

# Forgotten Victims of the Holocaust

Canadian War Museum Contest  
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The invasion of Poland on the Eastern front by the Germans was done in Hitler's usual fashion; coldly calculated and misleading even to his own people. In an operation titled 'Operation Canned Goods', thirteen German convicts were taken from a concentration camp at Oranienburg in eastern Germany and housed in a schoolhouse to await the Fuhrer's signal. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, all but one of these convicts were given Polish uniforms; they were then given lethal injections and were taken about ten miles from the German-Polish border. Their bodies were then arranged in such a way that it appeared as though they had died while advancing into German territory.

Later that day the remaining prisoner was escorted to the town of Gleiwitz by six members of the SS security branch, all whom were wearing civilian clothing. There they took over a radio station and one of the men relayed a provocative statement in Polish announcing that Poland was attacking Germany, that all Poles must take up arms against the Germans. A scuffle was then staged on air; shots were heard, and when the charade was over with the prisoner was killed and left lying in front of the microphone to impersonate the patriotic 'Polish' broadcaster. The entire 'Operation Canned Goods' was used by Hitler as proof of Polish aggression against the German people in a speech before the Reichstag the following day as he '...announced that he had thrown all the armed might of Germany against the attacking nation.'<sup>1</sup>

When the Germans crossed the Polish-German border on the first of September 1939, my grandmother, married Bozenna Epler, was only eleven years old. She was living with her parents and two brothers in a comfortable flat in Warsaw reserved for the families of officers in the Polish army. With the both the Nazis and the Soviet secret police attempting to arrest Polish government officials, my great-grandfather crossed the border to Romania to join the Polish government in exile, and eventually managed to make his way through Yugoslavia, France, and finally to England to rejoin the Polish army. Grandmother's two brothers, Leszek and Jurek, herself and her mother, Stanislaw Walkowski, chose to leave their home in search of a safe haven with friends in Lwów. Their train was bombed repeatedly during their journey, and finally it was decided that the conditions were too dangerous for them to continue by train. Bozenna and her mother, my Babija (great-grandmother in Polish), disembarked in a town in eastern Poland to stay with some family members on their estate; however, Leszek and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Wernick, *Time Life Books-World War II: Blitzkrieg*, Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1977

Jurek, patriots both, went to join the Polish army to fight off the invaders. The rest of the family travelled back and forth between Warsaw and several different locations until they finally found refuge in the town of Marynki, which acted as a divider between the German and Soviet forces. Leszek and Jurek joined them, after having joined the Polish resistance.

The Polish government in exile created the first underground movement in Poland in December of 1939-Związek Walki Zbrojnej (ZWZ), meaning 'Union for Armed Struggle'. The initiative taken by the Polish people in regards to the German occupation in the West was established without orders from the national or local authorities. They set up small cells, which "...provoked by the Nazis' brutality, had arisen spontaneously, calling for national resistance and survival."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the terror caused by the brutality of the Nazis caused a unification of the classes in their suffering, forcing a united front among the resistance.

The Armia Krajowa (AK), which literally means 'home army' was the largest underground movement in Europe during World War II with four hundred thousand citizens sworn in as members at the peak of its existence. The AK was formed in 1942 when the divided cells of the ZWZ were merged into one active movement. This was done "with the 'aim of creating centers of national resistance' and 'rebuilding the Polish nation through armed struggle' "<sup>3</sup> Their accomplishments were achieved through the use of sabotage, reconnaissance, propaganda circulated among the occupying forces in order to increase confusion and pessimism in the German ranks, underground newspapers and eventually armed diversions for the German forces fighting in the Soviet Union. These armed diversions included the destruction of railroad and telephone lines, bridges, as well as attempts to free prisoners by attacking prisons and transports and many other actions. The AK was increasingly successful with their operations as they had unwavering support from their fellow Poles and were able to keep in almost constant contact with their government in London.

On the eleventh of April, 1943 the family awoke early to "an urgent knock on the door, and a terrified voice saying: 'Lady, the Germans are here. They are surrounding

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<sup>2</sup> Józef Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War* London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 1985: 42

<sup>3</sup> 'Polish Home Army (AK)-History 30 March 2005  
<<http://www.biega.com/museumAK/hak-e.html>>

the woods!' ”<sup>4</sup> . Leszek bolted from his bed and sprinted to the cottage on the Pilica River where his friends and Jurek were sleeping. Babija told my grandmother to remain in bed, hoping that the soldiers would be hesitant to arrest someone who appeared to be sick. Outside, the soldiers were busy digging in the carefully planned garden. Someone in their tight-knit group of AK members had told the Nazis where to search for weapons. Babija heard a shout outside.

*They had found the rifles. The rifles which had been our pride and joy-beautiful, gleaming, lovingly cleaned and polished night after night by our AK company in anticipation of their use against our oppressors. These rifles, obtained with tremendous difficulty and transported at even greater risk at night by Leszek...now in their intended victims' hands.* <sup>5</sup>

Her two sons and their friends came to their door, escorted by several Nazis. She and my grandmother were ushered outside at gunpoint. The German soldiers took the boys behind the barn. They heard shots being fired. "...I had no emotions left. My sons had been violently taken away from me, and nothing mattered anymore." My grandmother and Babija were ordered by an SS officer to walk towards through the forest to the courtyard where other detainees from around the region were waiting. To her utter amazement, there sat her two 'dead' sons, sitting quietly against the side of the barn. They were then hurried to the railway station in the town of Grabowo, as the SS were fearful of an attack by the many AK members that were still in the vicinity. Still wary of an attack, they took the train back and forth from Grabowo to Radom until darkness fell.

The arrested were first taken to the Gestapo headquarters where they were ordered to stand in groups of five, with their faces to the wall; my grandmother, Babija and Leszek had managed to stand together. The men still had their hands tied behind their backs, but Leszek had managed to untie his hands. He said his goodbyes, and waited for his name to be called by the Gestapo. When Leszek's turn came, my grandmother

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<sup>4</sup> Stanislaw Walkowski, *Memoirs: April 1943-April 1945* : 1

<sup>5</sup> Stanislaw Walkowski, *Memoirs: April 1943-April 1945* : 3

and Babija began to pray fervently. They heard several shots ring out, accompanied by the sound of running feet and shouts in German.

They finally read off the women's names from the list, and they entered the building. Babija identified herself to a Gestapo official inside and was met with uncommon interest from the guard. They had recognised her as being the mother of the Pole who had escaped. The Gestapo considered him to be the leader of the group and therefore my Babija was enormously valuable to them. The prisoners were then taken back to the courtyard and taken by truck to the prison in Radom.

My Babija and grandmother were soon separated; my grandmother stayed on the main floor while her mother was forced to go upstairs to stay with other political prisoners. The guards stationed on this floor were members of the infamous Division IV of the Gestapo, known throughout Poland for their merciless cruelty. My granny and Babija remained at the prison in Radom for three months, during which time they were both interrogated by the Gestapo officials. My Babija was the first to be questioned by the Gestapo; they demanded names of members of the AK and ordered her to admit that she herself was a member and had taken part in sabotages against the Third Reich. She refused to betray her country, her family and her friends, and so they began to beat her in order to persuade her to talk.

*The beatings were done in a very brutal, calculating and systematic fashion. First one man, then the next, and finally the third one-each would pummel me in turn, methodically and hurriedly. The pain shooting through me was excruciating...They beat my from my shoulder to my legs...They paid particular attention to my hands...They struck me with leather straps with lead balls imbedded in the ends...I finally fainted...They revived me by pouring cold water over me and continued, with savage dedication to their task.<sup>6</sup>*

Fortunately, when my grandmother was interrogated they did not touch her; when they asked her who the leader of the group was she smartly pretended to be a silly girl who

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<sup>6</sup> Stanisława Walkowski, *Memoirs: April 1943-April 1945*: 15

did not know anything. Despite their efforts, the Gestapo did not retrieve any information from these two brave Poles, loyal to the teachings of the AK.

The pair was freed from the prison at the end of May. My granny remembers seeing her mother, a smile on her face despite being sent to a death camp. Their separation was difficult for them both, and so they vowed not to be separated again. They were put onto cattle cars at the train station and travelled for three days to the town of Oswiecim, better known by its German name of Auschwitz.

They reached Auschwitz on the night of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1943; my granny remembers hearing the camp dogs barking and seeing people in striped uniforms, staring blankly at the new arrivals. They were put into quarantine where their papers were checked, their heads were shaved and they had their assigned camp identification number tattooed onto their left arms. They received their generic camp garb, to which a red triangle was sewn to identify them as political prisoners. They were then assigned to a barracks—a large brick building containing innumerable rows of three-tiered sleeping platforms and a seldom light stove. There was a roof but no ceiling; as a result, there was a space between the wall and the roof where my grandmother could see selections taking place in the middle of the night and never ending expulsion of ashes spewing from the chimneys of the crematorium.

A blokowa was assigned to each barrack block; a prisoner specially chosen from earlier transports because of their eagerness to execute the Germans' orders or for their particular brutality towards their fellow inmates. They were given unique privileges, such as a separate room heated by a stove and good food. The Slovakian Jew who was chosen to be in this position of power for their block was particularly vicious and greeted her new inmates by shouting at them and by beating them.

Each day began in Auschwitz with a roll call. They would be awoken by the blokowa at around three in the morning so that they could stand outside in rows of five to be counted. They were counted repeatedly; however, "...with 1,000 or more women in every barrack, and with many streets of barracks in the camp, the process could take forever."<sup>7</sup> After the roll call, they were sent to work.

My Babija and grandmother's first task consisted of delivering garbage to the disposal site about two kilometres away from their camp. Along with several other

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<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Ayer, Helen Waterford, Alfons Heck, *Parallel Journeys* New York: Simon & Schuster 1995: 126

women, they would pull at a horse cart full of garbage. It was difficult business, as the wheels and their feet would sink into the mud, pushing them to the very limits of their strength. The lack of food and water made each day nearly impossible to live through.

Their insufficient ration of water was their worst enemy in Auschwitz. "Tortured by thirst we never missed a chance to exchange our meagre pittances of bread or margarine for a half pint of water. Better to endure hunger than that hell-fire that was constantly gnawing at our gullets."<sup>8</sup> Thankfully, the women had their faith to sustain them. Many of the Russian inmates had nothing to believe in and for that reason they died long before those who still believed in a God. In this fashion, survival at Auschwitz was proven to depend upon an equal balance of psychological and physical strength.

They were switched to different tasks during their stay. While they were digging ditches, they saw Jurek working across from them. With the permission of an exceptionally kind overseer, they were allowed to work side by side. My Babija talked with her son, asking him how he was faring. He replied, saying that the camp was better than prison had been. This was the last that they would see of Jurek. He later died in the camp after contracting typhus.

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 explosions rocked the camp. The 'Sonderkommando', a special detail of male prisoners whose task was to clear the gas chambers of bodies, had revolted. This group of male prisoners was liquidated every few months and replaced with fresh arrivals. A Frenchman named David organised explosives and hid them in close proximity of the crematorium. "The Germans advanced the date for the execution of the Sonderkommando. One day they gave them the order to be ready for transport and to leave the crematory building...The few S.S. were so surprised that they...withdrew for orders and reinforcements."<sup>9</sup> When they returned, they found one of the ovens to be filled with explosives and doused with gasoline. The revolting inmates lacked the time, however, to blow up the remaining ovens.

One night while it was still dark they were awoken and ordered to go outside for roll call; they were told that they would be leaving the camp. By this time the fighting was so close that they could hear gunshots in the distance from the advancing soviet troops. My grandmother recalls the terrible march, with the dead bodies of the male inmates littering the road and ditches in front of them. There was a horse-drawn cart at the end

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<sup>8</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* London: Cox & Wyman Ltd 1947: 56

<sup>9</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys* London: Cox & Wyman Ltd 1947: 170

of the column, supposedly for the older women who were no longer able to walk. My Babija wanted to take a rest on it, but “Bozenka wouldn’t let me-some premonition told her that it would not be safe. As it turned out...all the people riding in the cart were shot in cold blood.”<sup>10</sup> Their only consolation during the march was seeing the German soldiers retreating towards Germany with their families, their possessions piled high on horse-drawn carts.

They reached a railway station after three days of walking and were put into open freight cars and arrived at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany after three more days of travel. They soon settled back into a routine of roll calls and beatings, but their food was rationed to contain only one slice of bread every three days. In an effort to receive the nutrition they so sorely needed, many of the male prisoners turned to cannibalism. More and more bodies were being taken away-“You saw so many dead bodies that after awhile, you thought nothing of it...bodies were stacked in front of the barracks, one on top of the other, everywhere...”<sup>11</sup> Babija soon volunteered to carry the huge tureens of soup in hopes of getting more soup for her ailing daughter, but was still growing weaker by the day. Before long, they could hear the sounds of gunfire once again.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1945, my Babija ran into the barracks where my grandmother was resting and shook her awake. She told her to get out of bed and to get outside, because she could not miss what was happening. Outside, their commandant had been driven to the centre of the camp by British trucks and was officially disarmed in front of the inmates.

The image of the goodwill of the British was to be imprinted in their minds forever. The soldiers cradled the sick and placed them gently in the waiting ambulances, even though every prisoner was covered in lice. They shared their rations with the prisoners while they were waiting for the food to come. “They certainly had our everlasting blessings and love for what they had done for us.”<sup>12</sup> Their liberators soon put their former masters to work, carrying the rotten corpses to the crematoria, cleaning and carrying out the garbage. To the inmates delight, they also made certain that the

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<sup>10</sup> Stanislaw Walkowski, *Memoirs: April 1943-April 1945*: 34

<sup>11</sup> Bozena Epler, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Stanislaw Walkowski, *Memoirs: April 1943-April 1945*: 39



Germans were getting enough exercise by forcing them to run in circles while the soldiers watched. Many of them could not take it and committed suicide.

Babija's first thought was to get in touch with her husband with the Polish government in England. They made plans to reunite, and when they reached England they discovered what had happened to Leszek from Babija's sister. He made it to the forest near Marynki, and lived in the woods for a time. He then made his way by train to Warsaw, but unfortunately his photograph had been among the German ranks and when he disembarked in Warsaw, the Gestapo was waiting for him. They shot at him and he returned their fire, then turning the gun on himself.

*The Poles are the people who really lost the war. Over half a million fighting men and women, and 6 million civilians (or 22% of the total population) died. About 50% of these were Polish Christians and 50% were Polish Jews. Approximately 5,384,000...were the victims of prisons, death camps, raids, executions, annihilation of ghettos, epidemics, starvation, excessive work and ill treatment. So many Poles were sent to concentration camps that virtually every family had someone close to them who had been tortured or murdered there.<sup>13</sup>*

Although the Poles were victors in the war, they were not allowed to participate in the victory celebrations. A parade took place in London in May to celebrate the end of the war, and all those who had fought against the Axis forces, excluding the Poles, were to march in a parade in the streets of London. Despite the huge loss of human life dedicated to the war effort, whether through their unaided defence during the September campaign or in resistance operations, the suffering of the Polish victims and fighters have been forgotten by many. My Babija had this to say at the conclusion of her memoirs: "My last word is a hope that the concentration camps and the Holocaust of the last war should never be forgotten, for if we remember them, maybe we can prevent this evil from ever happening again."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "The Second World War", 2004 <http://www.kasprzyk.demon.co.uk/www/WW2.html> (March 31, 2005)

<sup>14</sup> Stanislaw Walkowski, *Memoirs: April 1943-April 1945*: 42

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