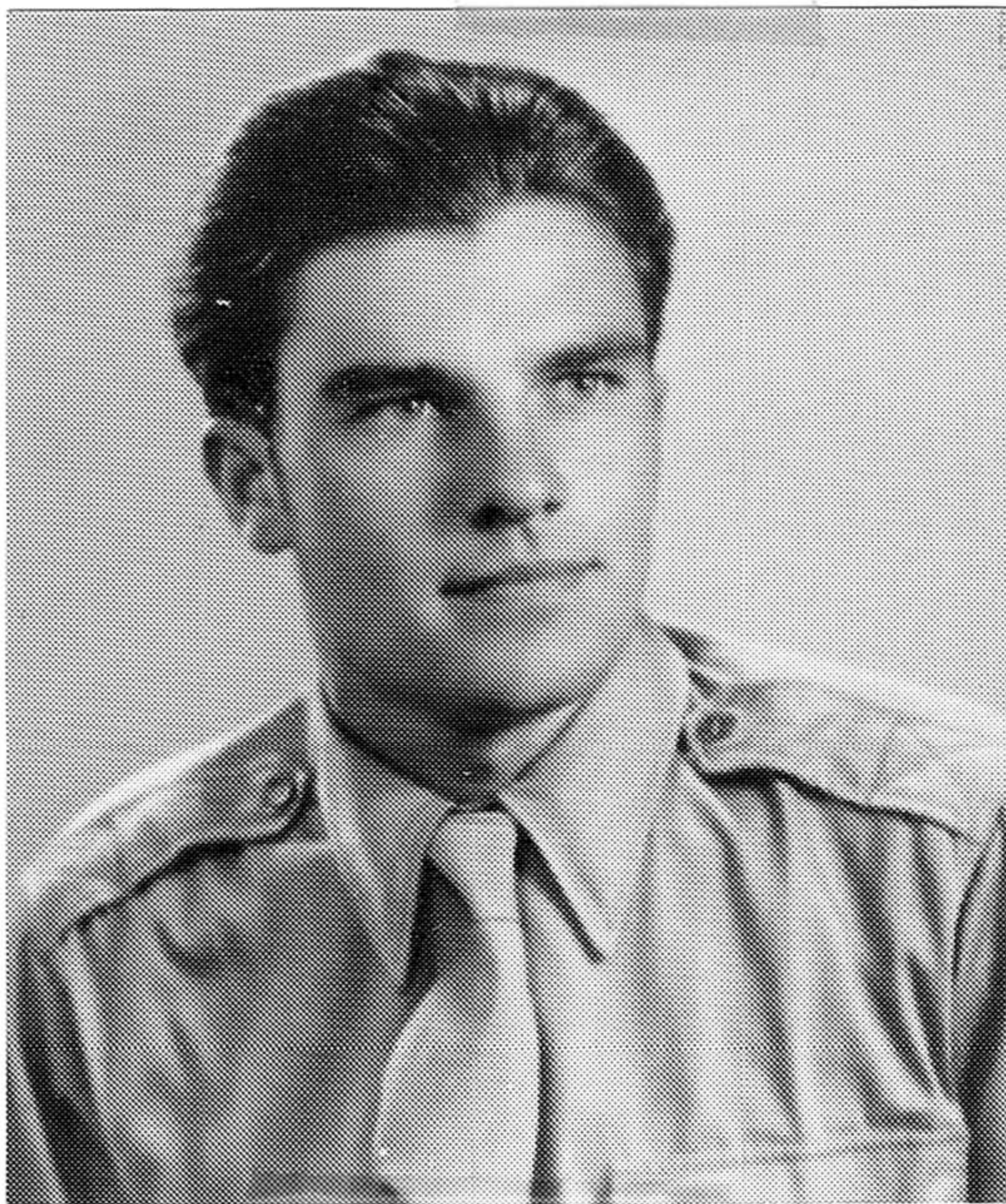


MEMOIRS

By John Mikula



"Love one another" John 13:34

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Prologue

As I listened to John relating his life story and trying to capture it into words, I see it has been a remarkable life, filled with hardships and circumstances that would have tested the strongest among us. John met all of his challenges head on and emerged with flying colours.

As I reminisce over his earlier life when he was a youth and his life experiences I can see how everything that happened in his life moulded him into being the person he is today. Beginning with his father whom he loved so much and cared for and who was John's model all through his life, who nurtured his faith in God and whose eyes were on Jesus all of the time. This was instilled in John at an early age and it was his faith that saw him through hardships, loneliness and despair. All of these things moulded his exemplary character, his highest integrity and his highest moral standards.

You can't write on paper what is in a man's soul and heart, but as I listened to John speak his life story, I sensed and felt his total love, kindness and compassion as he bared his soul.

Not holding anything against anyone but only having unconditional love flow through him in all circumstances. He never wavers from his faith in God. This is his foundation this Rock Jesus where he gets his strength and salvation, and where the storms of life couldn't waver him. He is running the race with his eyes on Jesus.

John is always smiling, showing the happiness that is within him and is always cheering someone up with his great philosophy on life. He is always giving someone a helping hand whenever he can and often gives his strength and faith to those in need and in doing so uplifts them in spirit through Jesus who is in him.

I know John was sent to me by God and I thank Him for the many blessings He has given me. I wish John much happiness and good health in the coming years, enriched with many blessings he so richly deserves.

He truly is a remarkable man, and he is My John.

Love, Minnie

Dedication

*I dedicate these memoirs to my beloved children, Randy, Sandra,
and Shelley and to all of my dear grandchildren who have given me
such joy. Love one another. May the Love of God give Peace to
your Hearts, Joy to your Souls, and set you Free.*

Dad and Grandpa

John Mikula

1

Faith, Love and Forgiveness

I was born in Poland on November 14, 1926. We were a family of six - Dad (Jan), Mom (Zosia (Sofia)), brother Aleksander (the oldest), two sisters, Genia and Natalie, and myself. I was the youngest and they called me Kolu, my real name was Jan like my dad's. There were two years between each of us children.

We lived in a village called Haczyska, about twelve kilometers northeast from Tomaszow Lubelski. It is located three kilometers straight east from a little town called Tarnawatka, which is located on a main highway which leads through Warsaw, Lublin, Zamosc and Tomaszow and leads to the Russian border.

Our village was made up of twenty-five families. It stretched out from east to west. Most of the houses were built on the north side of the road with a stretch of land behind each house which belonged to the owners.

Farms were small. We had seven hectares. The biggest farmer in the village had seventeen hectares. They were considered rich, but they didn't have any children and we felt sorry for them. As young as I was, I could not imagine a life without children. All of the people were small farmers. The land was flat and very productive. They were mixed farms, consisting of cows, pigs, chickens, geese, wheat, rye, oats, barley, buckwheat, lentils, and proso (the Polish name for a cereal grain). We were completely dependent on the land for our living. The only items we bought were sugar, salt, and spices. Any money that we had came from selling produce off of the farm. We sold eggs, butter, chickens, pigs and grains such as wheat, rye and cereal crops, which were taken to market in Tomaszow on a horse and wagon. Grain was bagged in 100 kilo gunny sacks. Butter and eggs were taken in baskets. The market was held every Thursday and there you could buy and sell farm goods.

Most homes were one room structures, built out of logs with straw thatched roofs and earth packed floors. Some people had their house



and barn combined. You would walk into the barn first, and there would be a door from the barn into the house. I thought that was neat! It sounds pretty weird to our Western standards.

Life on the whole was very happy, at least I thought so. People visited each other and we were like one big family. Every Sunday going to church was a must, and the people gossiped the rest of the week with the news that they had heard there.

I want to tell you a story about when I was three years old. My mom had a few ladies over for a visit and a gossip session. They got to talking away and forgot that I was playing there in the corner. One lady noticed me playing so quietly and said, "Maybe we should be careful about what we are saying", (they were talking secrets and "women talk") "he" (meaning me) "might be listening". Another lady answered her saying, "Don't worry, he's too little to understand what we are talking about". Little as I was, I thought to myself, "That's what you think!".

When I look back, from that day on, I started growing up. I always like to listen to other people - it doesn't matter how old or how young they are - and not to take them for granted. You will be surprised at how much you can learn from them.

Telling the time of day was unique to us as we didn't have a clock or watch to tell the time by. We depended on the rooster to crow in the

morning or the whistle from the saw mill six kilometers southwest from us off the main highway located at a place called Tartak. The whistle blew at 8 a.m., 12 noon, and 6 p.m. This was the only way we could tell the time of day.

The most memorable times I can remember was when Mom was preparing food, but especially when she baked bread. I never lost my sense of taste or smell as I still love food as much as ever and enjoy it. We had a big bake oven made out of bricks inside the house. It had to be fired up by wood for about two hours. The remaining hot coals were cleaned out into a fire box below the oven. Twelve loaves of round rye bread then went into the oven, which were baked by the heat of the bricks. Sometimes the oven would be at too hot a temperature for the bread to go in, so to make the most of the heat, Mom would put in potatoes to be baked first. We made sure we churned butter that day so that we had fresh buttermilk with little specks of butter floating in it to drink along with the baked potatoes that we would eat. It was so good! I can still taste it. I can still smell the freshly baked bread when it came out of the oven. I thought we were the most fortunate people in the world.

Our meals were very simple but wholesome. We ate very little meat. Our meals were mostly made up of vegetables, cereals, buckwheat, beans, lentils and proso. On special occasions we had chicken and dumplings to eat, and that was a big treat!

For Easter we always managed to butcher a pig. This was divided between four or more families. The pig was well fattened before butchering, weighing about four hundred pounds. The fatter the better! The fat was cut into three inch cubes and salted to preserve it. The rest of the meat was made into sausage, roasts and hams. Lent was always observed with no meat eaten during this time, so therefore we really looked forward to Easter with meat and extra goodies.

I forgot to mention that most of the villagers had small orchards on their land. Our family had a variety of fruit trees which included apples, pears, plums, cherries and also sour cherries, and they were very productive. We had more than we could eat. During the season the fruit was dried by the sun, then put into

gunny sacks for the winter. The sour cherries made great non-alcoholic wine. The dried fruit made the best tasting compote, a little sugar was added to it, and many a time the compote was the main meal of the day.

We lived in the centre of the village and shared the same house and yard with my uncle (Dad's brother Stephan). He was a very nice and generous person but I can't say the same about my auntie. They did not have any children and I think that she was a little envious of our family. The house was big and it was divided in the middle just like a duplex. I will draw a sketch of our house, yard and buildings. All of the buildings were built out of heavy pine timbers, interlocked in the corners just like a log house.

My dad and my uncle got along very well together. They shared a team of horses and always helped each other. When there was something heavy to lift, Uncle used to say, "I'll take the heavy end, you have children to look after. If I get hurt it doesn't matter."

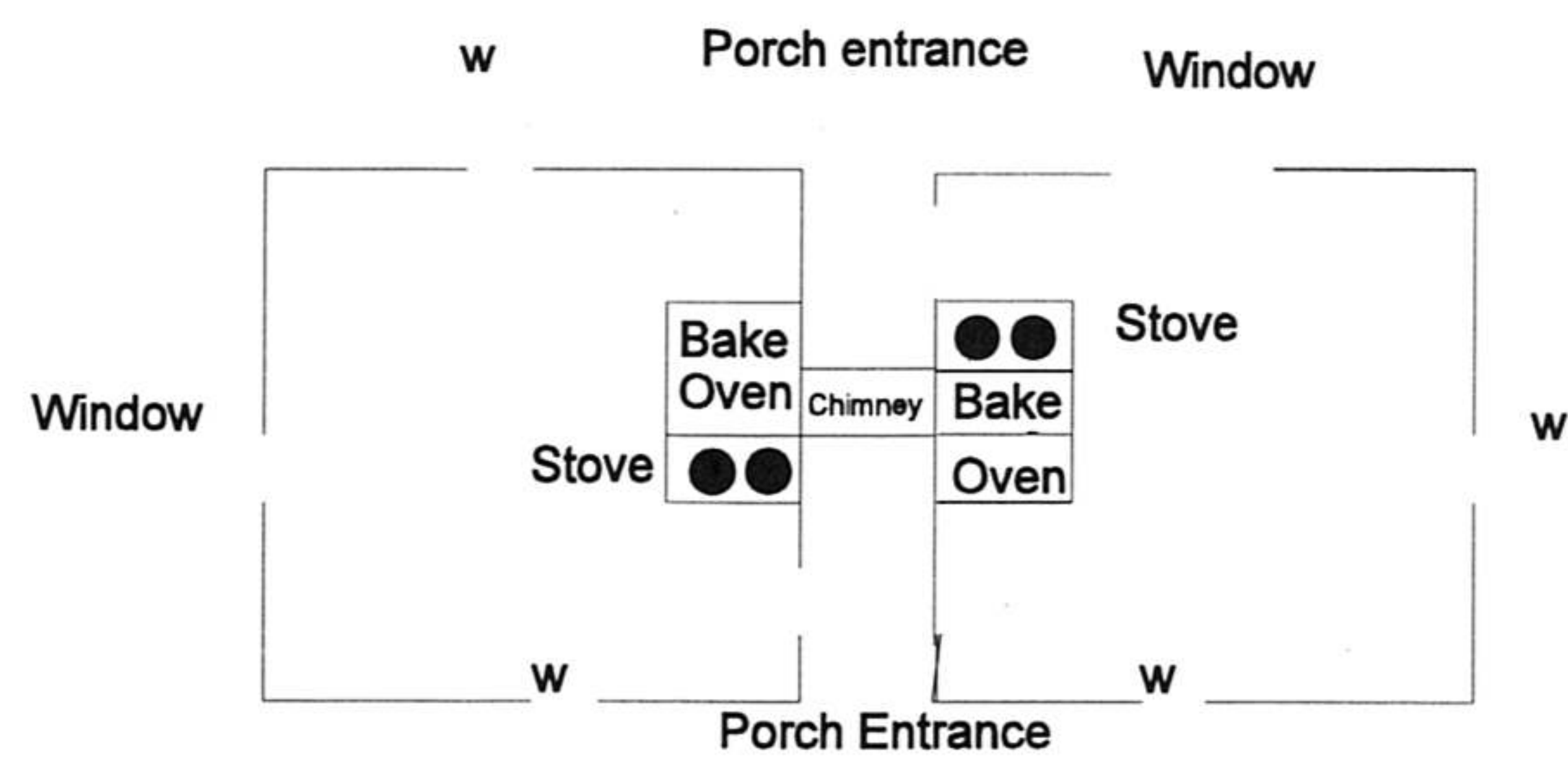
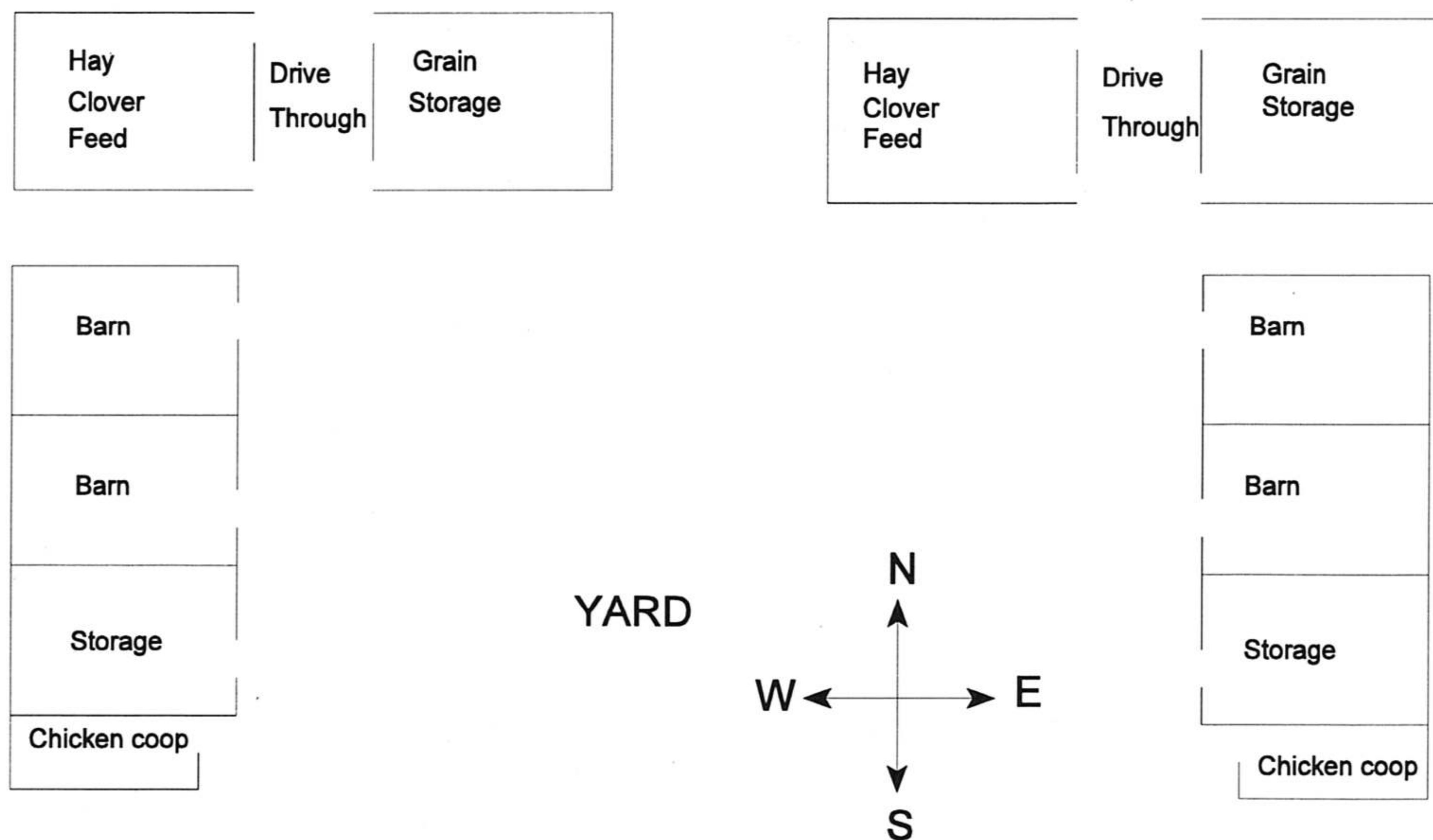
We were better off than the average village family. My dad was a very good provider. The outskirts of the village was surrounded by heavy forests. He worked in the forest in the winter time, hauling timber with a team of horses to the saw mill in Tartak. We always had a little extra money with which to buy clothes. So much for our life style!

When I got a little older, about four or five years old, I hung around with my dad a lot while my brother and sisters went to school. I just loved to be with my dad, especially when he and his friends gathered together and he would reminisce about his life before and during the First World War. He often talked about the time when the Austrian soldiers shot my grandpa (his dad). My grandpa was hard of hearing. The soldiers shouted "Halt." He didn't hear them, so they shot him.

My grandfather on my father's side was a fearless man. My dad related this amusing story to me when I was a boy.

My grandpa was well known in the village and throughout the countryside as a fearless man. Nothing would deter him from doing something that maybe would even endanger his life, if he was determined to do it.

ORCHARD AND GARDEN



These buildings were built by my grandpa on my dad's side somewhere around the year 1890 and were burned down during the Nazi invasion in September 1939. My uncle Steve and his wife and our family shared this house. Beyond the orchard and the garden, there was about 500 m of land on which we grew wheat, rye, oats, barley, and other grains.

One night one of his fellow acquaintances decided he had heard enough of grandpa's fearless feats. So he decided to play a trick on him to try and scare him.

My grandpa would regularly walk through the forest on his way to visit someone and very often it would be late at night when he returned from his visit. No one else ever dared to walk in the forest after dark because of the fear of running into something unearthly.

The fellow knowing this, rigged up a white sheet on a stick to look like a ghost. He got under the sheet and stood on the pathway deep in the forest and waited for my grandpa to come by. It was very late and very dark.

My grandfather always walked with a cane in hand. Not that he needed one, but it was his custom to carry one. This fellow could see my grandpa coming in the distance. He began to lower and lift this ghost-like sheet in a billowy fashion. My grandpa saw this apparition in the distance and without batting an eye continued on toward it. The fellow began to make moaning ghostly sounds as Grandpa drew nearer.

My grandpa got close to this "supposed" ghost and gave the sheet a couple of quick whacks with his cane, much to the surprise of the fellow maneuvering it, as he thought that my grandpa would have run in the other direction from fright. My grandpa shouted to the man that he would also whack him with his cane if he didn't come out from under the sheet. So the jig was up and the joke was on this fellow and my grandpa's reputation of being fearless was never tarnished. That story circulated throughout the village for many years as to how fearless grandpa was.

I must tell you that ghost-story telling was prevalent in those days and people were often afraid to go outside after dark after hearing them for fear that something ghostly would indeed get them. There was a very strong fear that gripped them and yet they seemed to thrive on those kinds of stories. In fact in my early years at home in Poland I heard many a hair raising ghost story.

My dad was fifteen years old when World War I broke out. He was taken prisoner by Hungarian soldiers and shipped to Hungary. He told us about how the people were dying from

starvation and how his friend had died in his arms. His friend, before he died, prophesied that in twenty years there would be another war and Dad often talked about that. The prophecy did come true, as twenty years later World War II began.

I was very frightened in my early childhood days listening to these stories of war. Then to make matters worse, when I listened in on Mom and her friends, they would tell ghost stories among themselves and they sounded so convincing that I wouldn't dare go outside after dark!

History, Faith and Love

Before World War I, Poland was divided between Austria, Germany and Russia. The part of Poland where we lived was occupied by Russia for over a hundred years until November 11, 1918 when we gained independence by the Polish underground army. This army was organized and led by Marshal Pilsudski. As is recorded in history, Marshal Pilsudski met Joseph Stalin in a Russian jail. They both opposed the Russian Czar and his regime at that time. At one point in time, Marshal Pilsudski escaped from jail. While the army was searching for him, a Jewish woman took him in and hid him, saving his life. When he came into power after the First World War, he was very sympathetic to the Jewish people, and most of the Polish people resented that.

Poland was occupied by Russia from early 18th century until 1914, the beginning of the First World War. Poland's independence only lasted until September 1, 1939 which was the beginning of the Second World War.

My grandpa, grandma and mom talked about life in Russia which at that time was ruled by Czar Nicholai Romanov. They emigrated from Poland to Russia to work there. Life in Russia was good they said, as they worked for big land owners, and there was always plenty to eat in those days. There was a great social division between the rich and the poor - the aristocrats and the peasants - which lead to the Bolshevik Revolution during the First World War. The Russians were fighting the Germans and the Austrians in the First World War and when the Bolshevik Revolution erupted the army

was too weak to crush it. Joseph Stalin, who was very active in the Revolution, later came into power.

There were many Polish families in Russia during that time so when they returned to Poland they brought with them accounts of what life was like in Russia before the First World War and after. They compared stories about their lives with the people in Poland. The people in Poland related stories about the Tartars, the Cossacks and bandits roaming the villages, stealing, burning homes, raping women and torturing men. I listened intently as they described how strips were cut on the men's backs and then salted; how horses were tied to each leg of a man and then the horses were driven off in different directions; and how men were tarred and set on fire. So you see, being five years old and listening to all of these stories, I was very frightened and I clung to my dad for dear life. I loved my dad dearly.

I remember how one morning I thought I had lost my dad's love. My aunt from next door came over to our house screaming, saying that I had stolen seven eggs from her chicken coop. She didn't see me do this, she only took the word of some kids and accused me, demanding that I be punished. I was just getting up, rubbing my eyes from sleep, and I didn't know what she was talking about. I kept saying "No, I didn't do it", but dad took her word for it and I got a strapping. I didn't get hurt physically, only my pride, because my dad didn't take my word. The love between my dad and I was broken.

I couldn't understand this injustice, so I started to pray, but I didn't really know how. That was my first prayer to God. Of course, my dad always prayed too, so I thought "What chance have I got?" I didn't get any results right away, so I thought I had better put some action into this. I got friendly with my accusers, who were some kids from down the street. There was a store a few houses down the street from us which I went into to investigate. After talking to the Jewish storekeeper, I found out that he



Family Picture 1936: Brother Aleksander, Mom, John, Dad, sister Natalie, (Genia missing)

was trading candy for eggs. So eventually the truth came out. Four kids were involved in the theft. One of the kids told me how they stole the eggs and traded them for candy at the store. Now, how was I to convince my dad about this? From then on my faith started to grow. I didn't know how to tell my dad, as I was only five years old. I waited for the right moment so that I could see him on a one-to-one basis.

Several weeks had gone by and I had finally got enough courage to talk to him. It was late in November and we were alone cutting straw and clover for feed for the cows. I started talking nervously. I said, "Dad, do you remember the time I got the strapping for stealing the eggs? I told you then and I am telling you again that I

didn't do it. Now I know who did it. I forgive you because you didn't know, but in the future I will not be afraid to get a strapping if I deserve it, but not to satisfy somebody's anger!". I couldn't believe that I was saying this to my dad. He put his big hand on my shoulder, and with tears rolling down his cheeks, he said, "I know." From that day on my faith in God was strengthened and our love for each other knew no bounds. From then on life for me was full of joy and happiness, a great burden was lifted from my little heart. I am sure that I was blessed by the Holy Spirit. I learned how to love and forgive.

School Days

The year was 1932, the beginning of my school days. The school I attended was located about three kilometres from our place in a village called Huta. It was a big village with approximately one hundred families living there. My mom went with me on my first day of school. On our way we stopped at my Grandma and Grandpa Kiec's house (Mom's mother and father). They lived only one kilometre from the school. My mom wasn't sure whether I should be starting school as I was so quiet and shy and not quite six years old. I, on the other hand, looked forward to attending school even though I was shy and scared. I started in grade one as there were no kindergarten classes back then. To fulfill my fears there were plenty of older kids at school who were bullies. I remember this one particular boy named Tadeusz Kawka who was five years my senior. I was petrified when I saw him, and he must have sensed my fear because he soon noticed the new kid at school! He carried a jackknife with him and when he saw me he decided to chase after me. Shouting as he ran he said, "I will castrate you when I catch you." Lucky for me he didn't catch me! Such was my introduction to my first day at school.

I remember the first word I learned to write - "Len" - it meant flax. I was so very happy with my accomplishment and very pleased with myself. School days were my "Happy Days." I loved the homework assigned to me. It was a challenge I looked forward to.

I often stopped at my grandma and grandpa's place on my way home from school. My uncle Michael (Mom's brother), Aunt Julie,

and my cousins Wladek (same age as I am), Lida and Janek shared the same yard with my grandparents, but they lived in a different house. My cousin Wladek and I were very close friends. My Auntie often invited me to stay for supper, though I always had to be coaxed several times before I accepted. I liked their meals.

One day I stopped there on my way home from school to play with my cousin Wladek. Auntie was cooking potato soup. It smelled so good. Twice she asked me if I would like to stay for supper and twice I said no, although I very much wanted to stay. I thought that maybe she would ask me one more time, and I was prepared to say yes, but much to my dismay she didn't, and I was so disappointed. I can still smell that soup to this day! From that day on I learned my lesson. I don't have to be asked twice anymore, especially when it comes to food. I say yes before they even finish their sentence. That incident helped me to grow up and I started to lose my shyness from then on. Being shy just didn't pay off.

As time went on, I thought that life was just beautiful. I was always jumping for joy, until one day this joy just about ended. It was the month of April. I was in grade three and on my way home from school I stopped in at my cousin Wladek's place. They were busy whitewashing the house, getting it ready for Easter. My cousin and I decided to be helpful and offered to wash the brushes. There was an old abandoned well down the road. The whole thing, pump and all, was caved in and the water was up to about one metre from the surface of the well. It was there that we went to wash the brushes. People had said that the well was bottomless.

As we washed the brushes, I suddenly slipped and fell into the well. I disappeared under the water for a few seconds, then reappeared to the top and in my heart I said, "God please save me." That, unfortunately, was my first swimming lesson. I frantically flailed my way to the edge of the well where Wladek reached out to me with one of the long handled brushes. After a few minutes of struggling I finally got out of the well with the help of my cousin Wladek. The water was extremely cold and being soaked to the bone I took off for home one and a half kilometers away. When I

got home I was so frozen that I couldn't talk. Mom and dad were not at home as they were in Tomaszow shopping; however, my oldest sister Genia was home. After stripping me of my wet clothes, she wrapped me in a feather ticking (codra) and made me some hot tea. My teeth were rattling so bad that I couldn't drink it. About two hours later my mom and dad came home with a new outfit for me for Easter, a shirt, pants and a special cap for school with the Polish emblem (a white eagle) on it. My sister told them that I had nearly drowned. My parents were relieved that I was alright, but they scolded me for being so careless and they asked me who would have worn the new outfit if I had drowned. I then settled down and I felt so happy that I was still alive and able to wear my new clothes.

My school days were going great. Once a week we were taught Religion by the Roman Catholic Priest from the local church. We had to memorize the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments; this was a must. The priest told us to make sure that we go to church every Sunday and this has stuck with me all the days of my life. Attending church and hearing the Word of God uplifts my spirit and feeds my soul.

I had many friends who were my own age. We played war games exploring the woods and finding old shells from the First World War. Every chance I had though, I spent with my dad.

In grade four we were taught Geography and were introduced to the World Globe and all of the countries of the world. One day I came home and told my dad that the earth turned on an "axle" and he jokingly asked, "Who's greasing the axle?" A lot of people in the village thought that the earth was flat.

One day in 1935 I was riding with my dad on a wagon with a team of horses when we received the news from a villager that our leader Marshal Jozef Pilsudski died. We felt very sad, as he was a good leader. People mourned for him for six months wearing black bands on their left arms. After his death, rumours started going around that there would soon be a war on the horizon and it would be the beginning of World War II.

My mom often talked about a prophetess called "Swienta Michalda" (St. Michalda) who wrote a book centuries ago prophesying that

there would be three world wars and how they would be fought. The First World War would be fought mostly hand to hand; the Second World War would be fought with "Iron Birds" (airplanes) and the Third World War would see a world that would be burned. It is amazing how her prophecy is fulfilling itself. She also prophesied the coming of radios, telephones, iron birds (airplanes) and many other things, way before anyone had even thought of such things let alone inventing them.

I had a prophecy given to me by one of the ladies of the village. At this particular time I was visiting some of my friends there. Some of the ladies had gathered around for a little conversation and, of course, as was the custom, a little bit of gossip. In the course of the conversation some of the women began voicing their predictions and prophesies and some were even matchmaking some of the children as to who they would marry when they grew up. I was one of the kids who was being matched up with someone, but this one particular lady, interrupting the would-be matchmaker, spoke up saying, "His wife is somewhere in this world, who knows where and is probably still in a crib." I was eight years old at the time and before you finish reading my story you will find out that my wife-to-be was indeed in a crib at that time.

Another prophecy (by ordinary people who didn't know how to read or write) said that I would go out into the world and that I would be rich. And so I did - and I am rich. I found out that to be rich you don't necessarily have to have a lot of money. Faith in God and in yourself and with a good outlook and attitude in your life is all you need to be rich. Rich in the peace, love and joy that only God can give.

In the winter time when I was about nine years old, my mother gave me a message to deliver to some people who lived a little bit out of the way on my way home from school. After I delivered the message I cut across a hilly field. That winter we had lots of snow and the top of the snow was very crusted so that you could walk on top of it. It was very cold that day, about -20°C. I was walking over the snow crusted hills and having a great time when I suddenly stepped on a soft pile of snow, falling through into about two meters of snow that had drifted between two hills. I saw only a hole

above me. I struggled and found out that there was no way to get out of that deep hole. I don't know how long I was in that hole before I realized that I was very cold and began to feel tired and sleepy. I sat down wondering what I was going to do when a memory came to me. I remembered people saying that when a person got really cold and sleepy that it was the first sign of freezing to death. Snapping out of my sleepiness I stood up and said "God help me." All of a sudden I received such warmth, tremendous strength, wisdom and no fear. I started digging with my hands, making steps in the snow and packing it with my feet to the top of the hole. It took me a long time, but strange as it may seem, I enjoyed making those steps. I think it was because of the wisdom I received to make these steps and knowing in my heart that they would work and I would get out. When I finally got out of that hole I felt so warm and I felt so good, I knew in my heart that I was touched by the Holy Spirit and saved by God.



Mom, Dad, John: 1938

By the time I got home it was late in the evening and everyone was worried about me. I was completely caked with snow, even my pockets were filled. I told Mom and Dad what had happened. My dad thanked God for saving

me. I thought that maybe Dad was even a little proud of me. He said, "You will do well in the world."

My faith was getting stronger and my fear was slowly disappearing. I was in grade five. My teacher's name was Kazimiesz Hmelacki. He was a veteran of the First World War. He fought for the independence of Poland. I admired him very much. He gave a one hour talk every week on life experiences - his own and other people's. He too said, "A coward dies a thousand times, a valiant man but once." I enjoyed listening to him and his stories and was also fascinated by him. So from that time on I could honestly say that I lost all of my superstitious fears. I was strengthened in my faith and spirit.

I realized that nothing in this world could be worse than dying. The problems and hardships we have to endure in life are only challenges that make life interesting. I put all of my fears in God's hands. What a load off my shoulders! I felt so good about this knowledge that I now wasn't afraid of the dark anymore or any of the other fears that I had. I was a free boy!

Winter was my fun time. I loved skiing. Skis were mostly homemade. I wanted skis so badly that I finally struck a deal with the carpenter down the road from us. He agreed to make my skis for three zlotys (60 cents Canadian) but I had to supply the wood. So I got my dad's axe and went to the forest which was situated about one kilometre north of us. I cut down an elm tree. It was a good tree to make skis out of. The tree was about fifteen centimetres in diameter. I pulled it home and took it over to the carpenter's place. It took a long time to make the skis. The wood was green, so to make the skis the front ends had to be boiled in water and then shaped to turn up. Then they had to be dried for a few days. I was so impatient, I went every day to see how he was doing. He kept saying, "Not yet." Finally about three weeks later, the skis were ready. I had some money saved and the rest my dad lent me. I paid the man. That was a big achievement for me. I thought that I had everything that a person could possibly want. I skied every chance I had and many a time late into the night. But that ended about one year later. Our next door neighbour's boy, about my

age, wanted to borrow my skis. I had some chores to do at home so I let him have the skis. He returned the skis that night and placed them in the usual place where I kept them. He said nothing to me. The next day I got up and checked to see if my skis were back and found out that one of my skis was broken. I was very upset. I asked him what happened. He denied that he broke it. Later he admitted that he broke the ski. I demanded that he pay for the broken ski. I wanted only 35 groszy (7 cents Canadian). He refused to pay. We fought over the broken ski for a long time. Time went by and he thought that I had forgotten what he had done. One day (about a year later) we were minding the cows together. I was about eleven years old and he was a few months younger, so I had a little bit of an advantage over him. I wanted justice to be done so I said, "Remember that ski of mine that you broke? Are you going to pay me?" He said, "No, I won't pay." So I said, "This is it. There is nobody here to help you, just you and me." I said to him, "See that fresh cow pie? I am going to put your face into it, then we will be even." We struggled for about one hour. Many times I was so close to putting his face into the pie, but each time he pulled away. Then he thought I gave up, and that was when I succeeded. So I got my seven cents worth after all. He was furious, but he soon got over it. He cleaned himself off and we continued to mind the cows. There were no hard feelings between us. I felt that justice was done.

I made my next pair of skis myself with the help of my brother Aleksander and Uncle Andrew. The skis were my pride and joy and no one except me used them.

