a place I cannot see. Moments of silence pass before he says with quiet assurance, "We are cold, yes. But Czesiu, *we are free*."

PART 2

CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

23 WINNIPEG, CANADA
MAY 1949

For our first two weeks in Winnipeg, we are kindly homed by my uncle Ben, his wife, Ruth Shorter, and their two children, Paul and Betty. Ben Zeglinski is a well-respected and educated social worker who worked for British Intelligence during the First World War. He recounts his journey from Poland to Canada shortly after the war in 1919.

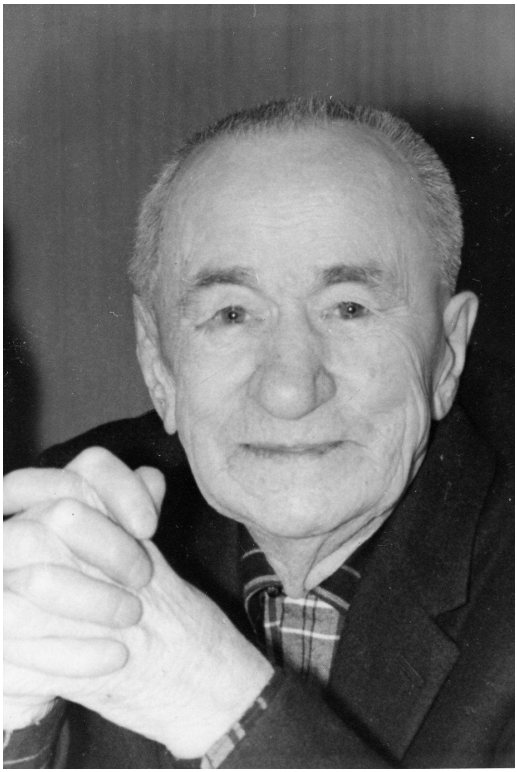
After we share our story and settle in, he encourages assimilation to improve our chances for success in Canada. The first step is to legally shed our past and adopt the Anglo-Saxon version of our names for official documents (naturalization, school records, passports, etc.).

Thus, we become:

- *Czesław E. Żegliński* to Chester “Ches” Zeglinski
- *Maria Żeglińska* to Mary Zeglinski
- *Eugeniuzs Żegliński* to Eugene Zeglinski
- *Danuta Żeglińska* to Diane Zeglinski

From left to right:
Tatuś, Ches, Uncle Ben, Diane, Betty, Mamuś, Ruth

For reasons unclear to me, the second step according to Uncle Ben is to become members of the Freemasons. Lastly, he instructs me to learn to speak, read, and write well in English. I do not protest. I cannot, for my English is too limited! I was also raised not to argue with my elders (apart from my mother!); the consequences could be upsetting. Suffice it to say Uncle Ben's advice proved to be very beneficial.



Ben Zeglinski

24 WINNIPEG, CANADA
MAY 1949 – MAY 1956

From the moment we arrive in Canada, I sense a silent wariness and, at times, outright hostility. We are strange people from a strange land. People fear otherness. Despite our best attempts to assimilate, the prejudice is prolific. The children in the neighbourhood all refuse to play with me because I am different, small, and foreign. I give up making friends and keep to myself. Over the summer, I intently work towards buying a bicycle by selling found objects and completing chores for neighbours.

It is a joy to ride! I cycle hard, feeling my heart race as the suburbs fly past me. Spent and exhilarated, I cycle home; on my way, a police car stops me! He gives me a speeding ticket,

even though I was cycling on the road and not on the sidewalk! I press that I am only 15 years old and that I wasn't going any faster than a car could! This gets me in more trouble. He confiscates me and my bicycle, locking us in a holding cell until Mamuś is called to bail me out. After arguing with the officers on my behalf, she pays the ransom ticket for my freedom. On the way home, I tell her they don't even know how fast I was going! They have no proof, no way of measuring my speed! The officer used only his eyes to decide I was a criminal. She tells me to be more vigilant; racism may follow us forever.

In September 1949, newly 16 years old, I am enrolled in St. John's Technical High School… in grade 6 *again!!!* The school feels this is best given my size (I look about 11) and current language limitations. So, for the *third* time, I am enrolled in grade 6, having already completed it once in Africa and again in England! I could not have felt more like an outsider. My clothes are a collection of odd hand-me-downs, and the language barrier is impenetrable. I'm laughed at, branded "DP[44]", "runt", and "donkey". My peers tell me to go back to where I came from. I wish I could. I stand rejected in No-Man's-Land; I am not Canadian and no longer Polish. Their insults hurt. My headaches return. The pressure squeezes the tears out of my head when I am alone. I know better than to cry and show my vulnerability—it is bully bait. I am *free* but not free.

Winnipeg greets us the following spring, 1950, not with snow but instead the worst recorded flood in the Red River valley. Homes are flooded to their roofs, and men paddle Canadian canoes down the streets! It seems not every Siberia is cold. It is unspeakably strange and awful, this place we now call "home"! The weather, the flooding, the racism, the mosquitoes. *Oh*, Canada!

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[44] DP is a derogatory term for immigrants, meaning "Deported Person."

Red River Flood in Winnipeg, 1950

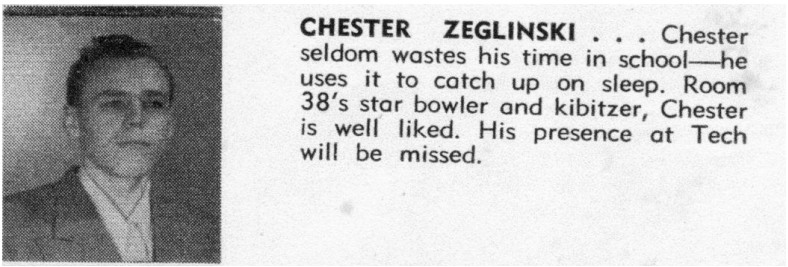
We adjust. We compromise.

I wear parkas in the summer. I *survive*.

Soon, my father trades the swampland for a used pickup truck. We rent a house and sublet the basement to another family. Mamuś, Tatuś, Diane and I share one bedroom. The kitchen and single washroom are shared with three other tenants. Eventually, for financial reasons, we downsize to a new space: a small garden shed with no more than a sink and a toilet. Eager to move, my parents work hard *8* days a week to earn and save money. It takes many years of trade work, my father as a labourer (repairing cement, plastering, etc.), my mother as a seamstress, earning a maximum of $12 per week when she meets her quota. Ironically, whenever she meets the piecework target, the quota is raised. Just as I learned in Africa, the harder you work, the more you must work to make less. Eventually, having saved 500$, my parents buy a modest lot (sold by the city for 60$) and begin building our home. We scrounge for used lumber, pulling and straightening nails for reuse. Lacking the finances to finish the house, we move into the shell one winter, missing floors, finished walls, electricity, and plumbing. To help, I offer to drop out of school and find a job. My mother, who was denied schooling, cannot bear the thought. She orders me to register at the Holy Ghost School, where I complete grades 9 and 10 in one year (1950-1951). I learn Latin and French easily, but I struggle with English. Learning Shakespeare is a new form of torture.

Mamuś standing in front of the garage shed
we call home for a time.

I graduate 12th grade from St. John's High School in 1952. That fall, I enroll in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Manitoba. Engineers are held in high regard post-war; a period of prosperity and rebuilding ensues for a time.



Ches in St. John's High School 12th grade graduation yearbook

Engineering is a boisterous boys club. At a faculty frosh party, I try to fit in and keep up with my peers, singing our theme song, "We are, we are, we are engineers; we can, we can, we can drink 40 beers"! I am a Zeglinski, *goddamit*! *Vodka is my mother tongue!* Keen to prove myself, I drink 27 before declaring a headache and driving home. I am no match for the champion, who downs 57 and lives to tell the tale!

My first year of university is challenging: I still struggle with English, am very shy, feel massively inferior to others, and am terrified of public speaking. However, I am determined to succeed. I bike to campus. I study hard. I hire help. Diane types up my reports and does the geography homework which is not worth my time. I prefer to concentrate on learning theory than on colouring maps.

I'm glad I didn't trade her for the stack of pancakes after all.

During my summers, I work hard at various jobs. During my construction job at Lynn Lake, Manitoba, I spend my time feeding mice. What begins with one hungry mouse ends with a colony! On my last day, I leave instructions for the next guy, "Feed my *family*!". My big reward for a summer of hard labour: A grey Morris Minor car! The salesman introduces me to the stick shift, and I (*eventually and awkwardly*) make it out of the lot, hoping no one is watching. Still needing a driver's license, I drive to the address the salesman mentioned. After stalling the car twice and getting honked at repeatedly when I incorrectly guess I have the right of way, I successfully arrive! Though it would have been faster to bike or walk to the government office, I feel ecstatic to drive my very own car! Seeing as a driver's license is only a formality, in less than a few minutes, I sign a form, pay $3, and am handed the ID. Now slightly more confident with the clutch and gears, I drive home to show off my beautiful car! Whoever said you could not buy happiness never had a Morris Minor!

All grown-up and newly confident, I drive it to campus and save hours in my commute. It also proves to be quite profitable! I chauffeur other students to and from campus. In exchange, one pays for gas, another does my homework, and the third pays in cash. However, this enterprise soon comes to an end.

Ches & his Morris Minor in 1953

Despite being a school for higher learning, University proves no different from any other fraternity. I am the target of taunts and pranks for 4 years too long. Despite the pain, I don't cry. Still, to this day, I cannot cry, even in grief. The bullies prowl and stalk to remind me that I am poor, small, and an immigrant. They *give me a beating so I remember NOT to forget*.

When words are not enough, they find additional means for cruelty. They stick gum in the keyhole of my locker, preventing access. They do this often. Once in the winter, when I return to my car after class, I find it parked on top of 2-foot-high concrete blocks! Another time, they strip my car of all its wiring. Worst of all, late after a school dance in 1955, I enter the parking lot but cannot find my car. I wonder if I drank more than I should. Just then, I spot a car parked in front of the TV *inside* the reception hall of the student residence! I laugh as I approach for a better look. To pull this off, they must have pushed the car up a flight of stairs and through the building doors! My jaw drops as I realize it is MY car! The mirrors are broken clean off, and the sides are badly scratched. The next day, *The Manitoban*, our school newspaper, features a photo of my beat-up Morris Minor on the front page.

My Morris Minor parked in front of the TV
in the student residence entryway

I am so accustomed to being bullied that I know it is best to ignore and retreat slowly when they are on the hunt. After this incident, however, something snaps. When the worst of them teases me days later in the lab, I explode. Smirking as he struts away, I pick up a chair and smash him over the head. I shock myself with exhilaration! If he wants a fight, I'll give him one!

On June 30, 1955, a momentous day, my family and I become Canadian citizens. Though it is official on paper, a part of me is still the displaced boy from a stolen country—without a Polish home, without identity. I still feel unwelcome. My language, my culture, my family, my homeland — gone.


CANADA

CC55 28582

CERTIFICATE OF CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

This is to certify that

CHESTER ZEGLINSKI

is a Canadian citizen under the provisions of the Canadian Citizenship Act and as such is entitled to all the rights and privileges and is subject to all the responsibilities and obligations and duties of a Canadian citizen.

CERTIFICAT DE CITOYENNETÉ CANADIENNE

MINISTÈRE DE LA CITOYENNETÉ ET DE L'IMMIGRATION

Ce certificat atteste que

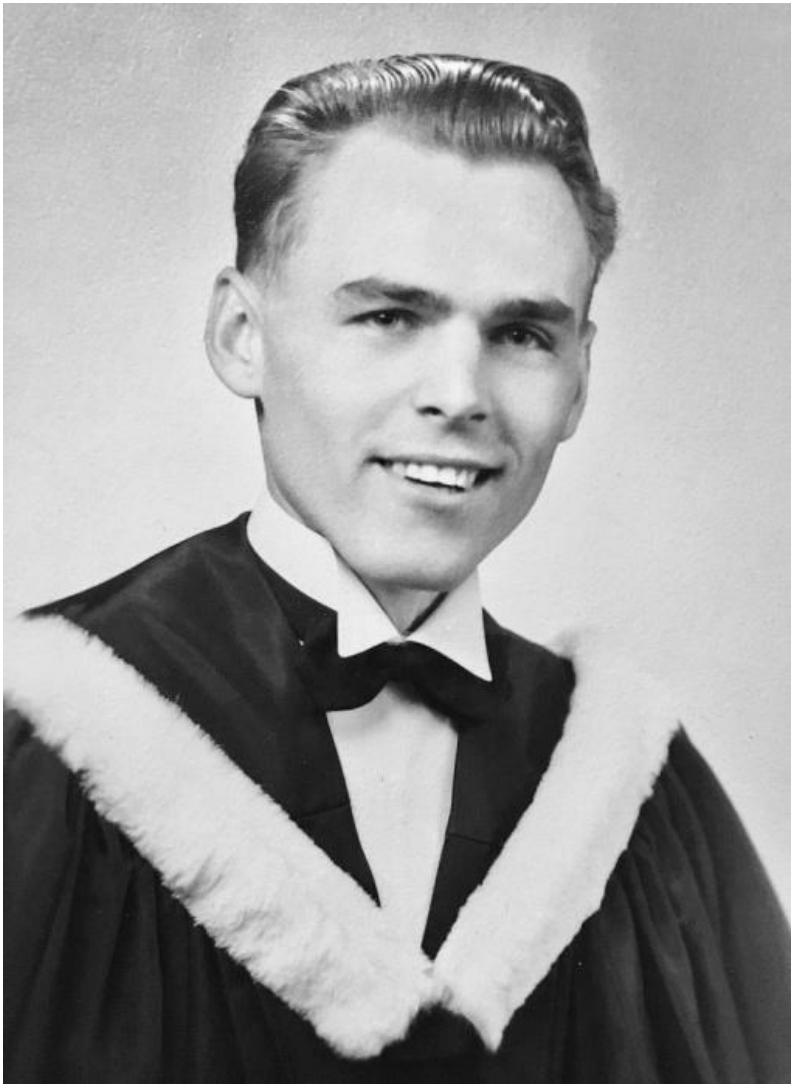
est citoyen canadien aux termes de la Loi sur la citoyenneté canadienne et a cette titre jouit de tous les droits et privilèges et est assujetti à tous les devoirs, obligations et responsabilités d'un citoyen canadien.

DEPUTY MINISTER
SOUS-MINISTRE

MINISTER
MINISTRE

In May 1956, I graduate from my program with my final thesis, "The Time and Motion Study." Proud and relieved, I celebrate with my family. *Na zdrowie*[45]*!*

[45] *Na zdrowie!* (pronounced "*naz drovieh*") = Cheers!



25 CANADA
1957 - 1979

I begin my career in 1957 at Westinghouse, Toronto, in management training as a sales engineer. A year later, I accept a new job at the North Star Oil refinery (as a safety, corrosion, and design engineer) in Winnipeg— to start in 2 days. I give myself 1 day to commute from Toronto to Winnipeg (a trip that takes most 3 days!). Who needs sleep!? *Not me!* I plan to start work the same day I arrive. I begin the trip broke, borrowing $80 from a co-worker for gas. The first hurdle is a flat tire, which I notice as a rumble and black chunks flying past my rear window. When I pull over to inspect, there is not a tire left to change! The rubber is gone! Fortunately, I have a spare, but it is not meant for a long journey. I have no choice but to drive hard and fast if I want to arrive on time. The next hurdle on my journey is the police. I'm charged with

speeding... I am given a $100 speeding ticket on the outskirts of a small town and told to pay the fine that evening. After paying for gas, I have only $40 left, so I refuse. The officer gives me the choice of a night in the tank or a legal debate with the Justice of the Peace. I choose the latter. I am escorted to the residence of the judge in this 'small town anywhere' sometime after midnight. The Judge greets us in his pyjamas! I plead my case and explain my situation: I cannot pay even if I want to. I am broke. He asks for my wallet. He rummages through it with sleep in his eyes, finds a $20 bill, and says, "I'll leave you $20– that's just enough gas to get you to Winnipeg, assuming you don't earn another speeding ticket!". With that, the Judge retreats to bed, and I drive all through the night. Miraculously, I arrive on time at my new job that morning! You can imagine how tired I was! I never want to be broke, exhausted, and poor like that again. I vow to become rich. What a dream that would be!

I later work for the Canadian Federal Government as a mechanical engineer for Indian Affairs and Public Works. I frequently travel up north to Native American reserves, assisting in the mechanical design of schools and more. In 1958, again restless, I switch jobs and begin work for the University of Manitoba, assisting with various engineering projects on campus.

Around this time, my father is working hard to invest in land. He uses his wages, 65 cents/hr (earning less than $6K/year), to buy 14 acres of land for $14,000 in North Kildonan. He has the dream but only some of the money to cover the down payment. I offer to co-sign a loan to help him with the purchase. I am inspired by this investment, his ideas for development, and the opportunity it might bring my family. Salaries alone bring little to the table. Despite several years as an employee for various engineering firms, I decide to break from tradition as a company man. I quit my job and leap full throttle into the make-or-break world of land and

housing development. I am now my own boss! As such, I work night and day! We subdivide the land we own and build houses to sell. We name one of the streets "Chopin Blvd" to honour a favoured Polish musician. To make my father proud, I name two streets in our developments *Zeglinski Crescent* (one in Victoria Beach, Manitoba and the other in North Kildonan, Winnipeg). Though empowered by the decision, I worry. I worry that by naming the streets *Zeglinski Crescent,* people will reject the land.

Fortunately, I am mistaken. This is, to date, my toughest decision and crowning achievement. With the gradual shift towards cultural diversity, the sale of our lots is a great success! I am filled with indescribable euphoria as I realize I have finally made it and will be a millionaire! My dream is realized! This is the most incredible high I have ever experienced. I have planted my Polish roots into Canadian soil. I am home. ***I belong***.

Ches in front of our housing development in Victoria Beach, Manitoba

Meanwhile, as we establish our roots, Mamuś receives a letter from our remaining family in England. They have been told they must move as the Iver Bucks camp is closing. Without delay, my parents write back, offering to sponsor them to Canada. Shortly after that, Babcia and her flock, sons Gienek and Dolek, and Dolek's new Polish wife, Wanda, join us in Winnipeg in temporary housing. Gienek moves in with my parents and Diane, which brings tension. Diane calls to tell me he is a difficult house guest, refusing to help around the house or even to be cordial. Frustrated with having to mother a grown man, my parents insist Gienek return to Poland to find himself a servant or a wife. He can't afford the former, so the latter will have to do.

"He is irritable, helpless and incapable, but has great hair"; they review his attributes, hoping a young woman will nibble.

Their prayers are answered.

In Poland, he meets Barbara and proposes. With his budget all spent, he returns to Canada and wooes her from a distance while arranging for her travels. As she is on her way by boat, after permanently relinquishing her Polish citizenship, he suddenly gets cold feet. Mamuś is *irate*! She tells him he must marry Barbara or move out because the poor woman gave up her citizenship for him!

Few people win a fight with Mamuś.

A few weeks later, I attend the marriage ceremony of Gienek (Eugieniusz) Baren and Barbara. They live in Mamuś' basement for many years until they can afford their own home.

From bottom left to right:
Ginek's forehead, Wanda, Dolek, Tatuś, Mamuś, Barbara, and Ches

On December 26, 1960, I follow suit and marry my first love, Joan Turner. She is a beautiful social worker from Cupar, Saskatchewan. She goes by her middle name, Joan. She loves nature, helping others, children, and learning. We enjoy adventure, travel, family, and fun. We especially love movement and play tennis, badminton, curling, and other sports together. My family joins me on our wedding day for a magical winter celebration in Regina, Saskatchewan. Full of spirit, snow, music, and extended family of all ages, our dancing warms the night away.

From left to right:
Tatuś & Mamuś, Ches & Joan, Alice & Frank Turner

Our post-wedding picture

Joan completes her master's degree in Social Work while pregnant with our first child and eventually takes on a professorship at the University of Manitoba. I am proud of her and my sister Diane, both modern, intelligent women determined to have their own careers.

At this time, Diane is pursuing medical studies at the University of Manitoba, considering a career as a psychiatrist, emergency physician, or anesthesiologist! Three medical residencies later, she tells me she did not pursue Medicine out of passion; but rather for the financial stability that comes with the job. Mamuś' insistent pleading for a doctor in the family is a strong motivator. I consider it myself briefly, but the biochemistry prerequisite course disagrees far too much with me!

Diane graduating from the University of Manitoba

Diane working in the operating room

During her second residency training in Winnipeg, Diane falls for Julius, a Nigerian prince studying orthopedic surgery. Shortly after, I receive a call from my hysterical Mamuś to say that Diane and Julius have eloped. Mamuś is devastated, not just because she missed the wedding of her only daughter, but because her daughter marries an African… I phone Diane, who explains that Julius proposed, and they decide to marry before anyone (meaning Mamuś) can interfere. Diane knew Mamuś would forbid marriage to a black man, despite Diane's African childhood.

Not long afterwards, the doctor-duo moves to New York to finish their medical training. After the birth of their first child, Diane is overwhelmed with the tricky balance of motherhood and medicine. She flies home to Winnipeg to gift Mamuś her brown baby boy to raise for a time. Mamuś herself is working full time, but her beautiful baby grandson finds his way to her heart.

As many can attest, the traumatized brain is sticky. Mamuś remains suspicious of others. She holds onto black-and-white beliefs with a death grip just to survive. Part of her never left the gulag; she lives with the daily uncertainty of our family's survival, and it takes a toll. Despite her own experience with racism and the refuge we were graciously granted in Africa, she is fearful of foreign people, races, and cultures. She frequently scrubs as the baby's pigment, possibly to protect him from future discrimination. For myself and Diane, being young children, Africa was and is a warm and wonderful place of colour, food, generosity and fun. Africa gave us our childhoods.

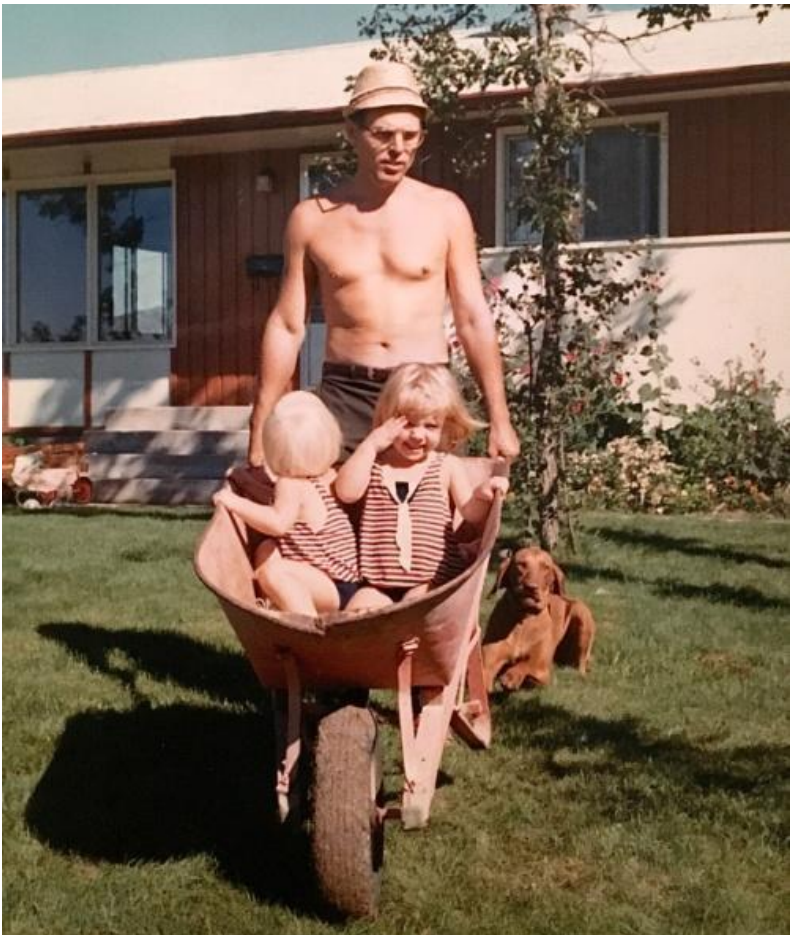
After a few years, Diane finishes her residency in anesthesiology and returns for her toddler. Diane's family grows with the addition of two baby girls, and they eventually settle in a beautiful shoreline home in Florida with sun, sand, and good pay.

With Diane gone, my Babcia moves in with Mamuś and the rest of the family. Soon after, she is diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer with 30 days or less to live. Yet, a stubborn shepherdess just like my Mamuś, she's never one to follow orders. It is no surprise when she refuses to die and lives for another 13 *years*. Gradually she deteriorates and becomes fully dependent on Mamuś (who already has a full-time job). One day, after a health scare, the family brings Babcia to the hospital and refuses to take her back. The hospital's social workers call *every day* for *months*, but my parents refuse. They are not able to manage the level of care she needs. Eventually, after vacationing in the hospital for 9 months, a bed is found in a long-term care facility. There, my Babcia, Zofia Baren, lives for another month before passing away, still adorned with her soft sheep's wool scarf.

My babcia, Zofia Baren

In September 1963 and November 1964, my daughters, Joy Ann Zeglinski and Cathryn Mary Zeglinski, are born one year apart. Despite being a parent to my little sister, I feel emotionally unprepared to raise my own family, neither mature enough nor financially secure. As a result of my own

deprivation, I struggle at times with being or having enough. I still feel very much like a child myself. Nonetheless, at 31 years old, I am a father to 2 little girls, a dog named Lady, and her brood of puppies.



Our first home (which I built with my father) on Uxbridge Road. See our dog Lady in the background, Cathy (with white-blond hair) and Joy (in sailor salute).

From left to right: Mamuś, Joy, Cathy

26 CANADA & UNITED STATES 1979 - PRESENT

The times are changing; my marriage of 19 years comes to an end in 1979. Women are growing more independent, taking to the streets to protest many issues. Joan is changing; I am changing. We grow apart, but I miss the signs. My children are independent teens, active in competitive sports, always out and always busy. My growing business is all-consuming and makes demands of me at all hours. I am tense, on edge, juggling purchases and large sums like my life depends on it.

I return home one evening after a long day at a home show. I am confused to find some furniture and family gone. There is a note. The shock of this unexpected loss is all too familiar; it brings me back to the knock on the door, February 10th, 1940. Throughout our separation and for many years after the divorce (1985), I am in a dark place. Abandoned and wounded,

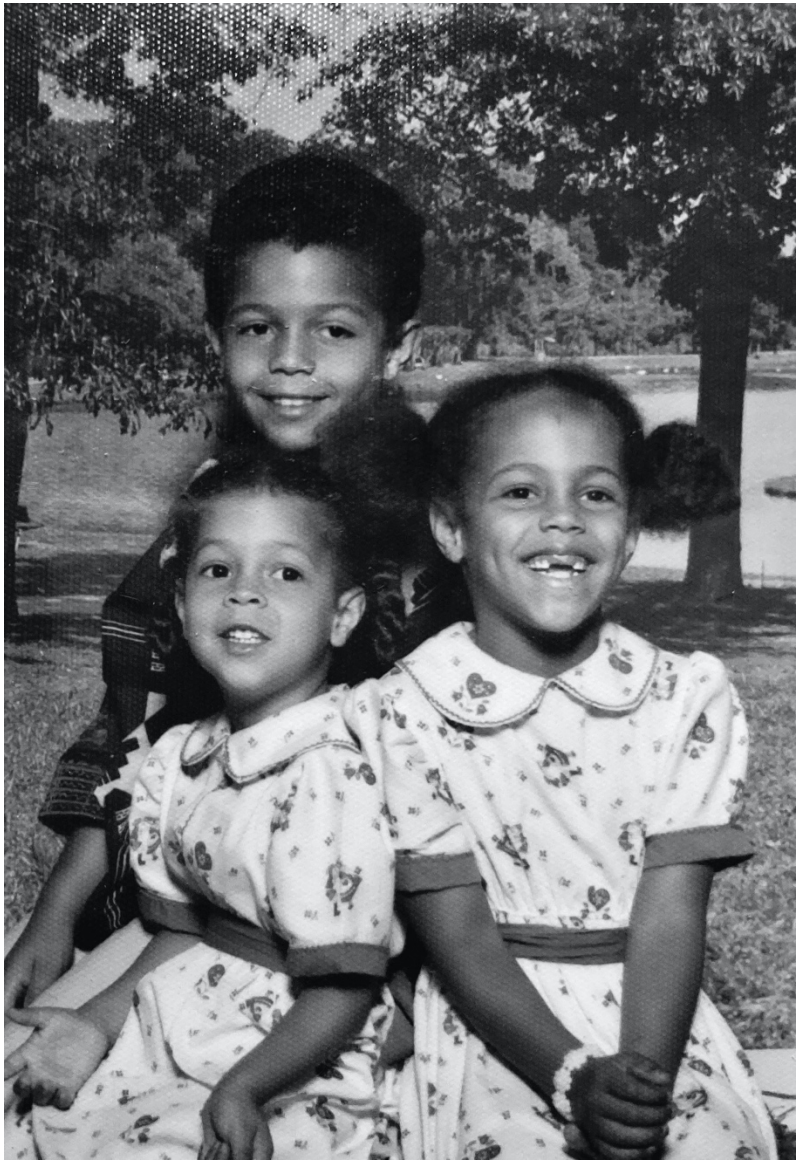
I struggle to forgive my family, but most especially myself. Over time, I experience all the stages of grief, from shock, denial, anger, shame, and deepening sadness. In my preoccupation with working, making money, building a business and a name, I had forgotten to cherish what mattered most, my family.

Shortly after this shock, my business partner steals truckloads of stone from our company (Whiteshell Quarries), forcing me to terminate the partnership and fold the company (1980). No different than the rodents back on the farm, he waited until I had let my guard down before eating all the beets for himself in the middle of the night.

I feel very alone.

As a single adult, I invest time in myself and my hobbies. I pursue many interests, including toastmasters, photography, theatre, music, tennis, golf, badminton, hunting, fishing, swimming, and landscaping. My favourite pastime is adventure and travel. I explore country by country, collecting stories, souvenirs, and countless memories. I foster a love of the world, theatre, sports, and travel in my children as well, gifting them with two worldwide trips each.

Similarly, Diane's relationship with Julius ends with the discovery of his repeated infidelity. Their marriage is *annulled* by the Catholic Church (to appease Mamuś) despite *19 years of marriage* and *three beautiful children*: Akanji, Simi, and Deji. Like a tax loophole, the church frowns on divorce but offers annulments. Go figure!



Deji (left), Akanji (above), and Simi (right)

Diane and I decide to return to our childhood home in Jasionów, Poland (currently within the new borders of Ukraine). It still stands after all these years! We knock on the front door and I am surprised to find *our home* inhabited by two families! I announce, "*Halo*, I am the owner of this house, and I've come to collect the rent!" They appear alarmed. With an elbow to my gut, Diane assures them I am joking. They invite us in for a tour and talk. Over vodka, I share our family story, beginning with how our home was stolen. I reassure them I have no intention of doing the same. They explain that our property and home became part of a Soviet *kolkhoz*.

Reflecting on my time in Poland, I decide to write letters to the Prime Minister of Poland, the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine, the President of the United Nations, the Pope, and the Queen of England- seeking restitution, reconciliation, or at the very least, an apology on behalf of my parents. All but the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine actually reply! However, each defers the matter to another, ultimately refusing responsibility or help.

Ches next to the town sign (translated from Ukrainian as "Zolochiv") where Tatuś was born.

The house that my Tatuś began to build in 1939
(at the time, only the shell of the house and kitchen were finished).

* * *

At this time, my daughters are grown. They attend university in Winnipeg, excelling in sciences and the humanities. Both are accepted into medical school on their first attempt – I could not be prouder! Before these weighty accomplishments, each learned self-discipline from their driven parents and busy years in a rigorous bilingual school system. Both juggled academics with competitive pursuits.

Joy dove competitively and ranked eighth in her national age group. At 17, she medaled in the Canada games. With a passion for the arts, she also took up art and dance. Within a short time, she landed a scholarship with Rainbow Stage and makes the cut to perform in 3 professional musicals (Kismet, Student Prince and Mame). Mame conflicted with an exciting opportunity to travel as a delegate to Moscow, Russia, for the 12th World Festival of Youth and Students (representing Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War). Joy interrupted her medical studies for gap years throughout Europe, Israel, Morocco, and South Africa, including a heritage trip together in Poland. Eventually, she moved to Ottawa and Montreal as a resident to complete her training in Family Medicine. After a time, restless with the practice of Family Medicine, she pursued certifications in Group Therapy and Expressive Art Therapy (California). Realizing her interests aligned with the healing arts, she re-trained in psychiatry. By then, Joy was married and pregnant with my first grandchild, Amy. Soon afterwards, while still a resident-in-training, babies Evan and Ella followed. Psychiatry integrated Joy's love of science with the arts and humanities. She is deeply interested in the effects of trauma (war, multigenerational, developmental, and interpersonal) and post-traumatic growth, a full circle for our family. Three children later, with an established career as a psychiatrist, she finds passion in her practice, her family, design, travel, art, photography, and dance.

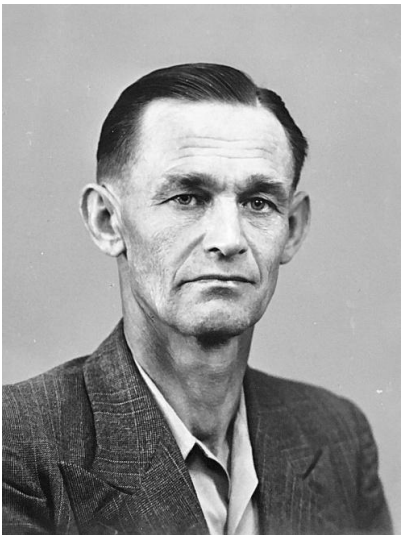
Meanwhile, Cathy was always motivated by freedom, speed, and the desire to be outdoors when not at her scholastic pursuits. She discovered ski racing for the winter and cycling and kayaking for her summer sports. Small but strong, she could equal her male friends on land, snow and water. The freedom it gave was exhilarating. By high school, she was commuting across the city on a 10-speed, feeling invincible despite a crash that would deter most riders. Joining a bike touring group at 19, she is noticed for her natural talent and encouraged to compete. That was the beginning of a bike racing career, where she travels and trains around the world while enjoying a year off from medical school. She was invited to the Canadian National Team, culminating in the biggest sporting event in the cycling world, the women's Tour de France Feminin. The event, which ran parallel with the men's race, travelled through mountainous and picturesque terrain, finishing to great fanfare on the Champs Élysées in Paris. From there, she cycled in Japan and the US until her return to medical school. She then completed her training in Family Medicine with an additional fellowship year in Utah in Sports Medicine. She establishes a reputable medical practice in Whistler, Canada, while mentoring junior and pro-athletes, including her sporty son, Skylar. Still avid for skiing and cycling, she returned to competition, winning the title twice over (with a fractured collar bone in the first round) as Master's World Champion in Mountain Biking.

I am very proud of my daughters, Joy and Cathy, in their desire to excel, heal those with trauma, and love a great bike!

* * *

On July 13, 1985, my Tatuś dies of throat cancer. On his deathbed, with haggard words, he tells me his greatest satisfaction in life is *his family*. For the first time in his 53-year marriage, he admits to Mamuś that he loves her. Only as he was dying did he fully realize what he had. He lives his final years dancing a legendary polka, drinking, smoking, joking, playing poker, snow-birding (with the geese) between Canada and Florida and surrounded by family. I am comforted by this. His greatest disappointment in life was not being able to liberate Poland.

I remember asking him – "Tatuś, if ever I tell our story, how should I end it?". His reply is unexpected. His eyes grow lively, but he says with a dying voice: **"*Poles, wake up!*".**



My Tatuś
1906 - 1985

On January 31, 2009, my Mamuś, born in 1914 at the beginning of World War 1 and exiled in WW2, slips away in her final years. After years of hardship, loss and trauma, the burden of her remembered sorrow is slowly lifted by dementia.

Throughout her later comfortable years in Canada and the US, she remains tense, worried, and dysphoric. She frequently experiences headaches, sighs, rubs her head, and works still harder. Her diet of evening news surely does not relieve the stress! She never opens her front door to the world. Not to the mailman, not even to her own family, whom she could see through the peephole. The front door is kept sealed and bolted to prevent the past from returning. She was terrified that her life, her home, and her forever-plastic-protected furniture would be stolen once again. When we went over to her place for dinner, we always had to go in through the backyard door.

Despite a few smiles, her greatest joy appeared to be feeding her family. However, the only time she softened was when she was hugged. During meals, she sat watchful, sad, and keyed up. She couldn't ever be convinced to sit at the table; instead, she preferred to hover and intensely urge her children and grandchildren (when already mid-bite) to "Eat! Eat!" as though their survival was at stake. Once our plates were polished and we couldn't swallow another delicious crumb, she would shoo us all out of her kitchen. if anyone dared to linger and try to clean their own plate, they risked a friendly whipping from her dish towel.

She urges her children and grandchildren to become doctors, impressing that "if there had been a doctor nearby when my baby was sick, he would not have died." Her grief is profound.

Throughout her life, she regrets a lack of schooling. Despite growing means and comfort in Winnipeg, she lives simply and cautiously. She sews her own clothes, grows her own food, and cooks her own meals. Invitations to restaurants and dinner parties are declined, unappreciated or, in retrospect, added stressors. When travelling, she is never without a separate suitcase full of food. Once, on a flight from Winnipeg to Florida, she packs her *legendary "*barrel of pork fat" in the form of a 20lb pig and a 2-foot fish, head-and-all, in her checked luggage! I cannot stop laughing, "Mamuś, they have food in Florida!". At the airport, her bag is flagged by a hungry german shepherd; TSA airport security chuckle when they open her luggage! It takes two tables to reveal her full buffet of offerings. "Ma'am, you cannot bring this on the plane! It will smell!" they say, barely able to hide their amusement.

Growing up, my relationship with my mother is complicated. Her childrearing methods leave me bruised and upset; she favours my sister with a tenderness I rarely receive. Even in my adult years, despite devoting my time and energy to her well-being (financial security in particular), her favouritism is glaring. She dies before openly sharing the emotions I crave: love, approval, and connection. I suspect many factors are at play: the war, trauma, her fatherless childhood, losing my baby brother, losing her father in dire circumstances, being a single parent for years through the war, being a refugee, her youth, and her private disappointments. I will never know. Despite this ambivalence between us, all my life, our bond remains strong. I knew I could absolutely trust my mother with my life. She, for one, would never sell me for pancakes! She fights for us in brutal, destitute times. I admire her tenacity, ingenuity, and foresight. She works hard and is unrelenting in her vision for a better life. I credit her with my family's survival.

My Mamuś
A heart of gold stopped beating,
hard-working hands laid to rest.
1914 - 2009

I engrave my family's story, from exile to excellence, on my parent's shared headstone in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Ja was kocham Mamuś & Tatuś.

* * *

During my single years, I am comforted by the knowledge that somewhere out there, an orangutang in a Texan zoo still longs for me. After making goofy faces at the monkey from the other side of the glass, she approaches, bends over, and moons my face! I still laugh when I tell this story. If it were not for the glass between us, we would have been cheek to bum-cheek! It turns out this is not an act of aggression but rather monkey courtship! Flattered, I choose to date Lucille Doll *instead!*

I (***finally!***) tie the knot and welcome my southern sweetheart into the family after ten years of snow-birding together. As the wedding bells sound, my tribe expands: Lu is also blessed with a daughter, Anne Marie, from her first marriage, and a granddaughter Olivia and grandson Will. I couldn't be more grateful to have her and her family in my life.

Similarly, in midlife, Diane finds love with Anthony. *She must still be trying to copy me!* Diane enjoys a long and successful medical career as an anesthesiologist in the US. She serves as an inspiration for medicine for the females to follow (3 physicians, 1 nurse practitioner, 1 medical student at press time). She enjoys her retirement with travels far and wide, with her sweet Tony by her side.

From left to right: Tony, Diane, Ches, and Lu.

27 APOLOGIA & LIFE LESSONS

During the war, all is stolen. Worst of all, the grownups disappeared or receded into listless shadows of their former selves. As a child, I was desensitized and hardened to the unrelenting degradation, poverty, starvation, and persecution. I adapted to the traumas by anesthetizing myself, such that I still struggle to cry to this day. Life is one of survival during wartime; water, food, shelter, and fear dominate the mind. War destroys. There is no glamour, lest we forget. Vulnerability can be deadly. For all those years, starvation gnaws at me like a bad headache, day and night.

The impact of war is a legacy of trauma and resilience, family after family, generation after generation. I understand the effects of severe distress can shape our mind, body, and parenting… and even be passed down through our genes!

Consequently, my scarred childhood shaped my

worldview. I grow up having seen the worst of humankind: *every person or family is for themselves; unchecked, human nature is inherently animal: at worse, selfish, cruel, or lazy; people in power can be thieves-not to be trusted until trust is earned; and the world can be a jungle: random, dangerous, unfair, unsafe, especially to those who are young, old, disabled, vulnerable*. Yet, I have also seen humans be resourceful, helpful, and resilient; if one dreams, plans, learns and works hard enough, excellence awaits.

To this day, I am fearful of returning to poverty. This drives me to scrimp and save as my parents did before me; so as to never be in a position of desperation again. Different from your typical rags-to-riches story, I only use my money for survival necessities: food, shelter, and travel, of course. I feel marked and massively inferior throughout my early to midlife due to my differences and my struggle to assimilate. Though I eventually grow to average height, I struggle to feel more than small. I am five-foot-five on a *good* day. Owning expensive cars, land, and a lot of money seems a tidy solution. In my later years, I discover that wealth is not the simple answer to happiness. I do know that life is much easier with choice and comfort than without. Despite shrinking year by year, I begin searching for peace within myself.

As many trauma survivors would agree, it is difficult to enjoy a pleasant life when sad memories blindside an otherwise ordinary day. I observe this in myself and my parents. I know how quickly joy can be eclipsed. If the memories are not enough, I suffer debilitating pain and experience heartbreak and abandonment throughout my life. Many relationship endings leave me hurting and raw, reminding me of my wartime beliefs that *it is every man for himself*. When I am robbed by my closest friend, who was also my neighbour and trusted lawyer and corporate partner, I feel deeply betrayed. Again, my trust is betrayed when I expect it the least, and my sense of safety is completely uprooted.

Worse, however, I am even more angry and saddened when he resolves his guilt by ending his life (2009). Yet, developing more compassion for myself and others, I have learned that humans are complex; perhaps we are all struggling. In case you, dear reader, are struggling, please heed some wisdom from my short 90 years:

1. Protect yourself because, in life, few will genuinely have your back. Trust must be *earned*. Don't give it to just anyone— *except your Mamuś, of course*.
2. Work hard but value your time. Time is a resource you can't get back. A rich life is one where you are the master of your time and choices. But remember, nothing in life is free and no pain, no gain. Like we say in Poland: "*Without work, there's no kalach (cake)"*!
3. Never stop learning and read anything you can get your hands on. Ignorance makes you vulnerable to scams and poor choices.
4. Be smart with money! Save and invest in stocks and real estate.
5. Lastly, *be strong like borscht!*

28 UNITED STATES
AUGUST 2023

Following retirement as a developer, Ches uproots from Canada in favour of a warm, comfortable life with his wife, Lu Doll, in Palm Harbor, Florida.

He prefers American soil, proclaiming it is “a better cultural fit.” He likes to say, “Americans are nuts!” to which Lu replies, “But Ches, you’re American now!” to which he exclaims, “Well, yeah! I’m nuts *too!*”.

If his mood fluctuates, it is with the stock market. When he and Lu are not in Florida, you can find them abroad, all over the world (ironically, much of his travel is via cruise ships!). His lifelong wanderlust was born from an uprooted and unusual childhood. Many of his happy memories involve funny events and an insatiable love for stories, music, travel, museums, animals, and tropical fruit. He still loves a good treasure hunt and can almost always be found foraging at a garage sale. At one particular garage sale, he even bought the house!

He enjoys listening to and attending jazz and classical music concerts. He still loves a well-made car and has put mileage on 70 different beauties (one at a time, of course!). As for family, he is very proud of the lifelong ambitions of his two daughters, Joy and Cathy, both driven athletes and physicians with a similar passion for learning, travel, the arts, adventure, nature, and photography. Similarly, he is proud of his grandchildren, Amy, Evan, Ella, and Skylar, and Lu's grandchildren, Olivia and Will, who have pursued their own interests.

From left to right: Evan, Skylar, Ella, Amy

Still, there are unresolved wounds. Nightmares and flashbacks appear on occasion. His lifelong siege of headaches serves as a reminder of malaria and the war. In later years, Ches is brought to his knees by crippling back pain (***likely a result of carrying around his massive sense of humour all this life**)!* After three relatively unsuccessful spine operations, he is primarily wheelchair-bound for five years, curbing his adventures. He feels hopeless, devastated. Fortunately, an astute physiotherapist determines the hip to be the culprit. Ches reluctantly agrees to a fourth surgery. To the delight of all, he rises, walks, and travels again!

When faced with obstacles, he always preaches resilience: "You're a Zeglinski, goddamit! Strong like *borscht*! You can do anything!".

Ches (age 90) enjoying his outdoor pool in Palm Harbor, Florida.

POLISH GLOSSARY

Babcia (pronounced “bab-cha”) = Grandmother

Bania (pronounced “bania”) = Russian bathhouse

Barak (singular) or Baraki (plural) = translates to army barrack, which is a military-style hut built for labourers & prisoners.

Boję się (pronounced “boye sheh”) = I’m scared

Dobranoc! (pronounced “do-brah-nots”) = Goodnight!

Do widzenia (pronounced “do vidz-enia “) = Goodbye

Dziadziu (pronounced “jaju”) = Grandfather

Dzień dobry (pronounced “jien dobreh”) = Good morning!

Dziękuję! (pronounced “jien-ku-yeh”)= Thank you!

Gołąbki (pronounced “ga-wumb-ki”) = Cabbage roll

Gdzie jest toaleta? (pronounced “bijeh yest toaleta?”) = Where is the bathroom?

Halo (pronounced “haloh”) = Hello

Ja ciebie kocham (pronounced “ya chebieh koham”) = I love you

Jak się masz? (pronounced “yak sheh mash“) = How are you?

Kolkhoz = a state-owned collective farm, created through forced expropriation, deportation, and imprisonment.

Litość (pronounced “lito-sch”) = Mercy

Mamuś (pronounced “mamoush”) = Mom

Na zdrowie! (pronounced “naz drovieh”) = Cheers!

Nie (pronounced “nieh”) = No

Pieprzyć się (pronounced “piepceshe-yeh”) = Fuck you

Polsce (pronounced “*pol-tseh*”) = In Poland

Polska (pronounced “*polska*”) = Poland, the nation (but translates literally to “land of fields”)

Synu (pronounced “sinu”) = Son

Tak (pronounced “tak”) = Yes

Tatuś (pronounced “tatoush”) = Dad

Ukryj to (pronounced “oukry toh”) = Hide this

Uszankę (pronounced “*ou-shan-keh*”) = Traditional Russian fur cap with ear flaps worn in the winter.

Walonki (pronounced “valonki”) are traditional Slavic footwear

Wypchaj się sianem = A polish proverb that translates to “Stuff yourself with hay” (meaning “Get lost!” or “Go away!”)

APPENDIX

- On the emotional impact of war on children: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBQ-IoHfimQ

- Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum (kresy-siberia.org), for testimonies, photos, art, etc.

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Polish refugees during WWII: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/polish-refugees-in-iran-during-world-war-ii

- Maasai people & bloodletting: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Zs7TrRk8cs

- "Why Polish people hate rules": https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20190903-why-polish-people-hate-rules

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As Ches' granddaughter, I have had the unique privilege of learning about Poland's rich history and my grandfather's experiences during and after the war. Weaving his many stories into this book has been a challenging yet enriching experience for which I will always be grateful.

At 90, sitting in his patio chair under the warm sun in Florida, he fills the room with laughter as he recounts the beautiful and painful moments, tearful tribulations, and funny anecdotes of a long-lived life. From the many lessons that can be learned from hardship, it is clear that my grandfather has embraced the gift of humour and story which came from his survival.

Dziadziu, ja ciebie kocham.

Ches & Amy in Winnipeg, 2004