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The war begins

In 1938 - Hitler's army marches into Czechoslovakia. More talks about war. Hitler demands Gdansk and East Prussia from Poland. People said that if Marshal Jozef Pilsudski was still alive there wouldn't be a war with Germany because Marshal Pilsudski and Hitler were friends.

1939 - We had a beautiful summer and good crops. September 1, 1939, my dad was in Tomaszow when the first bombs fell on the Jewish community there. Many people got killed. Dad came home safe. He saw it all and was not surprised as he knew that war was inevitable. Air bombardment continued everyday all over Poland. The ground war didn't come into our area until about two weeks after the war started.

The German army moved in so fast that we didn't know what happened. Then the fight started. The Polish army set up the resistance about two kilometers north and northeast from our village. So we gathered up our few belongings, loaded up the wagon, took our two cows and headed southeast to the next village about five kilometers from us. It was a village located in a valley with a heavy forest on each side of it. Boy did we ever get ourselves out of the frying pan and into the fire!

There was my mom, dad, auntie (from my dad's side of the family) cousins, my two sisters and I. We all hid behind this barn and grain storage building. It was built against an embankment, and we thought it would give us good protection from the machine gun firing and shelling. On one side was the Polish army and on the other side was the German army and we were in the middle. All day and all night they were firing on each other. Machine gun bullets were flying over our heads. There were fruit trees near us and we could see the bullets hitting the tops of trees and chopping off the branches. Heavy artillery shells were exploding all around us. My mom, sisters, auntie and cousins were by the barn covered with a blanket. My dad was sitting by the barn holding the horse, and there was also a dog there, left

behind by the previous people who had fled somewhere else. We did not know whose place it was. I was snuggled into my dad and I was worried about my dad more than myself. I thought, what if my dad got hurt, who would take care of us. I was twelve years and ten months old then.

Dad watched the pattern of the artillery shells exploding. He understood the pattern of the artillery firing because of his training in the First World War. When I looked at him he had turned white. He had a scared look on his face. I didn't dare ask him what was wrong. He knew that the next shelling was going to hit us. He prayed, and I hung on to my dad so close that I couldn't possibly get any closer and guess what; the next shell hit the barn but did not explode. It just made a hole in the roof! Dad gave thanks to God for saving us.

All of a sudden the next morning, it was quiet. There was no sign of either the Polish or German armies, so Dad hitched up the horse to the wagon, while Mom milked the cows. We had left behind two little calves, and the cows had to be milked. We all drank some milk and had some bread for lunch. Then we took off for home. There was no more shooting and no more armies to be seen. When we got home our house was still smoldering along with the rest of the buildings and the barn. The two calves had survived but the two pigs that were in the barn were burnt to a crisp. My uncle's pig which weighed about 250 kilos was also burned. They were going to butcher it and divide it between the neighbours, but it wasn't meant to be. Over half of the village was burned. That was probably the saddest day of my life.

Our possessions were gone along with the grain in the barn, although we had some grain out in the field still in sheaves. As I was looking through the ashes I came across my burnt jackknife. That really got to me and I cried. That jackknife to me was like my right hand. I was always making things and whittling with my jackknife and I have scars on my hands to prove it! To this day I always carry a jackknife with me in my pocket, and it still is like my right hand. All was not lost though. Before we left, my skis were set out away from the buildings, so they didn't get burned. They were my next best possession.

After much grief and sorrow, we were told that we were losing the war. The Polish army retreated and a few days later the war was over. The Germans started occupying half of Poland and the Russians who marched in from the East occupied the other half.

Since our buildings had all burned down, my uncle Michael Kiec, Wladek's father, offered to share his house with us. I liked that because my cousin Wladek was also my friend. We all got along very well. We were planning to rebuild in the spring.

After a few days there wasn't a German soldier to be seen. Then the Russian army marched in, and we were all surprised. The border had not been decided between the Germans and Russians yet, so we were under Russian occupation for about three months. While we were under the Russians they started to spread propaganda, putting it into high gear. They told people how good life in Russia was. They were recruiting people to emigrate to Russia, promising good jobs to work on collective farms and many other enticing opportunities. Many people signed up thinking that the Communist system was the only way and the most fair. It sounded very good the way they projected it. My dad was not convinced though, but many people were and did go to Russia, including my two uncles and aunts (my dad's sisters). They gathered up all of their possessions and cattle and took off for Russia. Even my uncle Michael Kiec's family were ready to go, but at the last minute they changed their minds. I was relieved (even though we would have inherited all of their buildings and farm) it didn't happen, and we were all happy.

When the Russians withdrew, they established a border between Germany and Russia, twenty kilometers east from us. So we again came under the German occupation. At first they were not so bad. They set up some rules for the people to obey, otherwise life went on as usual. We were even selling butter and eggs to the German soldiers. Some soldiers could speak Polish because they had lived close to the Polish border. Sometimes they visited the homes, giving the children candy. We were one of those homes. We thought they weren't so bad.

The year was 1940. I still had one more

year of public school to attend, but that was out of the question as there was no teacher. So Wladek and I had a lot of time on our hands. We spent many hours on our skis in the winter time and explored the countryside in the summer time. We gathered ammunition abandoned after the war and even some pieces of tires from blown up vehicles. I brought half of a tire home and hid it with my other possessions. My uncle Andre Kiec (my mom's cousin) said that it would be good for the soles of shoes. The tire got me into trouble later on. This certain fellow, who lived on the outskirts of our village, stole this tire from me. I wanted it back very badly. I needed to sole Dad's and my shoes. There was enough tire for many soles. He denied stealing the tire. I didn't actually see him steal it. Some kids told me where he had hidden this tire. I went to see it for myself and it was there. So I asked him over and over to bring it back, but he wouldn't. Here we go again. I wanted justice done! But how? I didn't want to fight him. We had enough fights with the Germans. But justice was done and you will find out before you finish reading my story.

Winter, 1939-40

That winter of 1940 was very adventurous for me. I helped my dad gather different kinds of materials to build our house. Grandpa Kiec (mom's dad) gave us an old log storage shed which we took apart for our house. We went with horse and buggy to different villages to beg for anything we could get, like straw for the roof, boards and anything else that was suitable for the house. People were very helpful after hearing our circumstances that our buildings were destroyed during the war. I liked to be with Dad.

We were begging in this village about five kilometers north from us. The farmers there were very well-to-do and very religious. I sat on the wagon while my dad went in to a farm house to see what he could get. A lady that was walking by greeted me saying, "Praise the Lord." I was to reply, "Forever and ever." Instead, I said, "Let it be." I was caught off guard, so I was worried about my reply to her, as I didn't answer properly. I told Dad about this and he said, "That's okay. God will accept your

reply." I felt better then.

Anyway, we gathered a lot of material for our new house. The new home we were to build was to be in a different place. It was one kilometer straight north from my uncle's place. It was the very last house on the east end of the village. We bought this land from my uncle Joseph (my dad's brother). There was a house and a root cellar on this land too, but the house burned down during the fighting; however, the root cellar survived and we were able to make use of it later on, even as a shelter when we were building.

The rest of the winter, about twice a week, was home-brew making time. My uncle Michael Kiec was master brewer. Wladek and I helped him. Our job was to keep the "still" cool. This we did by bringing snow in to fill the tub and to keep the coil cool which condensed the steam into whiskey. Sometimes we stayed up until 5 a.m. until the process was completed. I liked that.

People gathered in different homes in the evenings and bragged about who made the best home-brew.

The Matchmaker

Matchmaking was always going on in our village. I must tell you how the matchmaking was done.

When a young man has an eye for a particular girl, and one who he thinks would make him a suitable wife, he will go and hire a matchmaker, who is usually an older man living in the village.

This matchmaker then goes to the home of the girl's parents, carrying with him a bottle of the finest whiskey which the suitor provides. As soon as he arrives at the home, he immediately puts the bottle on the table and from that moment on they drink and talk "matrimony business" to see if the couple in question are suitable to one another. If the girl's parents are satisfied that the young man is suitable for their daughter, they choose a day for another meeting.

At the next meeting both the matchmaker and the young man attend and an introduction to the girl takes place. There is more drinking and more talking. The matchmaker lists what

possessions and wealth the man has to offer to the girl (wealth was measured by the amount of land a person owned). The parents of the girl also list what can be expected from them in the form of a dowry. If the girl and her parents agree to the proposition presented to them by the matchmaker and the young man, marriage plans are soon made and a wedding date is set.

This gives you an idea of the matchmaker's purpose.

My sister Genia was eighteen years old. It was 1940. We still lived at uncle Michael's place. My parents thought that it was about time that Genia got married. A certain fellow in our village let it be known that he had an "eye" for Genia. My mother encouraged Genia to consider him because the young man was a good catch and very well-to-do. As was the custom, the young man hired a matchmaker. Genia told Mom and Dad that she definitely was not interested in him, but as parents go, Mom and Dad thought that given enough time Genia might have a change of attitude. This matchmaking went on for about a year and a half with lots of drinking and talking. By this time we were already in our own house. It was the summer of 1940.

Genia repeatedly said that she did not like this man, but to no avail. Mom and Dad thought that he would make a good husband. They liked what he had to offer Genia so the wedding date was set and preparations for the wedding were made. In the end Genia won out, and five days before the wedding was to take place she finally convinced Mom and Dad that she would not be happy in this marriage so the wedding was called off.

However, the groom-to-be and the matchmaker, not to be disillusioned with the rejection, went down the village a few houses away from us to where a fifteen year old girl and her not-so-well-to-do parents lived. He offered her his proposal of marriage and she and her parents accepted it at once. The parents were very happy as it meant that there would be one less mouth to feed. The wedding took place as planned not with Genia but with the new found girl.

Our family were guests at the wedding but not Genia, and we had fun, especially when the floor above the root cellar caved in! The root

cellar was located under the house and because of the many guests and the dancing, the floor gave way. Half of the guests fell into the root cellar. The kids really thought that was funny. Luckily, no one got hurt.

Some of the guests that landed in the root cellar didn't even bother to come back up. They continued the celebration down there with food and drink and much merriment.

Despite the slight inconvenience of a gaping hole in the floor, the wedding celebration continued for three days and a great time was had by all.

The orchestra at the wedding consisted of a small brass band including a violin, and one drum that was made out of a dog's hide. Drums were made only out of dog's hides in our village. As you can see, the Humane Society wasn't very active in our village! If a dog disappeared and someone came up with a new drum, there was a lot of suspicion among the people as to what happened to the dog.

After the wedding was over, friends and neighbours all pitched in to help repair the floor.

Genia never did regret her decision not to marry that man. She eventually did marry though and was blessed by two beautiful daughters, Natalia and Ola.

March 19, 1940.

The snow was just about gone and we were itching to build. We needed a house and a barn. Most people would have built the house first, but not us, we built the barn first. That was smart. You might not think so, but I did. We had to have a place for the cows, storage for our belongings and grain for seeding. We had to build a chicken coop too because our chickens were kept above our root cellar. The root cellar was covered with a roof. Dad had lots of help. There was uncle Michael (mom's brother), uncle Steve (dad's brother), uncle Andre (mom's cousin, who was a jack-of-all-trades) and many neighbours. By the end of May the barn was built except for the roof. We had enough straw to do half of the roof so we did the south side first. By the end of June we had new hay and clover which was harvested. This was brought into the barn and stored under the part where the roof was. What was most important

to us was the fact that we had something to sleep on - the new hay.

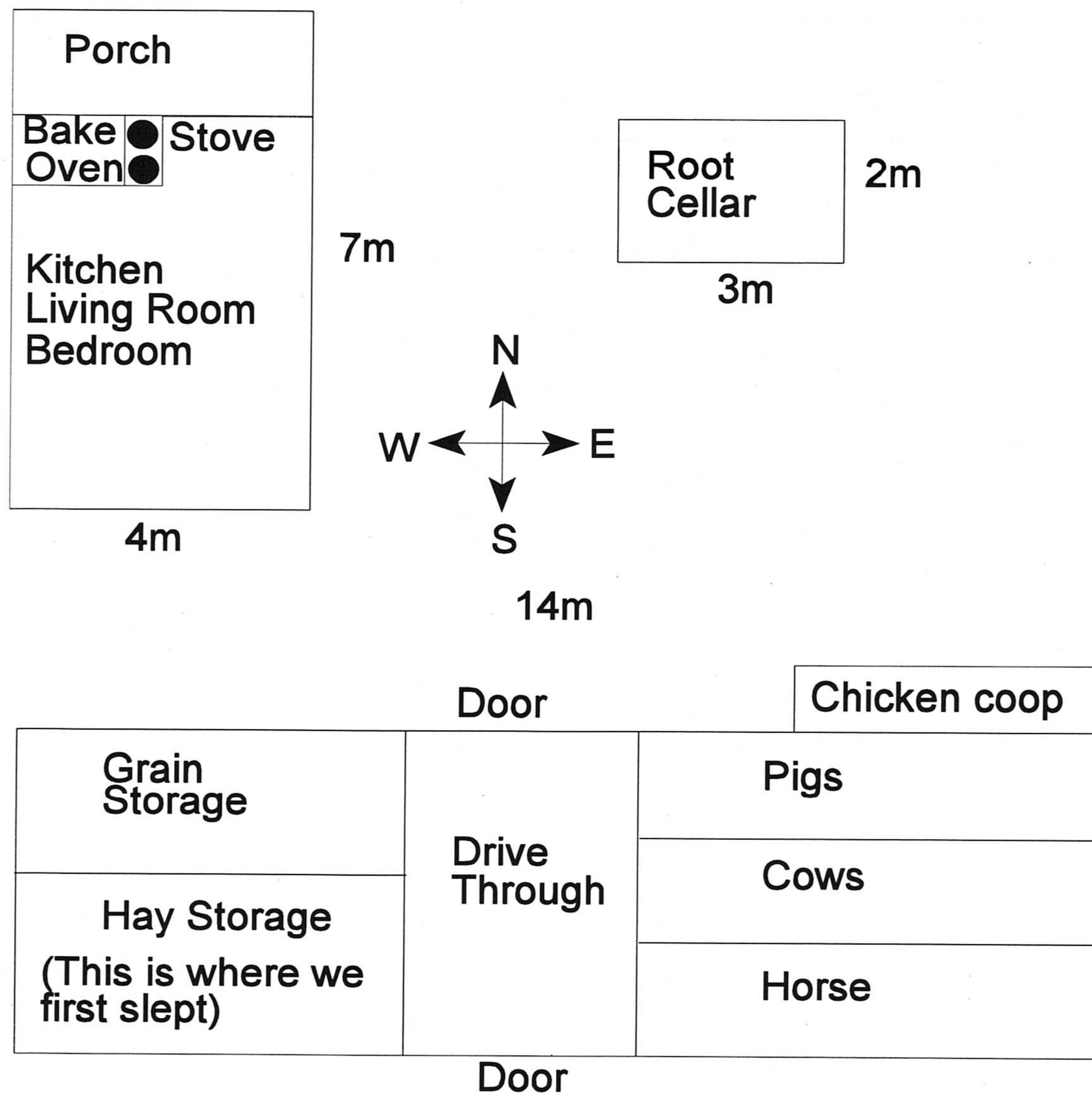
Slowly we started moving out from our uncle's place. This was a big adventure for me, especially sleeping in the hay under half a roof with the sky and stars looking at us through the other half. I liked that. We cooked out in the open. It was fun. Mom still baked bread at uncle's place. Wladek came quite often to see me and at these times I was his host. He had fun too. We then got busy and went out to beg for some more straw, and we got enough to finish the rest of the roof.

That summer was a busy time for us. We had just started building our house when my brother Aleksander was taken to Germany as forced labour to work on a farm. He was in the Eastern part of Germany, a district called Saxon. He wrote to us quite often and said that he had it pretty good. He worked for an older couple whose son was in the German army. Aleksander even sent us some second hand clothing which we needed badly. I received a sweater from him and it fit me perfectly. I liked that. The house was finished by mid-summer. What a joy it was moving into the new house. It was a one room house, seven by four meters, porch included. We even had a wooden floor in this house.

Then came the harvest. We had very good crops and a good garden. The family made big barrels of sauerkraut and dill pickles for the winter months.

We also had three pigs, two cows, one calf, one horse, chickens and geese. My job was to mind the cows in the summer time. I led them by a rope along the roadside to graze until they were full. I used to hate that job. It was so boring, but I had to do it. There was no way out. I made up for it in the winter time though. The cows stayed in the barn and I spent most of my free time on my skis. By the way, I saved my skis from the old house that burned down because I had set them outside before we fled to another village.

That first Christmas that we spent in our new home there was a joyful celebration. There was Mom, Dad, my sisters, Genia and Natalie and myself. It was the first year that Aleksander was not with us for Christmas, but we knew that he was alright.



This house (our second) just about burned down in 1942 when the Gestapo burned our neighbors house down and then shot them. Sparks were flying all over and my Dad and I were wetting the roof so that it wouldn't catch on fire. This happened in late June or early July. I was taken from home as a prisoner on July 7, 1942.

Christmas 1940

The winter of 1940 was very cold with lots of snow.

This is how Christmas was celebrated in Poland and especially in our home. I must say it was a most joyful time. About three days before Christmas my mom got busy baking. She made special pastries out of the blueberries, plums, cherries and apples that were dried in the summer time and preserved for the winter. A special non-alcoholic drink was made out of the sour cherries. The pastries that were baked were not to be eaten until Christmas Eve. Can you imagine all of us hungry kids not being able to eat any of the freshly baked goodies until Christmas Eve? Well, we didn't, not one single crumb. This is where I learned my self-discipline.

The day before Christmas was a very special and busy day. My dad hitched up the horse to the sleigh and sent me to get the axe from the barn. I knew instantly that we were going to go to the woods to get our Christmas tree. The tree was put up on Christmas Eve in front of the window. Homemade decorations were put on the tree. Paper chains, angels, bells and store bought chocolates and candies were hung on the tree. I remember one time we had chocolates that were shaped like violins. We also had candles that were lit on the tree. I am surprised now that we didn't burn the house down, but we were extra careful.

The Christmas Eve supper was made up of twelve meatless dishes. Boiled wheat with honey and poppy seeds, pickled herrings, sauerkraut cabbage soup with dried mushrooms (my favourite), pirogies (cottage cheese mixed with potatoes), cabbage rolls, mashed beans with garlic, poppy seed bread, kolach (braided bread), sour cream, cottage cheese, borscht (beet soup), and nalishniki (this was a very thin pancake made the full size of the frying pan. It was paper thin more like a crepe suzette and rolled up with fruit. The dried fruit was boiled with honey or sugar and water and this was used in the nalishniki). I must stress that these nalishniki were very, very thin and very, very delicious.

The table was first covered with about five centimeters of hay. One head of garlic was put

in each corner of the table. The table was then covered with a tablecloth of homemade linen which was made out of flax straw. Straw was brought in for the floor, measuring about thirty centimeters in depth when it was all laid out. (The hay on the table represented the manger and the straw on the floor represented the stable). This was another joyful time in my life. I liked that.

Then came the time for the Holy Christmas Eve supper. Mom set the twelve special dishes on the table (representing the twelve apostles). The Christmas candles on the tree were lit by Dad and also the candles that were on the table. The kerosene lamp was turned down. The family all sat around the table and the Holy evening began with Dad saying grace, thanking God for everything. We then partook of the special Christmas Eve supper. The boiled wheat mixed with poppy seeds and honey was eaten first. The wheat represented the Bread of Life - Jesus. In keeping with tradition we all then had a drink of vodka, no matter how young you were or how old, we all had some. Everything tasted so good, it is hard to describe how delicious everything was, especially when it came to the sauerkraut soup with the dried mushrooms in it. After the soup we were given a second drink of vodka. In the meantime Mom was complaining to Dad that I was too young to be drinking this stuff. Dad turned to me and said, "Grow big and strong, and remember no matter how good things are, they are good as long as you don't overdo them, because if you do, then they could be bad for you."

Our Christmas Eve supper took a long time as we reminisced over the past year and at this special time we especially remembered my brother Aleksander who was in Germany working as forced labour. This was the first time that he was not with us on Christmas Eve. After supper we all went to the barn to wish the cows, pigs and horse a Merry Christmas and to give them a special feed of clover for the cows and oats for the horse. People used to say that the cows talked among themselves on Christmas Eve, so I stayed behind to see if they really did talk. If they did talk, I didn't understand them.

Later, all of the family, except my sister Natalie and I, went to church for midnight mass in a little town call Tarnawatka which was about

five kilometers west of us. They walked. I didn't go to church because I didn't have any boots that were warm enough, as it was very cold that night.

I enjoyed staying home that night as we were allowed to sleep on the straw covered floor, and that was fun. I liked that. The table stayed set all night with the candles burning. I tried to sleep, but I was too excited thinking about all the food still on the table, especially the nalishniki that were left over from supper. So from time to time I would get up and eat one, and the next thing I knew they were all gone. When the family came home from church, mom questioned me as to where all the nalishniki had gone and I innocently told her that Natalie must have eaten them. But that didn't go over too well, so I told her that they were so good that I couldn't resist eating them. Mom liked that.

New Years Day - 1941

January 1, 1941 was our first New Year's day in our new home.

Traditionally on New Year's day the children in the village went from house to house bringing New Year's greetings to the families. The children carried with them a bag of oats. A few handfuls of the oats would be thrown on the floor as the child recited the greeting. For this they were given a few groszy, depending on how well-to-do the family was.

This year I was sad that I couldn't go out and do this as I was now too old. In fact, the last year that I had gone out was in 1939 when I was eleven years old. I was thinking about my younger years and how I had prepared for the big day. On New Year's eve, before I went to bed, I would get out my little home-made linen bag which my mother had made. This bag was made with a long shoulder strap which went over the shoulder so that the hands could be free. I would fill the bag with about two kilograms of oats and it sat ready for New Year's morning. I was very excited. I wanted to get up very early as I wanted to be the first person to get to each house with the New Year's greeting before the people ran out of money. Besides, the first person there usually got more and many a time if you were late and the other children got there before you, you

didn't get any money at all. So I told my dad to make sure and wake me really early so that I would have a head start. He didn't have to though, as I hardly slept at all thinking about the money I would receive. It was still dark when I set out. I was usually the first one to visit each house. I threw the oats over the floor just as if I was sowing them on the land and said this rhyme:

"I am sowing and sowing and sowing some more and bring you New Years greetings. May you have good crops, good health and lots of money."

(It loses in the translation, but you get the idea)

For the people I visited who had no children I said a special rhyme and it went like this:

May you reap rye and wheat and may you be blessed with many children behind your bake oven.

I must tell you that people kept their small children behind their bake ovens, as it was the warmest place in the house, especially in the winter time - this explains the rhyme.

I got paid one or two groszy and sometimes five. Some rich farmers gave us as much as ten groszy (one groszy was equivalent to one-fifth of a cent Canadian at that time).

I remembered this one year in particular, it was very cold. After finishing my rounds I went home to count my money. I had collected ninety groszy, just ten groszy short to make one zloty (one zloty equalled twenty cents Canadian at that time). Just then my dad's friend came over to our house. He lived one kilometer west of our village. I didn't go to his house this year because in the previous years that I had gone there, I didn't receive any money from him. He always had some kind of excuse for not giving me any. So while he visited with my dad he asked me why I hadn't visited him this year as he would have given me ten groszy. I felt very bad that I hadn't gone there as that ten groszy was what I needed to make the one zloty that I desperately wanted.

The next year though, I made sure that I didn't miss his house. To my disappointment he didn't even give me one groszy let alone the ten that I had expected. But I did learn something from that experience and that is not to mislead people, not even little children.

One year though I was very successful. I reaped a total of one zloty and fifteen groszy. I thought that I was rich.

Each year I saved this money for the annual fair that came to Tarnawatka (a town five kilometers from us) on June 28 and 29, which were the Saint's Days of St. Peter and St. Paul. By the time June came though, most of my money was almost gone. I remember this one year I had only five groszy left for the fair. I went anyway, walking of course! There were so many things to buy there for five groszy, you could buy a big bottle of lemonade, candy or little toys. I couldn't decide what to buy. Finally my eye caught these delicious looking waffles, so I bought five groszy worth. I ate them slowly to make them last a long time. After I finished eating them I got very thirsty and very mad at myself that I hadn't bought the lemonade instead. To this day I am pretty careful when I buy anything. I make sure that it is what I really want, and I also know that I can't have my cake and eat it too.

As I said before, that winter was very cold and we had a lot of snow. On the west side of the house the drifts were so high that they reached the top of the roof. We would put on our skis and slide up to the top of the roof where we could look down into the chimney. From the top of the roof we would ski right down on to the field.

February, 1941 - There were about six of us boys who were skiing late in the evening, including the boy who had stolen my piece of tire. He had a brand new pair of factory made skis. I asked him when he was going to return my tire. He said that he wouldn't return it. Then he said, "Why don't you forget about it, it happened so long ago." That really got to me. We all went to one of the boy's homes to get warm. I told my friends that I had enough skiing for that night and that I would be going home. After all of the boys had gone into the house, I came back to where they had left their skis and picked up one of the skis of the boy who had stolen my tire. I stuck it in between two posts and tried to break it. I struggled for a long time, but I finally succeeded to break it. I put it down neatly beside the other good ski and I went home trying to look innocent and went straight to bed. I was exhausted from trying to break the

ski. My heart was pounding and I wondered whether I had done the right thing. Somehow I didn't think so and I felt guilty. But then I thought, justice had to be done. One hour later all of the boys came over to our house screaming and accusing me of breaking the ski. Dad had answered the door. He came to my bed and asked me if it was true what the boys were saying. I said, "Yes, I did it." Dad didn't think that what I did was a good way to settle my dispute with the boy. But he wasn't angry. The next day the boy's father came over to our house saying that I was a no good kid, and demanded that I replace the broken ski or else he would report us to the police. I didn't have any money so I agreed to fix the ski. I went to my uncle Andre's and got some wood glue, screws and clamps and proceeded to fix the ski. As I was working on the ski, I looked back at what I had done and thought how stupid I was to break a perfectly good ski and now I was trying to fix it knowing that it would never be as good as it was before. I caused a lot of grief, hard feelings and never accomplished anything by my actions. The moral of this story is that revenge doesn't pay. You end up being the loser, no matter how right you thought you were.

March, 1941

The days were starting to get longer. I helped Dad thresh the rest of the grain that was stored over the winter in the barn. I must explain that the grain was stored in sheaves that were left over from the fall, and this was normal procedure as the grain was threshed as we needed it. A good days threshing by two people would produce about a two hundred pound sack of grain.

The Nazis put a heavy quota on our grain, potatoes, eggs, pigs and milk. These products were delivered by us to their storage centres. This left us with very little to eat. In order to survive we had to hide some of the produce. The barn was a good hiding place. We dug a pit under one of the cow stalls, hid some of our grain, then covered the pit with boards then with dirt because we had a dirt floor in the barn, then on top of the dirt went a layer of manure. This worked for us. If anyone did not meet their quota or if they were caught hiding anything

they would be taken immediately by the Nazis to the concentration camp.

At this point in time the Nazis were rounding up any Jewish people that lived in our village. Anyone caught helping them in any way were automatically given the death sentence. This order was given from Hitler himself, so we were told. This was a constant worry for our family as one of my mother's friends was a Jew. Even though her life was in danger, my mother made sure that her friend would have enough to eat. The father of the Jewish family would come late at night over to our house so that no one would see him, and we shared with him whatever we had.

Spring was on its way. I was fourteen and half years old, a happy-go-lucky boy and ready for adventure. I could hardly wait to take off my boots after the long winter and run around barefoot - that was our lifestyle - no shoes in the summer.

It was April, 1941, the snow was all gone and we started seeding the grain and planting the garden. Rumours were starting to circulate that there might be a war between Germany and Russia. This was hard to believe as Germany and Russia had just signed a non-aggression pact. The evidence was pointing to war though, because by the end of April, May and June, the Germans were beginning to gather people from our district to build an airport for heavy bomber airplanes. This was being built at Labunie located about eighteen kilometers northwest from our village. I was one of the people. I was picked up on the highway at 7:00 a.m. every morning and trucked to the airport being built. There were thousands of people working there. Men and women worked long hours up to 8:00 p.m. or later. I was probably the youngest person there. Most of the workers guessed that I was seventeen or eighteen years old; I felt good about that! When it came to shovelling the dirt on the trolley; it was tough, and I didn't feel like seventeen, I felt like twelve. I was only fourteen and a half.

The construction of the airport was run by German people; engineers and supervisors. They carried whips, clubs and guns and they didn't hesitate to use them on anyone who was dragging his feet on the job. The person got it wherever they could lay it on him. I know, I was

one of the victims.

One morning as we were marching from the truck stop to the airport construction site, I had a very bad headache and I just couldn't keep up. I soon was noticed by one of the guards, and without warning I was whacked on the head with a one inch stick. This instantly cured my headache. I felt good the rest of the day. Since then I have often told my story to many people about how this guard cured my headache, but no one has ever practiced this headache remedy to my knowledge. It sure worked for me!

There were hundreds of Jews working on this airfield. They were given the worst jobs, like carrying cement sacks on their backs. Some of the old people were too weak to work. They were beaten and pulled over to the side to die. I worked there until Saturday, June 21st. On this last day I was in a group of ten workers and a soldier was our guard. He spoke Polish. As we were cleaning up, we couldn't help to see what was going on. There were lots of airmen all over the place and about two hundred and fifty heavy airplane bombers. The planes were being loaded with bombs. The Polish speaking guard confided in me that the next day there would be war with Russia. This was a secret and I was to tell no one. That evening on my way home people were gathering in the village and debating about whether there would be war between Russia and Germany. I kept my secret. When I got home I shared my secret with my dad because we never kept any secrets from each other. I told my dad that there would be war tomorrow explaining to him my conversation with the German guard who could speak Polish. He looked at me rather strangely, but he wasn't too surprised. It was the evening of June 21, 1941. We went to bed.

On June 22, 1941 we were awakened at 3:00 a.m. in the morning by a tremendous roar - it felt like the whole village was shaking - 250 bombers were on their way to Russia. The peace pact between Germany and Russia was broken. All of the villagers ran out of their homes dressed only in their night clothes, to watch the bombers going over. These bombers came from various airfields around the country besides the one that I was working on. This bombing went on for several days. We were

only about twenty kilometers from the Russian border, so we could hear the bombs exploding in the distance. The German army advanced very quickly deep into Russia.

We were digging bomb shelters thinking that Russia might retaliate, but instead, within the first few days their airfields were destroyed by a surprise attack. So we didn't get to use our bomb shelters after all.

By mid-summer, as the war progressed, the Germans brought thousands of Russian prisoners of war to Poland. Many of these prisoners were left unguarded, so they wandered from house to house begging for food and shelter. They slept wherever they could find a place to lay their head; fields, barns or hay stacks. We were not allowed to keep them in our homes. We fed them what we could and they would go on their way. When winter arrived they literally had no shelter and were dying all over the place. This was a sad sight.

Even so, the summer of 1941 was a happy one for me. There was no school to go to as it was closed down. The Germans were preoccupied with the Russian front. My job was to mind the cows, help Dad in the field and garden, storing food for the winter and of course we had to deliver our quota to the Germans. The quota had been increased substantially as the soldiers needed more food now. Despite all of this I thought that we were doing pretty good, especially since we had our own home.

One evening late in the fall, our family was sitting around and chatting when we all decided it would be nice to have an apple to eat.

Our apples were kept in a storage room that was part of the barn. We kept our grain, apples, vegetables and other staples that we grew, in that room.

It was very dark outside and with no such thing as electricity, you could poke your eye out with your own finger, literally speaking.

So being the fearless boy that I was and knowing that there was nothing in this world that couldn't be scientifically explained, I volunteered to go out to the barn and get us all some apples.

I ventured outside and groped my way to the door of the storage room. I opened the door and started to feel around in the dark with my hands trying to locate the apples.

Suddenly I heard heavy breathing. Fear

came over me like a blanket. My hair stood on end. I touched something with my hands. Something hairy. I felt further with my hands and came across what seemed like horns. I wanted to scream and run as in my mind I associated the horns with the devil and how I perceived him. But then I remembered my teacher and how he said that there was an explanation for everything. I groped further and soon felt a hairy face and a moist nose. I knew then that it was our year old calf. It had somehow gotten into the storage room and had started to eat the oats that were stored there. I got the calf out and led it back to the barn.

After I got back to the house with the apples, I told my family what had happened. They were all pleased that I got them the apples and besides that, I was praised by my dad for rescuing the oats from the calf. I felt good about myself for not letting fear get the best of me.

Wladek (my cousin) and some of my other friends talked about our future and wondered what would become of us. We contemplated why the Germans were oppressing the Polish people and what was happening to all of the Jews as there were so few left in the village. There were rumours going around that in the concentration camps there were gas chambers and the people were being gassed. This was hard for us to believe. There were two concentration camps not too far from our village. Belzec which was fifteen kilometers away and Majdanek which was near Lublin about seventy kilometers away. We did not know too much about them, only rumours, which we learned later on were the facts and more.

That summer the German armies advanced deep into Russia. They took Lvov, Kiev, Stalingrad and Charkov and by late summer they were only sixty kilometers from Moscow. One day my dad and I went to Tomaszow, a city twelve kilometers southwest from our village. We bought a newspaper and couldn't believe the headlines that were printed in red. In twenty-four hours the Germans will conquer Russia it said and the war between Germany and Russia will be over. Of course that was German propaganda since they controlled all of the news media. Any other news we heard was mostly word of mouth. We heard some rumours that were encouraging especially news from

England through some underground sources. Our Polish government exiled to England and we were told that Poland had armies in England led by General Sikorski, General Anders who led the Second Division in Italy against the Germans and General Macik who led the First Division in Holland against the Germans.

We were encouraged to fight the Germans as best we could and as a result an underground army was forming. Through this underground army the Germans were set back somewhat as they had to contend with sabotage and disruptions of their transport systems that the underground army would blow up. The Germans were also getting frustrated as they were suffering defeats on the Russian front, also winter was setting in with snow and cold slowing down their operations.

The German soldiers decided the highway needed to be cleared from the snow, so they began to round up men and women from the village to do the job. I was taken many times whenever the highway needed clearing and worked day and night until it was cleared.

At one point the regular soldiers were replaced by the Gestapo to speed up whatever needed doing. The relationship between the Gestapo and the Polish people worsened as they were very mean to us.

I remember one time after a heavy snow fall we were clearing the highway and working literally day and night. We were never fast enough for them and as a result got hit with rubber clubs to get us going faster. My uncle Steve was a big man and he was hit on the head with a club. His hat fell off, and as he bent to pick it up the Gestapo hit him again and again. I think his pride was hurt more than his head, but he did not fight back. If anyone dared to fight back he was shot on the spot.

From that point on and besides other incidents that took place, hatred was planted between the Nazis and Polish people and was spreading and growing like wildfire. There was a lot of revenge taking place on both sides. The Germans didn't get much sympathy from the Polish people when they started to bring train loads of soldiers who were frozen to death from the Russian front back to Germany.

As young as I was I already thought in my mind that all of this hatred and revenge that was

going on will never solve our problems. Out of all of this my faith grew stronger. I was touched by God and trusted in Him completely. I said the Lord's Prayer every night, remembering especially the words, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven and Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. I felt that I was always protected. I knew I was loved by my mom and dad and I felt that there was nothing in this world that they wouldn't do for me. But they were powerless. When I think back now I know that I was never alone. God was with me.

Despite all of the unrest between the Nazis and the Polish people, I thought that life was pretty good. There was never a dull moment. I was fifteen years old, my birthday was on November 14, 1941 and I was well into my teenage years. I spent a lot of my time skiing, that is whenever I wasn't shovelling snow off the roads for the Nazis, which was almost every day.

The year is 1941 and we celebrated our second Christmas in our new home in the traditional way. We had a tree, the twelve meatless dishes representing the twelve apostles and vodka of course. This was my most joyous time because I loved food and these were special dishes. We attended midnight mass in Tarnawatka about five kilometers from where we lived. Of course we all missed my brother Aleksander who was in Germany working as forced labour for the second year.

After Christmas it got colder and more snow fell, lots more. I spent more and more of my time shovelling snow to clear the roads. The drifts were so high they reached the tops of the telephone poles, spilling over them. By this time the Nazis were very frustrated and mean to us. The underground army was getting stronger. It got to the point where the Nazis wouldn't dare come into the village at night. So it was like Poland in the night and German occupation in the daytime.

The Russian front wasn't going too well for the Nazis. They experienced more and more defeats. That winter of 1941 - 1942 was probably the turning point between Russia and Germany. The invasion called "Barbarossa" lost its punch. The Nazis were gaining more

enemies in Poland. They imposed a bigger quota on our food supplies. It got so bad that the Nazis came to the homes and took everything they could lay their hands on. If anyone got caught hiding any food they were taken to the concentration camp. Some people who got caught were taken to the camp and about three weeks later the families were notified that the persons had died from natural causes.

Friends of ours had a son who was two years older than I. He was picked up by the Nazis and taken to the concentration camp and accused of collaborating with the underground armies. A few weeks later his parents received word that he had died of natural causes. This gave my mother more worries as I also mingled with the underground armies. I admired how brave they were in the face of adversity. There were lots of Russian prisoners on the loose and were in the process of organizing themselves. Bandits also were on the rampage posing as underground armies, looting and robbing people of clothing, food and other goods and also fighting between themselves. It got so bad that the people didn't trust one another. They couldn't even trust their neighbours.

We couldn't butcher our own pigs or kill our chickens for our own use because they were registered and the Nazis knew what we had. We had three pigs of different sizes. As soon as a pig was big enough to butcher for our own use (which I must say was illegal), we bought a little piglet on the black market to replace it. We had to protect our inventory of three pigs. The biggest scare that we had was when our uncle Andre came over to help us butcher the pig. It was 3 a.m. early morning. We had to do this in secret and very quietly. We lit the coal oil lantern and went into the barn talking only in whispers. My uncle Andre was a tall, lean and strong man. We got the pig into the middle of the barn floor. My uncle got the axe and went to hit the pig on the head. We all were very tense and fearful, because if we were caught by the Nazis we would probably die with the pig. Of course this wasn't the first time that we had done this. My uncle was always sure of himself. He swung the axe aiming for the pig's head. The pig suddenly moved and he hit the pig behind the ear. The pig started squealing and

running around in a frenzy. We quickly jumped the pig and wrapped the pig's mouth with a gunny sack, then stabbed it. Needless to say we were very relieved when we finally silenced the pig. We were lucky that our neighbours were heavy sleepers and were not awakened by the squeals. By morning we had all of the meat cut up. Some of it was salted, some frozen outside, and some was given to my uncle. Our next big fear was to cook it and eat it. When we were cooking or eating this meat one of us had to watch and stand guard and when we saw someone coming we had to quickly hide the meat and look innocent because we didn't know who to trust. We lived through that winter warily but very well. To me that was fun and games. Somehow I thought that nothing bad could happen to me.

By late March the Nazis rounded up all of the Jews. There were no more Jewish families in the village and surrounding area. Just as this man prophesied, "When they finish with the Jews, they will start on us." That was so true. No one was safe anymore. People were shot day in and day out for no reason whatsoever. My dad took chances many times. We ran out of potatoes. The Nazis had taken all we had. They stored them about one and a half kilometers from us. The potatoes were stored in long pits and covered in a double layer of straw and earth to keep them from freezing. Many a time Dad got up at 3 a.m. in the morning and headed out quietly into the darkness with a gunny sack in hand to the potato pits. One time I heard him leave the house. I got up quickly, got dressed and caught up with him. "Where are you going?" he asked. "I am going with you," I stated. I also had a gunny sack in my hand. We were going to steal our own potatoes. The potatoes were guarded by the Nazis. If anybody was caught they were shot on the spot. But we were desperate. I thought it was a challenge. We survived that winter with no incidents and we had potatoes with our meat.

Spring was now upon us and it was seeding time. The Nazis gave us some seeds for planting. Some of the people were so hungry and desperate that they ate the seeds. Spring was a blessing for us, especially the month of May when the grass started growing and there was feed for the cows, as our feed had

completely run out. We had two cows and one horse and of course the three pigs - which didn't gain much weight.

The horse got so skinny that we were afraid that if she ever fell over she would never get up again. The horse was very essential to us. She was the only power we had to work our land. We managed to seed our seven acres of land and plant a garden. By late spring our horse started to look better. I fed her new grass and groomed her. By mid-June her coat was shining. Every time I walked by her she greeted me with a hee ha, hee ha. It seemed like she was saying, thank you, thank you.

June was the beginning of summer. My job was to mind the cows; taking them to pasture and making sure they were well fed and watered, and the horse too of course.

By this time the underground armies got stronger. Many of the able bodied men went into the surrounding forest and joined the armies. It was impossible for the Nazis to catch them. By then the German armies had put all their efforts into the Russian front. The life line between Germany and the Russian front went through Poland. The underground armies had a field day hitting the Nazi convoys and blowing up their trains, thus getting the weapons and food supplies. The Nazis retaliated by taking revenge on innocent people. For every Nazi that was killed, ten innocent people were shot at a public execution.

I don't remember the exact day but it was near the end of June, 1942. We were awakened at 2:00 a.m. early morning by heavy machine gun fire and hand grenades exploding. About three or four kilometers southwest from us, the furniture factory at the town of Tartak was located on the main highway that led to the Russian front. We could see from the distance flames shooting up and explosives lighting up the sky.

We learned that day that the underground armies had demanded 60,000 zloty from the Nazi boss, or they would blow up the place. He wouldn't agree, so instead he reinforced the factory with more soldiers, which didn't help. That attack was very well organized. The underground armies didn't lose one man. They set up machine guns at four corners of the factory. The shooting lasted about one hour.

The factory was burning for days. The Nazis brought in more reinforcements; they were boiling mad. They couldn't find the underground army, as they retreated to the forest. The Gestapo picked up innocent men from the surrounding villages from every tenth home. Our village had twenty-five families so they picked up three men and gathered all the people in the village to watch the execution. There was a neighbour three houses west from us who was twenty-eight years old. He had a wife and two little girls, two and three years old. He was one of the men picked up. His father who was about sixty years old begged the Nazis to shoot him instead and spare his son. This was a very sad moment. The Nazis would not even consider it. The Nazis told the people that these innocent men were underground collaborators and anyone who collaborates with the underground army will be shot. As the people watched, the men were taken across the street, blindfolded, and made to kneel. Three shots were fired. The men had to be buried on the spot that they were shot. Their homes were set on fire and the survivors were not allowed to save any of their possessions. We, however, were allowed to protect our own buildings from the fire. We just about lost our own home. We sat on the top of our straw thatched roof putting the sparks out with pails of water. We were lucky our home was well spaced apart from the other homes. Many homes were burned. Now fifty years later, every once in awhile I can still smell the stench.

More hatred developed between the Nazis and the people. They started rounding up people for forced labour to work in Germany.

July 7, 1942

This day I will always remember.

It was about 10:00 a.m. in the morning. My mom, dad and sisters, Genia and Natalie, were working out in the field when the Gestapo came to our house with an interpreter. I was at home alone cooking dinner. They wanted to know where my older sister Genia was. I told them that she was out in the field working. They said that they had come for her to take her to Germany. Of course I jumped the gun and I said, "Why don't you take me instead?" I was quite tall for my age and I thought that here is

my chance for adventure, and also to get away from minding the cows every day which I hated. They agreed. I was barefoot and I had on a pair of pants which had been made out of an army blanket by a tailor in the village, and a shirt made out of homemade linen; this is how I went. They had a horse and wagon for transportation. I got on the wagon with them and we headed west through the village. The villagers, especially the women (as there were hardly any men left) came out of their houses and were looking and crying as we rode by. It was a bad sign when someone was taken by the Gestapo. I didn't think anything of it.

My uncle Andre lived at the end of the village. He saw us driving by and came out and told them that he was my uncle and begged the Gestapo to let me go into the house with him for a few minutes as he wanted to give me some bread for my journey. He was very frightened for me. He and I went into the house. He gave me his blessing and some bread. As I was leaving, he said, "Just a minute. I have something for you that might cheer you up!" He pulled out a bottle of vodka, poured me about two ounces and also for himself and said, "Good luck, and may God be with you." I drank that vodka in one shot, came out and got on the wagon. We continued on towards the highway and the city of Tomaszow, then on to Belzec which was about five kilometers south of Tomaszow. At Belzec there was a railway station and a concentration camp which I didn't know about until later. I was the only person there from our village. Some of the vodka had started working on me by then. I was zapped by two spirits; alcohol spirits and Holy Spirit, especially when uncle Andre had said, "God be with you."

I felt so good about everything that I was literally laughing. The people around me couldn't understand why I was so cheerful. Little did I know what was ahead of me.

We arrived at the Belzec railway station. There were hundreds of people there, mostly young men and women, who had arrived there under the same circumstances as I. I was probably the youngest boy there.

The Gestapo loaded us into the railway box cars. We wondered where they would take us. It was getting on towards evening when the train

started moving north. I was still full of the two "spirits" and feeling cheerful. I met a boy named Stachu (Stan) who was about a year older than I. We hit it off very well. I learned that he was from a distant village east of us. We decided to stay close to each other and later on we became very good friends. The train proceeded north. On that train were all kinds of people with different characters. This one fellow was so comical, telling jokes and making fun of the Gestapo. I laughed so hard that I forgot where I was coming from and where I was going to.

It was after midnight when we arrived in Lublin, Poland, a city of about 100,000 population. The concentration camp called Majdanek was located here. We got off the train. We were heavily guarded. They marched us into the city. There was a big stone building surrounded by a barbed wire fence and a gate. We were marched in through the gate and spent the rest of the night outside the building but still enclosed by the barbed wire fence and guarded. By then I was tired, cold and hungry. I was thinking of my mom, dad and sisters. I huddled up to the wall of the building and started to cry.

Then the sun came up. I got a little warmer and felt a little better. Then came breakfast. We were lined up and each of us received an empty soup can which held about half a litre, and a spoon. We were to keep these utensils for our future meals. Breakfast was one slice of bread and barley coffee. Dinner was a half litre of soup and supper the same. Of course for me there was never enough. The soup was so thin that it was a joy if you came across a piece of potato. One day I was still so hungry after I ate my portion that I decided to go for seconds. I got in line again and when I reached the cook he said, "Didn't I give you your portion already?" I said, "No." I lied. I got seconds!

One night around 11:00 p.m. we were all in bed. A boy, about sixteen years old, who looked as though he might have come from a city and obviously well to do, committed suicide with his jackknife. He tried to slit his throat but couldn't so he stabbed himself in the heart. My friend Stachu noticed him but it was too late to save him. That was a sad experience for all of us.

The next day the Gestapo marched us to the Majdanek concentration camp to get de-

liced. We had to take all of our clothes off. They were then put into big ovens to kill the lice. As well we got a haircut right down to our skin. We were then taken to the public showers. This put the finishing touch on our hygiene. We were then taken to the barracks. There were bunk beds, three high, and each layer slept three people. Boards were our mattresses.

We stayed there for a few days. I don't remember how many as I lost track of time. The people were then sorted into groups. They took our names and we were tagged. We were then taken by truck to the railway yard and loaded into box cars. We made up a whole trainload. Machine guns were situated at the front and back of the train. We took off again, this time going west. I was happy again. Riding the train was a big adventure for me. I was also happy that they didn't keep us in the concentration camp. The train ride was very slow as we were side tracked many a time to let the military trains go through, which was of course a priority. Our food ration was a little bread and water once a day. We were very hungry. Sometimes the train would stop on the outskirts of a town near some fields of grain. I would run out of the car, risking to be shot, to pick a few grains of rye, which was just about ready for harvest, to eat. That was my treat. That trip lasted about two weeks.

Along the way we were unloaded at different camps to stay for a day or two. Then back on again to continue our journey. We were already in Germany. I lost my sense of time. We arrived in the province of Thuringen. It is situated in the middle of Germany. They put us into a camp and we were de-liced again, tagged and sorted out for distribution throughout Germany. Groups were picked up by German civilian agents and distributed to different locations.

I was lucky that my group of four people included my friend Stachu. We were shipped to the city of Jena (pronounced Yena). This time we rode a passenger train with the agent in charge of us. I remember people staring at us, we must have looked a sight, and probably wondering why we were so skinny. When we arrived in Jena we were taken to the arbicant (pronounced arbi-sant) meaning "workers place". There we were re-tagged and assigned

to work on various farms. To my amazement, Stachu's tag and mine were to the same destination, Camburg, a small railway stop. We got off the train and were handed over to the people we were assigned to work for. There were two women waiting for us at the station, a young girl my age, and a young married woman who was about twenty two years old. Her husband was in the war. They rode about seven kilometers on their bicycles from a village called Tautenburg to pick us up. We all walked back to Tautenburg. The women talked to us but we didn't understand what they were saying.



By the time we got there however, we did understand what their names were and who would be going where. It was around seven or eight p.m. in the evening when we arrived at Tautenburg. The sun was still shining. It was a nice evening. I was assigned to the young girl's family. Her name was Iuda, her mother's name was Elsie and her father's name was Walter Boume, (pronounced Beameh). He was in the war. Her grandmother, (on the father's side), was the boss, I was told.

My friend Stachu was assigned next door to us on the west side. He was with the family of

the twenty two year old married woman (I forgot her name).

That evening they gave me a wash pan for my own use. After I washed up I was given supper by the boss lady (the grandmother) which consisted of a dish of potatoes with a little pork grease on top. This I ate out in the porch. This was to be my place to eat for the duration of my stay. I was so hungry and so run down that I thought that, "I could eat these potatoes in one gulp". But then I had a few spoonfuls and I was full; I just couldn't eat. I was totally exhausted. I was so skinny weighing only forty three kilos. When I left home I weighed sixty kilos, so in about three or four weeks time I lost seventeen kilos.

I noticed that they were very dissatisfied with me because I was so young and so skinny. They needed a strong man to do the heavy work and instead they got an undernourished boy.

The old lady (the boss) was very angry. I could see that she was furious and very disgusted with me. Actually she didn't want to accept me, but the local authorities told her she would have to keep what she got, and that she was lucky to get me. I found out later that prior to me being there they had a Ukrainian worker for about six months. He couldn't stand it there, so he escaped and nobody knows what happened to him.

The next day they got an interpreter who spoke Polish. There were many Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, French and English prisoners working in this village. So I was told what my job was to be. There were two big horses, three cows, pigs, goats, chickens and domesticated rabbits on this farm. I was to feed them and clean them before breakfast every day. After breakfast I had to harness the horses and work in the fields, hauling hay and various other jobs.

It was August and harvest time. I was still very weak. Most of the grain had to be cut with a scythe. I was pretty good with a scythe and kept up my end of the load. After the grain was cut we tied it into sheaves. When the sheaves were dry we hauled them down to the barn to be threshed later on.

One of the horses had a tendency to bite whenever he got the chance. Once he snapped me by the chest and his big teeth just barely

skimmed over me. It was lucky that I was so skinny. He managed to grab the front of my shirt and threw me against the fence. I didn't get hurt too badly.

For the first few weeks I was very lonely. I missed my family very much. I cried many times. Of course that didn't help. I wanted to go home every day. If someone had told me that I would spend three whole years there, I never would have believed them. It got so bad that I even missed minding the cows at home (a job I disliked doing). As time went on I wrote letters home to my Mom and Dad and hot tears of sadness, loneliness, and homesickness fell on the paper as I was writing, making it very wet. I received replies from them too, and they said that they were crying too and that their hearts were very heavy. There was nothing anyone could do.

In the meantime things got worse at home. My family wrote me that I was lucky that I was in Germany and not at home. Since I had left home, many of my school friends had lost their lives. One day the Gestapo rounded up all of the boys my age and some even younger and took them away, no one knew where. My cousin Wladek was one of them. He was one of the lucky ones. He ended up in Germany working in a factory, but he was worse off than I as factories were main targets for bombers.

I visited my friend Stachu often and I got to know many Polish people who were also working on farms as forced labour. We got together in the evenings and visited until curfew time which was 9 p.m. This was the only recreation time we had. We shared each others burdens which helped to ease the despair and loneliness each of us felt.

I worked with the ladies every day and as a result I learned the German language very well. As soon as I learned how to ask questions I was well away. I never communicated in the Polish language with them. I felt that if I couldn't speak German to them, I wouldn't speak at all.

The people I worked for had nice neighbours. I was sometimes sent over there to help them with their work. This one neighbour had a special job in the factory at Jena (Yena). That is why he didn't have to go to war. His wife's name was Frieda and they had a seventeen year old son who was in the war.

This man, I don't recall his name, was a kind of a handy man around the house. He taught me how to sharpen my scythe and various other things. I looked forward to going over there to work for them especially when it came to lunch time, as the wife always had extra special food to eat and lots of it. I liked that.

I got my brother Aleksander's address from my mom and dad, so I wrote to him. He worked in the next Province to us called Saxon about two hundred kilometers east from us. He would write that he had it pretty good where he was. He had lots to eat, while I never had enough. My dream was if there will ever be a day that I could eat all the bread I wanted to.

Orders came from the higher authorities that any Polish or Russian persons working for people who had no man in the house, could not sleep in the same house. The people I worked for were so obedient to Hitler that they moved me out the same day across the street to live with a family who had an old man living there. He was too old to go to war. They put me up in the attic of their house. It was already late in the fall and very cold. One night it snowed very hard and the wind was blowing. I woke up the next morning to find snow in my bed. The roof of the house was made of slate and the snow blew in through the cracks. I was very cold and uncomfortable and I longed for home.

It was in this house that I was accused of going to the bathroom on the floor of the attic where I slept. These people had cats. These cats would go up there and do their jobs. I tried to convince the people that it was their cats that were messing up the floor. But they would not believe me. It was a sad time for me. They didn't find out the truth until they moved me out of the attic, and found that they still had the same problem with the mess on the floor.

The people my brother worked for were very nice and kind. They let him come to see me.

I remember the day Aleksander came to see me. I was ploughing in a field about 50 meters from the road that led from Camburg to Tautenburg. It was late in the fall and towards evening. A man walking along the road called to me in German and asked me how far it was to Tautenburg. I told him it was about a kilometer away. As I was ploughing along I got closer to the road and the man called out to me



Brother Aleksander, Germany 1943

again, "Is that you Kolu?" I thought to myself, "Could that be my brother?" as I hadn't seen him for two years. There was a big change in both of us. I stopped the horses and ran to him. It was my brother. We hugged. We were overjoyed to see each other, tears streamed down our faces, and we embraced again.

Aleksander was dressed up like a movie star, or so I thought; he looked great. He had on a nice suit, overcoat and hat. It was just about quitting time so I unhitched the horses from the plow and hitched them up to the wagon. We put his suitcase on the wagon and Aleksander and I walked side by side heading toward Tautenburg and catching up on two years of news.

We arrived at the place where I worked and I introduced Aleksander to the boss lady and Elsie. I was so proud of him. They couldn't believe that Aleksander was my brother. He was a nice looking man, well-dressed and twenty two years old. They were very impressed with his appearance.

Aleksander brought me some clothes to wear, socks, pants and shirts for which I was very grateful, and they were very much needed.

He talked the ladies into letting me come back to their house to sleep. To get this okayed he had to go to the local authorities and tell them that I was of a young age. They agreed to let me go back. I was glad to get out of that attic.

The time my brother visited me was the only time I had ever eaten in their kitchen. I guess they were trying to impress my brother that they weren't so bad. He visited me for two days. Little did we know then that the next time we would see each other again would be twenty four years later.

As soon as he left my meals were served back in the porch once again. This porch was used for keeping the feed for the chickens and pigs. They boiled potatoes for the pigs in there and this is where I ate my meals - all alone.

Christmas, 1942

My first Christmas away from home. Needless to say I missed my family very much. I only had my memories. I didn't have to work that day, only feed the stock. The boss lady gave me three apples and some chestnuts. This was my Christmas treat. I ate the apples and some of the nuts, then I went and saw my friend Stachu. He worked for nice people. When he told me how well he was fed my mouth watered. It crossed my mind that my situation could have been reversed in Jena (Yena) when we were tagged and assigned our places. But it wasn't meant to be.

The winter of 1942 - 1943 was very tough for me. I didn't have warm clothing to wear. I was always cold. My hands were frostbitten because I didn't have any gloves or mitts to wear. I was always working outside, cutting wood and hauling wood to fill the woodshed as this was the only source of fuel they had for cooking and heating. I also hauled wood by sleigh to the railway yards and there I loaded it into railway cars. The village was surrounded by a beechwood forest where English prisoners worked in the sawmill. They cut logs for the sawmill and also cut firewood. The forest area was very hilly.

One day towards spring I was hauling wood with the horses and wagon. The trail was very narrow. One horse pulled a little harder and the wagon tipped over and rolled over the embankment. The wagon was badly busted. I was lucky. I jumped over the other side of the wagon and I wasn't hurt. I was accused by the ladies that I had done that on purpose. The boss lady called the Gestapo and I got beaten

up and threatened to be put in the concentration camp. This camp was located twenty seven kilometers north from Tautenburg called Buchenwald, which I didn't know about until we got liberated by the American Army in 1945. It was then that I saw the horror. (Every time I was threatened to be taken to the concentration camp, I had no idea where it was located and I only heard rumours of what went on there).

Summer, 1943

I was still receiving letters from home. Things were becoming progressively worse there. The Germans were retreating from the Russian front. They hated the Polish people because Poland was their number one enemy. To begin with the Second World War started there and much to their chagrin the Polish government went into exile to England and never surrendered to the German army. We were at war with Germany to the bitter end.

That summer was a relief for me. At least I was warm. By now I had mastered the German language quite well, which led me into more trouble. I started talking back to the women. Out of their frustration they would call the local Gestapo. I was beaten several times over the three year period that I was there.

One morning the boss lady brought me my breakfast of two slices of bread out into the porch. The chickens were clucking around inside the porch and flying up on to the shelf and strutting around on top of it.

She placed my bread on that shelf and one of the pieces she placed on some chicken droppings and then she left. I was so hungry. I picked up the one slice and ate it. Then I picked up the other one. I looked at it smeared with the chicken droppings and my heart sank. I took that piece of bread to the boss lady and showed her the mess that was on it and asked for another slice. She told me that I was lucky that I got that one and that I should be thankful.

I complained some more and told her that I wanted to be placed somewhere else with another family. She got really mad and called the Gestapo.

He came roaring in on his motorcycle and on hearing the boss lady tell her story of my being so insolent he slapped my face several

times and threatened to take me to the concentration camp.

I was so furious my blood had rushed to my head so that the slapping around didn't really hurt me but my pride was hurt. So with one slice of bread to sustain me I went to work, thinking of home, my mother and the memories of the bread she baked.

I remember an argument I had with them one time. The boss lady threatened me that she would call the Gestapo. So I said, "Go ahead, I'll pay for the phone call." She did - without my paying for it! The worst time for me was waiting for the Gestapo to arrive. The suspense was unbearable. The Gestapo had the power to do whatever they wished. If anyone fought back they were usually shot on the spot. I never fought back. That is why I am still alive today. The Gestapo always came on a motorcycle. When he pulled into the yard and stopped, fear would engulf me.

One time I tried to escape. I got up very early in the morning and headed for the arbisant (worker's place). I thought that when I got there and told them my story they might sympathize with me and send me to some other place to work. I told them how badly I was treated. They listened on a deaf ear and sent me back to the same place. The boss lady was very furious when she found out what I had done. She called the Gestapo at once, but they didn't come until the next day. I got beaten up once again and was told that I should feel lucky that I was still alive. The next time he said he would take me to the concentration camp.

Late Summer, 1943

The allied forces started bombing the German cities. I liked that.

Every time the siren blew the alarm we didn't have to work. So I started to be more cheerful. I thought that maybe the war would soon be over. I got a little smarter too. They were boiling potatoes on the porch for the pigs, so I managed to take some potatoes out of the boiler to eat. I got braver. Sometimes the chickens strayed and laid their eggs outside of the chicken coop. I would find these eggs and put them in with the boiling potatoes and enjoyed a boiled egg every now and again. One

time I just about got caught, so I quit that, and started instead to eat them raw. I developed a taste for raw eggs and every time I came across a stray nest, it was like a treasure for me. I began to gain some weight and I felt good (survival of the fittest). I started getting my hopes up that the war would soon end.

Winter, 1943

The son of the boss lady, (husband to Elsie and father to Iuda) Walter Boume came home on a one week leave. We hit it off right away. He liked me. One thing he couldn't believe was why I was so skinny. The first day he got home we worked together sorting out some grain. Came lunch time he said, "Let's go for lunch." He called me into the kitchen. I told him that I always ate in the porch. He couldn't believe it, and he said, "From this day on you will always eat in the kitchen." I thought, oh boy things are looking up. I liked that. I never complained to him that they were mean to me. When he was leaving he came to me, shook my hand and said good-bye, and told me that I was a good worker. He was stationed in Bremen as an anti-aircraft gunner. After he left every time I got out of line they threatened that they would tell Walter that I was no good. So I kept my mouth under control.

This one evening during supper time, we were listening to the radio. The propaganda minister Dr. Goebels was speaking. He said that they had too many prisoners of war and didn't know what to do with them. It cost too much to feed them he said. The boss lady was always mad about something and said, "Why don't they shoot them so they don't have to feed them." I, like a fool and feeling pretty cocky said, "How would you like it if your son got to be a prisoner and they shot him?" She immediately grabbed the fry pan off the stove and before I knew what hit me, bang, bang over my head it went! I tried to protect myself with my hands, covering my head. She was swearing. I learned a few swear words in German! I think my pride was hurt more than my head. Her daughter-in-law called her off and then she quit. This time they didn't call the Gestapo, much to my surprise. I probably would have been a goner. I told my friend Stachu and

some of my other friends who I associated with (Polish, Ukrainian and Russian people) what had happened and they all said that I was lucky that she didn't kill me.

Winter, 1943-1944

The bombing was increased by the British in the night and by the Americans in the daytime. By the spring of 1944 the bombing was in full swing. When they were bombing Berlin, the airplanes flew right over us. Sometimes I counted up to 800 - 900 bombers. That was a beautiful sight for me.

Most of the German people showed their anger towards the Americans by their actions. They shook their fists and swore as the American bombers flew over the villages, which of course didn't do them any good, but it did get some of the frustration out of them. They were worried when the allied forces (Americans, English, Canadians, Polish and French) landed in France (Normandy). The propaganda machine tried to alleviate these worries by telling the people that they (the Germans) had a secret weapon coming, meaning of course the atomic bomb which they were working on. None of us realized how powerful the atomic bomb was until the Americans dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Japan later on in August, 1945. The world was very fortunate that the Germans didn't perfect the bomb first.

That summer of 1944 went by very quickly. It was very adventurous for me. The air raid sirens were sounding every day, sometimes two and three times a day. I liked that.

The German people started losing confidence that they would win the war, especially when there was an assassination attempt on Hitler in his bunker. Their greatest fear was that they would be taken over by the Russians. I overheard the boss lady and her daughter-in-law Elsie talking between themselves that they would consider committing suicide if it came down to a Russian occupation of Germany.

It was the beginning of August 1944. It would soon be harvest time. The boss lady was worried that we didn't have a hay rack on the wagon to haul the sheaves of grain. The system there was to haul the sheaves into a

building and store them. Then later they would be threshed as needed in the winter months. They had an electrically driven threshing machine.

I told them that I would build them a hay rack for the wagon provided they got me the proper tools that I needed for the job, which were a hand saw, hammer, axe, chisel and hand drill. At first they thought that I was crazy. "How can you? You never built anything before", they said. What they didn't know was that I had watched their neighbour build a hay rack. So I had a pretty good idea how to do it. They had the material to build it with, and I kept on insisting that I could do it. They didn't have any choice, harvest was on their doorstep, so they consented, and I began my project.

I borrowed the tools I needed from the neighbour and within two days the hay rack was completed. It turned out just the way I expected it to, and I enjoyed making it. It was a challenge for me and I succeeded. Many of the villagers would stop and watch me working. They were quite amazed that this little Polish boy undertook such a project which normally would have been done by a professional carpenter and would have taken two weeks or more because tradesmen were hard to get.

The boss lady was very impressed, and every chance she got she told people that I had built it, and they would comment on what a nice job I had done. I felt good about that. The relationship between the ladies and myself improved somewhat after this.

By this time I got bolder and would go and pick fruit off the trees to eat and I dipped into the milk can for a drink of milk which was stored in the porch for shipment to the dairy plant every second day. This supplemented my daily meals which never satisfied my hunger (as I told you before, the only beverage given me to drink was barley coffee - so milk was a real treat).

Each villager who had milk would take it to a milk station. There, all the cans would be picked up by a designated villager with a horse and wagon to be taken to the dairy plant. Every two weeks it was my turn to take the milk to the plant which was located fifteen kilometers north of Tautenburg.

To get to the plant I had to cross a big bridge over a river. This bridge will be

significant later on in my memoirs. Delivering the milk was one of the highlights in my life as it was during this time that I had all the milk that I could drink, much to my delight. I would take a glass with me and would dip a glassful of milk out of each can and drink it. This way, a little out of each can would never be missed and my craving for milk was satisfied for a little while. Remember, I was a growing boy.

Many a time I got up in the middle of the night, and quietly tiptoed down to the kitchen to cut a slice of bread to satisfy my hunger. One night I just about got caught. The boss lady heard me coming down the squeaky stairway. I got into the kitchen and she came up right behind me and said, "What are you doing here?" I, without hesitating said, "I was checking the time to see if it was time to get up." She said, "It is only three o'clock in the morning. Go back to bed." She bought my story. But I didn't get my slice of bread. If I was ever caught I would be reprimanded severely for taking a slice of bread.

Necessity taught me many cunning ways to succeed in what I went after. For instance, I had to cover the light switch with my hand and then very carefully turned the switch so that it wouldn't make a loud click and wake up the boss lady. The bread was never cut evenly. This proved to be a challenge to me. They would notice if the bread wasn't cut the way they left it. One time the bread was cut half way, so I had to cut right across and then cut another half so as to leave it the way it was. So I ended up with two slices of bread much to my enjoyment. The anticipation of eating the bread was so great, that I could taste it even before I saw it. There were times I was completely disappointed when I went to cut myself a piece of bread. There before my eyes would be a loaf of bread which had never been cut, so I had to leave it. Painstakingly, slowly I would shut off the light switch and carefully make my way up the stairs, avoiding the squeaky ones, and getting into bed thinking about the bread and how good it would have tasted!

This one time they butchered a pig. A professional butcher was hired. He slaughtered the pig and processed it. The meat was made into different types of sausages, some meat was canned, some of it was salted in brine, and the

hams were smoked. The aroma was tantalizing and made me hungrier than ever. This time I was in luck. Shortly after the meat was processed, the whole family got sick with the flu. I guess I was too hungry and too skinny to get sick; the flu bug wouldn't have had anything to feed on! So for about seven days I helped myself to the food. Over these seven days I gained three kilos. I lived like a king. And they were too sick to care. When they recovered I thought to myself, wouldn't it be nice if they were sick a little longer. All that was left now was the memory and how good it was!

The winter of 1944 - 45 was a big improvement over my previous circumstances. The air raids were more intense. The people were losing hope of winning the war, and the ladies were a little nicer to me. The German people were very frightened of the Russians and the Russian front was very near. The Germans were losing badly on the Eastern and Western fronts. I felt pretty good about that, thinking that the war would soon be over. I was eighteen years old on November 14, 1944 and weighed sixty two kilos. I felt very healthy. The liberation was getting close.

I didn't receive any more letters from home because the Russians were already in Poland. Christmas 1944 was very sad for me as I didn't know whether my parents and sisters were still alive. I soon cheered up though thinking that this would have to be my last Christmas in this place. That winter went by very fast. The allied forces were getting closer.

Early Spring, 1945

The German armies were retreating and with them were many American prisoners of war, marching back on foot. They were starving and were begging for bread, which we didn't have ourselves. There were also many SS Nazi soldiers who were always positioned behind the regular German army. The SS soldiers were known to shoot their own men if they thought of deserting.

American airplanes were shooting everything and anything they saw moving on the road.

It was around the end of April or the beginning of May when my turn came up to

deliver the milk to the dairy plant which was situated on the north side of the river. To get there you had to cross over a bridge. The Western front was closing in. There were many SS Nazi men in the village. The boss lady, Elsie and Iuda were debating whether they should send me with the milk. I listened to them, and said that it would be rather dangerous, as the American airplanes were shooting all around. The girl Iuda said that they weren't worried about me, they were more concerned about the horses. So they sent me to the head man in the village (burgomaster) to ask him if I should deliver the milk or not. He lived on the other side of the village north of us. On my way to talk to him the air raid alarm sounded. SS soldiers were everywhere. That day could have been my last. An SS soldier shouted at me to stop. I kept on walking as I did not hear him because of the roaring airplanes. Something made me look back. He was getting his gun out ready to shoot me. Quickly I ran behind a building and hid. He soon gave up the chase because he had to run for cover himself. After the air raid I continued on my way to see the burgomaster. He told me it was up to the ladies whether I should go or not. The ladies were so obedient to Hitler's orders that they decided to send me with the milk. I was scared but I didn't have any choice.

The next day I got up early in the morning and loaded up the cans of milk (about 25 of them). Each can contained about 20 litres of milk. As soon as I left the village I got out my special glass and started dipping into the cans of milk. As I drank the milk I thought that if I got shot at least I wouldn't die thirsty. I heard heavy artillery guns firing in the distance. As I got closer to Camburg (railway station) I saw many German soldiers along the road who were digging trenches and setting up anti-tank guns. Some of the soldiers were very young, no more than fourteen or fifteen years old. They were the Hitler's Youth and I remember their uniforms being much too big for them and literally hanging on them. These boys were waiting for the big fight. This was just about the last stand before the war ended. They didn't have a chance.

I continued my journey. I drove over the bridge which was all set to be blown up in case

the Americans got that far. I arrived in Camburg. People noticed the milk on the wagon. There were many women with babies and small children who badly needed the milk as supplies were not getting through to them. They begged me to give them some. They were very desperate. Of course the milk wasn't mine to give away. The people advised me not to go any further because the Americans were coming. So I thought, what the heck have I got to lose. I pulled over to the side of the road and started dishing out the milk. The word soon got around and before I knew it a long lineup of women had formed, carrying all kinds of containers ready to be filled. After distributing some of the milk, I continued on my journey. The road led up hill through a wooded area. I reached the top of the hill which was about three kilometers from the dairy plant. I saw German soldiers and many civilians coming toward me, running and yelling, "The Americans are coming, the Americans are coming." They stopped me and turned me back telling me that I couldn't go any further. Even with the war raging all around me I was still determined to carry out the duties that were assigned to me. On my way back I stopped at the brewery to pick up a keg of beer for the village pub. The brewery was already abandoned with only one Russian prisoner left who was working there. I had a requisition form for the keg of beer which I handed him. He told me to take all the beer I wanted and that I didn't need a requisition form. So he helped me to load a keg on to the wagon. I headed back to Camburg. When they saw me the women again came out with pots and pails for more milk. I dished out the rest of the milk I had. Only the keg of beer was left. I headed back over the bridge, walking along side the wagon and leading the horses.

The bridge was full of soldiers and army vehicles. This was the most memorable time of the war for me. God must have been with me. I just got to the end of the bridge when it blew up with everybody on it. The middle of the bridge went up into the air, then fell down into the river. Many people got killed. My horses got spooked from the explosion and took off and I along with them running along side of them holding on to the reins. The horses slowed down a little, then I noticed a narrow road off the

highway that led towards the forest. This is the road I took. Further down the road was a cut through a hill with a three meter embankment on each side. It was in this area the Americans started firing with artillery shells. The artillery shells were exploding and machine gun bullets were flying all over. Through all of this I was between the embankments. One of the horses got hit. Blood was squirting all over. I took the time to unhitch the good horse and took off over the hill with the horse and fled into the forest. I was running all that time. When I got out of the range of fire I stopped and sat down on the stump of a tree. My lungs were just burning. I was completely exhausted. The reins of the horse were still clutched tightly in my hands.

Many people were killed and many wounded. I was spared and I never even had a scratch on me. When I arrived home the boss lady came out of the house and just about fainted when she saw me. I was covered with blood from head to toe and I only had one horse with me which was all bloody too. The first thing the ladies asked me was where the other horse and wagon were. The last thing on their mind was how I was or if I was hurt. I told them about the bridge being blown up and how I barely escaped with my life. I did not tell them at that time that I gave away all the milk, because I would have been prosecuted as the Germans were still in command in the village. They began squabbling amongst themselves, the boss lady blaming Elsie and Iuda for overruling her and letting me go to deliver the milk. So she had the justification of saying, "I told you so." They were out one horse and a wagon and "crying over spilled milk," which literally did happen but they didn't know that until I was liberated by the Americans.

