Kazimiera Kurowska

A TALE OF SURVIVAL

Excerpts from the memoir of a forced laborer

Kazimiera Kurowska in 1940

On October 4th, the capitulation took place. The commander of the 2nd Assault Battalion "Odwet" of the Home Army,[1] Captain J. S.[2], pseudonym "Roman," announced that the Warsaw Uprising had officially ended. The Germans surrounded Warsaw. Home Army was no more, now we were on our own. We had the option of leaving as prisoners of war or as civilians. The Germans guaranteed everyone's life. I was a section-nurse in the Healthcare Department, from August 1, 1944 until the end of the uprising. As the soldiers of the Home Army, we in my group did not want any privileges from the enemy. After a meeting with people with whom I became closer—"Anna" M.B., "Grażyna," "Genia," and others—we decided to leave as civilians and share the hardships and fate of the civilian population.

Our intention to stay in the city came to naught. On October 5, 1944, the Germans announced through their messengers that everyone was to leave the city—apartments, basements, or other hiding places—and go to the marked assembly point. Let no one remain, for all houses would be checked and then set on fire or blown up. The Germans went from house to house, using flamethrowers, forcing people into the streets (or rather, the piles of rubble). The insurgents dropped their weapons and marched in columns. The less injured ones were released on their own, others were carried out on stretchers. In the afternoon, armed German soldiers reached Noakowski Street and forced our group to leave.

A thousand people had already gathered in the square in front of the University of Technology. It was a terrible sight, that mass of hungry, dirty and ragged people! Most of us were in rags, with some miserable bundles in sheets on our backs or under our arms. Our faces were thin and blackened. Old men who could barely move their legs, women with children without any belongings, emaciated children who cried terrified of what they saw after emerging from the basements, wounded people on crutches—those who could move. The severely wounded ones were thrown out separately.

Currently, the crowd of several thousands, escorted by armed soldiers, formed a procession. They rushed us (civilians) along the 6 Sierpnia and Aleja Niepodległości streets. The

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[1] Armia Krajowa (AK) in the original Polish version.

[2] Juliusz Sobolewski (1917-1956) – Commander of the 2nd Assault Battalion "Odwet" [Revenge]. After capitulation he was captured by the Germans, first in Stalag X B Sandbostel, then Oflag. Sobolewski received the rank of captain already after liberation, as a liaison officer in the 8th British Brigade. He organized care for Poles released from camps in Germany, then returned to Poland in 1947. Persecuted and imprisoned during the stalinist era, he was vindicated posthumously on May 20, 1957 (Note compiled on the basis of: *Roots of Memory* https://www.1944.pl/powstancze-biogramy/juliusz-sobolewski,41379.html)

Germans kept their word: after driving people out of their homes, they set fire to and demolished everything. The whole of Warsaw was in flames. We looked at our beloved Capital in silence, our hearts filled with hatred towards the enemy, the fascists. We were overcome with terrible grief and the feeling of defeat. We wept – thousands of people! No one was ashamed of those tears of pain and love for our Capital!

Walking through the fields, we stealthily picked out whatever we could, cabbages, beets, turnips. During the two months of the uprising, we starved to the extreme, so now we ate vegetables with peels, barely shaken off, to satisfy our hunger at least a bit. At noon the guards rushed us to the transit camp in Ursus. We were herded into factory halls. My group was placed in some corner, without beds or anything else. Hot chicory coffee and pieces of bread were distributed. Nowadays I cannot depict the delight and reverence with which I ate that bread (we hadn't eaten bread for several weeks). We spent the night on bare cement, covering ourselves with whatever we could. I had a thin blanket. Since we went into battle on August 1, we were in summer clothes and had no warmer outfit. Only a few civilians brought larger bundles with them —as much as they could carry.

In the morning, activists from PCK and RGO[3] showed up. After distributing coffee, they took care of the sick, the old and the wounded. Some were taken outside of the factory—they were probably transferred to the care of local people. Others remained in place. A few lucky ones got out of the camp with the help of cash. I suffered greatly from rectal hematomas, had a fistula and terrible pain. This ailment remained with me after a bloody diarrhea caused by hunger in 1942, after the deportation to Nowy Sącz[4]. Now, after the Uprising, the hemorrhoids were huge and the pain was so terrible that at times I lost consciousness. I asked the doctor and nurse for help, but unfortunately received none.

On the third day, in the morning, we were taken out to the yard. A selection ensued. The old, the sick as well as women with children were released or (we guessed) sent to a concentration camp. Strong and healthy people were sent to labor camps. The doctor and the gendarmes lined us up in fours, and then ordered us to approach them. Judging us by eye, they directed us either towards the factory or towards the ramp where several dozen covered freight train cars were parked. My group and I were directed to the ramp. I was very weak and had no money to bribe my way out of the camp. The crowd was huge but that did not stop the gendarmes from forcing people into the train. I was pushed in, along with three of my friends. As soon as we got into the car, the door was locked from the outside with a clasp. Everything happened at lightning speed. No attention was paid to any protests or requests, for example for a mother and daughter to stay together. It is impossible to forget the cries, the weeping... It was horrific. But after sixty terrible days of the uprising we were physically and mentally exhausted, too numb to react.

In the early afternoon the train started moving. The calls, the cries of despair and sobbing remained behind us. The trip was horrible. The carriage was so crowded that it was impossible to

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[3] PCK – Polski Czerwony Krzyż (Polish Red Cross); RGO – Rada Główna Opiekuńcza (Central Welfare Council) – a Polish social welfare organization.

[4] In early days of the Nazi occupation of Poland, Kazimiera Kurowska, together with her ailing mother and sister, were thrown out by the Nazis from their apartment, and then deported to southern Poland.

sit down. We rode crowded, in stench. There was no air. The window was so small that when the train was in motion, there was barely any breeze. Some people escaped from the train cars, but they were shot. In the evening they brought us to the transit camp in Szczakowa. After two days, segregation began again and they took us—this time by a passenger train!—to Erfurt. There was plenty of discrimination, threats and insults such as "Polish pig," and even slaps on the back if something was not to the "lords" ' satisfaction. In Erfurt, they took photos of us and handed out the letter "P" (Pole), purple on a yellow background, like a square. Under penalty, one could not take it off one's clothes. From there they sent us to permanent work. My group of four people was assigned to the town of Suhl in Thuringia, to a bicycle, pedal and ammunition factory.

On the way to Suhl
Erfurt 1944

At first we were accommodated in the factory. Photos were taken—in the yard, even though it was the end of October (we still had no warm clothes). After a few days, they sent us to the "Kunegunda" camp near Suhl. Those were wooden barracks with "clearings." I had a place on a bunk bed. During winter it snowed and rained on us. I once mentioned to the camp manager that there were holes in the roof of the barracks, and asked him to repair it. I was lucky that he only called me stupid. The toilet in the barracks was an open latrine, holes in the boards for men and women. It was dirty, it was difficult to get there, there was no way to relieve oneself in a normal way. Cold and hunger determined our existence.

The day started at 6:00 in the morning. Bowls in hand, we lined up for soup (usually thin, made of turnips with worms) and a piece of bread (20 dekagrams for the whole day). After breakfast, we had to walk three kilometers to the factory. I painted the pedals and cleaned the room. At 12:00 they brought us instant soup in milk cans and small pieces of bread. There were a dozen or so Poles in the factory, as well as French, Belgians, Russians and others. We did not know where those workers lived and in what conditions. Once I was sent to work, for a few days, cleaning the factory's canteen. At lunchtime, I served food at the table—and my eyes were opened. Apart from Germans, the French, the Czech, the Belgian, the English and others ate in the canteen. Dinner consisted of a meat-based soup, meat with vegetables for the second course, and compote or pudding. Hence only the Poles and the Russians were excluded from normal nutrition.

The factory had several floors. There was a normal toilet on each floor, but not for everyone. There were signs on the doors: "für Russen und Polen verboten" - "for Russians and Poles forbidden." Russians and Poles had to use a primitive latrine on the ground floor. It was a board with a huge hole, placed high up, so it was difficult to enter. It was dangerous to straddle and there was a risk of falling into the toilet pit. One had to clean up the slightest contamination, —with what? With one's own hands and clothes! What about washing the hands? The washroom and cloakroom were only for people, hence not for Russians and Poles, for whom the entry was "verboten." A few times, Marysia and I managed to enter the washroom and wash our hands and face. Once, my two friends and I decided to wash ourselves up to our waists. We arrived early, undressed and washed ourselves (the soap was made from corpses). Then in came the ladies,

wives of SS-men and German women working for the Third Reich. One of them screamed, "You're not allowed in here!"

We pretended we did not understand and went on washing ourselves. Two other women joined to help the first one. They went on shouting and insulting us: "Get out of here, Polish pigs!"

Suddenly, I heard, "What do you want from them, let them wash themselves!" And then another woman chimed in, in support. But the first two kept on: "We will call the gendarmes right away!"

But that true worker, the defender of ours, replied: "Do you want them to get lice? If they get lice, it will crawl onto you too, so be quiet."

They argued for a while but eventually fell silent.

How did German women raised small children? Once we were on our way back, from the factory to the barracks. We walked alongside the road for there were signs everywhere that Russians and Poles were not allowed to walk on the sidewalks. A well-dressed German woman with a boy, maybe six years old, strolled on the sidewalk towards us. The child had a whip in his hand. She whispered something to him. When they got close to us, the boy ran down the sidewalk. He started to hit Marysia in the face with his whip and shouted: "Polish pig! Polish pig!" Finally he got tired. Even though the child's blows could not hurt her physically, Marysia burst into tears. We were overcome with the feeling of terror and helplessness. Until that day we believed that every mother would dream of her child being famous for standing out among others for its abilities and virtues. And here we saw a mother proud of her son obediently fulfilling the role of a thug tormenting a defenseless woman. We felt shame and despair because of this.

The working day ended at 6 p.m. We returned to the barracks, where we received weak chicory coffee and three dekagrams of margarine for bread. We and the Russians were terribly hungry. One time they fed us with leek leaves after work, for several days. At work, the attitude of Germans towards Poles and Russians was completely different than towards other foreigners. We were called "Polish bandits," no other word was heard. There was a lot of discrimination, insults, etc., but not towards the Belgians, the French, the Czechs and others. For example, during air raids on the city, everyone went to the shelter with the Germans, only the Poles and the Russians were not allowed. We stayed at the factory. At the most we were permitted to go down to the boiler room.

Should there be any wonder then that today in the West they talk about Germans in a completely different way? After all, those foreigners did not suffer from such hunger, they did not sleep in cold barracks, they were not constantly called bandits, they were not discriminated against and humiliated in various ways as were the Poles and the Russians.

There were air raids on Suhl and other towns. Those became especially intense in the spring of 1945. We, the foreign workers impatiently awaited liberation. Frequent bomber-raids (flying fortresses) on industrialized points, the most recent raid on Suhl, finally the increasingly visible nervousness of the Germans confirmed our belief that liberation was near; that the long and horrific wartime would end, and with it the martyrdom of millions of battered, hungry and exhausted people. In April 1945, a lot of American bombers arrived. The noise was so loud that the barracks in the camp shook and jumped. A terrible cannonade began and the roar of approaching tanks could be heard. On April 3, the first day of work—a beautiful, sunny day after

the Easter holidays—at seven in the morning the supervisor came to us and told us that if we heard a long signal from the factory siren, we had to quit work immediately and get back to our barracks in the camp.

The whole night before and in the morning dull, thunder-like detonations could be heard coming from the west. Standing by our work stations, we exchanged knowing glances. Our eyes expressed joy but also anxiety, because we did not know what else the Nazi criminals might do to us. Suddenly at 8:45 a siren sounded. We stood still, listening... A minute had passed, two, three, four, five—and as if on command, we rushed to the door. We grabbed our coats and ran out to the stairs. There was noise, screams, shouts—in short, an indescribable uproar. Suddenly, above the tumult, a terrible sound rose—the scream of terror by a man who was being murdered. We run to the yard, then towards the guardhouse. We passed the terrified guard. Closing the route, a group of foreigners rushed into the office. They grabbed the rifle from the hands of the guard, who was speechless with terror. One of the men stuck the bayonet into his chest. The factory manager and two Gestapo men tried to leave through the guardhouse, but the workers attacked them. A fight broke out, the Gestapo man fell to the ground, and one of the workers stabbed him in the stomach.

Kazimiera Kurowska in 1988

We finally made our way to the exit. In the yard, some groups were fighting with each other. Without looking back, we took a shortcut to the camp (5 km away[5]). The ground trembled with the explosions of cannon shells, there was a rumbling sound and the increasingly frequent clatter of the series of shots. Missiles flew over our heads, towards the forest. And then… a few older soldiers (probably from the Volkstorm) ran in front of us. They were without dogs, without weapons. They hid behind roadside bushes, and after a while run out onto the road again, now in civilian clothes. Fear was visible on their faces. They ran towards the forest, turned left and disappeared from sight.

“Look” I exclaimed to Marysia, “how the "Übermenschen" are running away! They chickened out and threw down their weapons. No more of them.”

Our hearts burst with joy—our Golgotha was finally over. We laughed. We reached the barracks. The bullets were flying more and more densely, hitting hidden ammunition magazines some 100-200 meters before us. We could see huge explosions of dirt and fire. The earth was shaking. There were only women in the barracks. Marysia and I stood in front of ours, looking toward the west, from where a dull rumbling kept coming. Suddenly, the Lagerführer and his deputy appeared on the porch of the office barracks. Both were armed, in uniforms, nervously smoking cigarettes.

“Das ist das Ende (it’s over),” the Lagerführer said.

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[5] The Author stated previously that the distance was 3 kilometers.

“You know what,” I said to Marysia, “I’ll go to these scoundrels and ask them to give us some cigarettes. Just to piss them off.”

Marysia looked at me as if I were insane. “Are you crazy with joy?! They can kill you! Look how angry they are.”

Ignoring her words, I got closer to the “supermen.” “I’d like some cigarettes, please,” I said.

They look at my smiling, happy face. The younger one grabbed the holster. “What?! Zigaretten, du verfluchte Polin?!” he roared. I had no idea how it would end but at that very moment the older one grabbed the man’s hand, pointing with his eyes to something behind my back. They both stared for a few seconds, then suddenly turned and ran into the barracks. I turned around. Far away on the road I could see two large vehicles slowly approaching the camp. I ran to Marysia who was still in front of the barracks, observing my stupid actions. We stood in the warm sunlight. Continuous cannon fire interrupted the silence of that beautiful day.

“You're lucky they ran away,” Marysia remarked. “Otherwise it would be the end of you. Oh, you…” She drew a circle on her forehead with her finger.

I turned towards the office barracks.

“Look!” I shouted, “They’re running away!”

The Lagerführers, already in civilian disguise, ran towards the forest. We laughed heartily. It was a delight to watch the former masters of life and death now escaping ignominiously. The rumbling from the road got closer. Two tanks appeared from behind the hill. Menacing and powerful, they gleamed in the sun. They had white stars painted on them.

Freedom! It arrived at last—after five years of torment... albeit incomplete, because far away from our family and the Homeland.

By then, I had received a message from my mother and my sisters. They were alive!

Edited and translated from Polish
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