

# Forgotten Survivors

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Polish Christians Remember the  
Nazi Occupation

compiled and edited by  
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## Marian Wojciechowski

I was born in Polaniec, a little town south of Sandomierz, in 1914. The fact that I am alive today, so many decades after the catastrophic events of World War II, is due to many small miracles of human intervention by friends and by complete strangers.

I came from a large family—three sisters and four brothers. Since my parents were small farmers, there was no money to pay for my schooling, so I tutored to cover my tuition and other expenses. I finished elementary school in Polaniec, graduated from high school in the nearby town of Busko-Zdroj, and was accepted at the Szkoła Główna Handlowa in Warsaw (Main School of Commerce).

During my college years, I financed my studies in cooperatives and business education by working as the assistant to the secretary in the Union of Agricultural and Economic Cooperatives. At Grudziąz, I taught evening courses on cooperatives to prepare soldiers to work in co-ops in their hometowns after they completed their military service. I made many contacts in the cooperative movement as an assistant teacher and later as an auditor. These contacts were invaluable when I joined the underground resistance against the Nazis.

After my college studies, I fulfilled my military service in the Szkoła Podchorążych Rezerwy Kawalerii (School of Ensigns of the Cavalry) in Grudziąz. I was assigned to the 21-szy Pułk Ułanów Nadwislanskich (21st Regiment of the Nadwislanski Lancers) in Rowne Wolynskie in the province of Luck.

In August 1939, my cavalry unit was sent to the Polish-German border. On September 1, 1939, a beautiful clear day, my regiment faced a line of German tanks stretched across the horizon. We fought a bloody battle at Mokra, a village near Czestochowa. I was a platoon leader and lost many good, brave soldiers. A Polish artillery train arrived and destroyed most of the German tanks, which was a temporary victory.

My platoon guarded the rear as we retreated toward Warsaw, but were diverted to Garwolin to regroup. There we were joined by several detachments of General Franciszek Kleeberg's army. Soon we were surrounded by the Germans. The leader of our cavalry refused to surrender and ordered a charge. We broke through the Germans, who encircled us.<sup>1</sup>

After attacks from the Germans from one side and the Russians from the other, our group disbanded somewhere near Uchnowo or Rawa Ruska. We buried our weapons, handed over our horses and uniforms to the peasants, changed into civilian clothes, and dispersed in different directions. Some of us tried to get to the Romanian border to join our comrades in the Polish Army in France but the Russians prevented us. When we reached the German-Soviet border, the Germans detained us, but we escaped and headed for Warsaw at the end of October 1939.

After I returned to Warsaw, I went to my former place of employment—the *Zwiazek Spoldzielni Rolniczych i Zarobkowo-Gospodarczych* (the Union of Agricultural and Economic Cooperatives) on Warecka Street. Food supplies in Warsaw were low, black market prices were high, and many people were starving.

To help with the food crisis in hospitals and shelters, many of my colleagues gave up part of their food rations. While delivering food to one of the hospitals, I found the leader of my regiment, Lt. Col. Rostwosuski, and other wounded officers there. We had to do something to help our fellow army officers. I obtained blank personal identity cards and municipal seals and delivered them to the liaison from the *Sluzba Zwyciestwu Polski* (Service for Poland's Victory—SZP).<sup>2</sup> The officers received their new identity cards before their release from the hospital. The wife of Lt. Col. Rostwosuski contacted me one day and warned me not to spend the night at home because her husband had been arrested and would be interrogated by the Gestapo that evening. Thanks to the new identity card, the Germans released him.

After the September Campaign, I got involved in the Polish resistance. A new restaurant in Warsaw, the "Wymiana," was the cover for the group's meetings. I became involved in buying one of the first printing presses used by the Polish resistance in Warsaw. The press had been hidden in a barn in the Polish countryside. We needed to get a large sum of money to buy it. One of my friends, Zygmunt Jedlinski, who headed an agricultural cooperative in Rawa Mazowiecka, sent wagons filled with food that was sold on the black market. We got the money we needed.

My regular work involved auditing cooperatives and writing reports. Due to the nature of my work and the importance of Polish food for the Germans in Poland and the Reich, I had special travel

privileges. This enabled me to meet with various resistance groups and develop contacts I could trust. My audits enabled me to verify what food could safely be taken and sold on the black market. Had the Germans found out what I did, especially if they suspected the food was for partisans or Jews, the punishment would have been torture and death for me and others involved in the conspiracy.

Late in 1940 or early 1941, Kazimierz Wegierski, a colleague from the cooperatives, came to me with his friend, who was not identified by name. Kazik asked me to help him. His friend explained to me that he needed to contact people who could help him acquire food of various kinds and quantities. On several occasions I was able to provide him with valuable contacts in the cooperatives in the districts of Warsaw and Radom.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1941, I was supposed to attend a meeting of our resistance unit at the "Wymiana," but due to unforeseen circumstances, I had to miss it. Later I learned from my friend, Kazik Wegierski, that the group had been betrayed and that the Gestapo had arrested thirty people. The men were sent to Auschwitz and the women to Ravensbrück. Most of them died at hard labor or were executed.

I learned that the Gestapo was looking for a man called "Marian Wojciechowski." Since that was a common name, I wasn't sure whether they were looking for me. As a precaution, I changed residences every few months.

Shortly after the arrests in Warsaw, Kazik Wegierski introduced me to his sister, who worked as a courier for the Polish underground, conveying information that was radioed from Warsaw to London about key German war installations in German territory. This intelligence helped the Royal Air Force in their bombardment of German targets.

Kazik's sister, Wanda, became a spy to avenge the death of her father, who had been murdered at Sachsenhausen. She asked me to find a secure place near the border of the General Government (German-occupied Poland) and Germany on the train line Lowicz-Kutno, where couriers could stay after crossing the border. I decided Lowicz was the safest spot. Moreover, I had good contacts there with the local cooperative. I organized the point of transfer and arranged everything for Wanda.

Unfortunately, Wanda, who had assumed she had evaded the Germans on her trail, wrote letters to members of the group, including

206 me, about what had happened. The Gestapo intercepted the letters, copied them, and remailed them to the intended recipients. A few months later, the Germans arrested her in Berlin, where she was beheaded.

Everyone who had received letters from Wanda, including me, was arrested. When the Gestapo arrested me on April 24, 1942, I carried several secret underground documents. There would have been tragic consequences had they fallen into German hands. I handed my briefcase to my assistant-apprentice, and quietly told him to burn the incriminating materials. But I had documents in my clothes and could not dispose of them without arousing the suspicion of the Gestapo. Again fate intervened.

When I arrived in Radom in the custody of the Gestapo, I was handed over to a prison guard, whom I had helped one month earlier. He needed a train ticket from Radom to Warsaw to go to his dying sister. As a cooperative inspector with special travel privileges, I bought him a ticket, avoiding the long line in which he would have had to stand with a slim chance of getting one of the limited tickets.

The prison guard and I discussed what to do next, without risking the lives of our families. He told me to destroy any damaging documents on my person. He lifted the cover of a huge stove in the hall and told me to throw them into the fire. I burned a book with coded names, telephone numbers, and addresses. I wanted to avoid the risk of breaking down under torture by the Gestapo and revealing the code. With the dangerous materials consumed in flames, I was "clean."

While in prison, I learned that the Wegierski family had been arrested. My first interrogator, who spoke fluent Polish, was a special agent from German intelligence. He asked me about Kazik Wegierski but I pretended I didn't know anything. I was not beaten. The next interrogation took place two weeks later. This time I was beaten so badly, I was completely disabled.

This was how the second interrogation took place. They handcuffed my hands behind me. The handcuffs were tied to a rope hanging from the ceiling. They pulled me upwards, where I hung several feet above the floor. The Gestapo beat me all over my body, which was completely covered in blood. As I hung by my hands behind my back, carrying the entire weight of my body, my persecutors some-

times pulled me downwards by my legs. I lost the use of my hands and fingers after the second interrogation. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't bend my arms at the elbows, nor could I reach my mouth with my hand to eat. The torture was horrible. Usually, the Gestapo executed prisoners after the interrogations by shooting them in the prison or in the nearby forests. Or, they sent them to Auschwitz with a delayed, but inevitable, death sentence. Again I was lucky. They sent me to Auschwitz without a death sentence.

When I arrived at Auschwitz in July 1942, I was a complete ruin. Being unable to bend or move my hands, I was unable to follow the commands to put on or take off caps, which the guards expected us to obey promptly. They sent me to Block 11, the block of death, not realizing that I was unfit for work. Had they known that about me, they would have killed me right away.

After a week or so, they sent me to the kitchen with about twenty prisoners to carry the afternoon soup. The soup, consisting of hot water with nettles or something like that, was carried in 25- or 50-liter barrels by two prisoners. Since my hands were completely numb, I couldn't carry the soup. If I spilled it, I would have been killed. I walked in the back so they would not choose me.

As I walked with the group carrying the soup, a fellow prisoner yelled, "Marian, is that you?" I immediately recognized my friend from cavalry school, Zdzisiek Wroblewski. He had been rounded up on a train with other men and sent to Auschwitz. He survived because he was a strong man. He became a block scribe, recording the activities of prisoners in his block. He accompanied me to my block monitor, a brutal German criminal, and told him not to harm me. A short time later, Zdzisiek arranged to have me transferred to his block, where I met former colleagues and acquaintances. He wanted to make me an overseer of a ward, which involved beating prisoners. I refused and ended up working in various labor commandos.

I shall never forget an incident that happened in Auschwitz in late 1942. It had rained during the night and the ground around the block had turned into an enormous quagmire of clay mud. I saw a Jewish man sitting in the mud with his back against an electric pole. Perhaps he didn't want to go on; perhaps he couldn't get up. He was a large, strong man, probably a porter or water carrier. His powerful voice resonated widely over the camp.

"*Oj, Boze! Boze!*" ("Oh, God! God!"), he exclaimed. A few moments later, he wailed, "*Gdzie jest moj Bog?*" ("Where is my God?"). Then he asked, "*Gdzie jest wasz Bog?*" ("Where is your God?"). Finally, he screamed as loudly as he could, "*Gdzie sa te pierdolone bogi?*" ("Where are those fucking gods?"). It is difficult to convey in words the tragedy, the utter despair in his voice.

When a typhus epidemic broke out, the Germans reserved two blocks to isolate the sick prisoners. They didn't care about the ill prisoners; they were afraid of getting infected themselves. One day all the sick and convalescing prisoners from the typhus blocks were taken away to the gas chambers, even the orderlies.

Almost a week later, I became ill with typhus. I was so weak I could hardly stand up. My friends helped me to the hospital where a young Jewish physician examined me. He filled out my health card when an SS man appeared and took the card. He observed I had a high fever and therefore was unfit for work. Realizing the SS man would record my prison number and mark me for execution, the physician reacted quickly and wrote, "High fever. For observation." The SS man understood that I would be sent to block 10 as part of a medical experiment. He did not write down my number. The Jewish doctor had saved my life by risking his own. Had the SS man caught on to the deception, both of us would have been killed.

I was then sent to new quarters for prisoners sick with typhus. Kazik Wegierski visited me. He had been so viciously beaten that I did not recognize his swollen body. He died the following day, never betraying anyone in the resistance to which we both belonged.

After I recovered, Zdzisiek arranged for me to work as a bookkeeper for a few weeks for a civilian German engineer who was in charge of building materials in the camp. He treated me like a human being, giving me bread and some jam on my work table a few times. The SS did not trust him and warned him that if he didn't follow their orders, he would be made a prisoner.

Later, the Germans assigned me with about a hundred other inmates to shovel out drainage ditches outside the camp. It was a bitterly cold November. In a few days I became ill with a high fever. Luck was with me again because the doctors who cared for me were Polish prisoners like me. Despite the lack of medicines, they knew how to treat me. Our camp intelligence warned us that when the SS men

appeared at the hospital to write down the names of prisoners unfit for work, my friends should take me out of bed, wrap me in a blanket, and place me on the floor as if I were dead. After the SS left the premises, my friends put me back into bed. They did this repeatedly until my fever broke and I was sent back to work in a different block.

I was in no condition to work. They assigned me to arrange freshly milled boards in layers to air dry. The stacks were high. I was told to climb to the top and pull up the heavy boards from below. I decided not to climb up.

I was in such despair I didn't care if the Germans killed me. But the German bookkeeper for whom I had worked took me to a building where pipes, joints, and other parts were stored. He left me with the director of the warehouse, a Polish prisoner, who brought me hot water and bread and allowed me to sit by the stove for several days to recover. This was unheard of in camp. As I regained my strength, I helped him with the storage work until mid-March 1943, when the Germans transferred many of us to Gross-Rosen.

When the train arrived at Gross-Rosen, I remember how the German children responded to the prisoners—calling us bandits and throwing stones at us. I worked as a carpenter but soon, thanks to the assistance of a German capo, I landed a job in the camp post office. My job was to see that food parcels sent to prisoners by their families and friends got to them. Sometimes this meant a great deal of work when it involved recently transferred prisoners from other camps. I volunteered to work in the camp chancellery after work hours to match old prisoner numbers with the new ones they acquired at Gross-Rosen.

My extra work earned me the trust of the camp administration. Thanks to this confidence, my life was saved again when a fellow prisoner denounced me. I had admonished him not to steal the best food items from the parcels. In revenge, he informed on me, alleging that I used my position at the post office to send letters outside the camp. I had been forbidden to do so ever since the Germans sent me to Auschwitz.

The highest authority of the Gestapo at Gross-Rosen was the chief of the political section. He queried the director of the post office and eventually interrogated me. The director defended me, denying the allegation that had been made. Actually, the denunciation was true.

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210 Occasionally, perhaps once a year, some of my colleagues gave up one of their own letters so that I could write to my family, using their name and number.

I learned from a Belgian prisoner who worked in the political section that I was on a list of prisoners under surveillance by other prisoners, most of whom were Germans. These spies reported our conversations to the political section. I became very vigilant when I interacted with strangers.

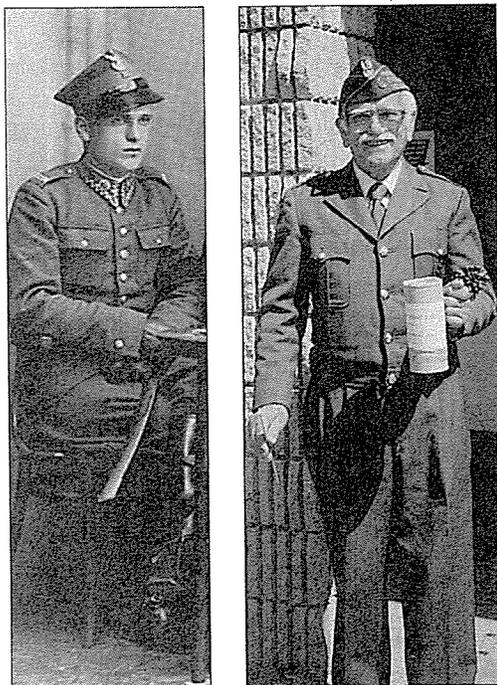
My Belgian friend also had access to a list of Poles who were sent to Gross-Rosen with a sentence of death. An SS man led them to the crematorium, where they were injected with phenol, shot, or gassed. My younger brother's friend, Antoni Suchon, was on that list. In some cases, we were able to use our internal contacts and bribes to transfer these condemned prisoners to different sub-camps. But I was unable to save Antoni. A few months later, I saw him standing at attention next to the SS man, who took him to the crematorium for execution. Antoni was calm and resigned. I wept like a child for him.

In January 1945, when the Soviet front moved west of Wroclaw, the Germans evacuated their prisoners by train and by foot from Gross-Rosen. Packed tightly into uncovered train cars, we had to kneel or sit. Whoever raised himself was immediately shot by the SS men, who were armed with machine guns.

After we reached Flossenburg and then Leitmeritz, those of us who survived the trip had to remove the corpses from the wagons and place them on the embankments of the train tracks. When we entered the camp, some of the former prisoners I knew from Gross-Rosen, remembering the food parcels I had rescued for them with my extra work at the post office, fed me and my colleagues. They found a bed for me and arranged work for me outside the camp in better conditions.

I was told by some of my Polish friends that a vicious German supervisor had promised to finish off Dr. Henryk Stankiewicz. He had been docent lecturer at the Warsaw Politechnical School and was already under a death sentence. I was able to take Dr. Stankiewicz into my work group but I had to release someone in his place. Both men survived the war.

By March and April 1945, we heard Soviet artillery in the distance. On May 5, 1945, the Germans formed us into columns and we left the camp on foot. We already knew that these marches without food



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or water ended badly for prisoners who could not keep up. They were killed on the spot. My colleagues, Kazimierz Wisniewski and Dr. Henryk Stankiewicz, and I fled from the column at night. We found a Czech village where we were greeted hospitably, fed, and given clean clothes.

Aware of the crimes at Katyn, where the Soviets murdered thousands of Polish army officers, and the mass arrests and deportations of Poles to Siberia, we eventually ended up in the American zone. We came to Amberg, where a Polish Displaced Persons Camp was being organized. The camp commandant, a former concentration camp inmate and a major in the Home Army, greeted us warmly. In the new atmosphere of freedom and hope, we slowly recuperated physically and mentally from the horror.

Even now, decades later, I have terrible dreams. I still see the silent pleading of my friends standing in Gross-Rosen, guarded by the SS men who executed them. I hear the shots into the backs of their heads. The nightmares never go away.

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### 212 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wojciechowski never participated in or witnessed a Polish cavalry charge against German tanks. The canard of Poles on horseback attacking tanks seems to have originated with the Germans, who preached the idea of Polish inferiority. The Independent Operation Group Polesie, commanded by General Franciszek Kleeberg, fought until the bitter end, engaging the Germans near Kock in early October 1939.

<sup>2</sup> A clandestine military organization organized immediately after Poland's military defeat, it was soon superseded by the Union for Armed Struggle which, in turn, gave way to the Home Army.

<sup>3</sup> After the war, Wojciechowski recognized from a published photograph that Wegierski's friend was Julian Grobelny, president of *Zegota*.

\* \* \*

Marian Wojciechowski married Władysława Poniecka after the war. Like her husband, she was a concentration camp survivor. Imprisoned at Ravensbruck, she was a victim of pseudo-medical experiments.

The Wojciechowskis came to the United States in 1950 and settled in Toledo, Ohio, where Marian became the owner and publisher of the Polish-language newspaper, *Ameryka Echo*. He and his wife were active in community and Polish American affairs. They had three children.

Mrs. Wojciechowski passed away in 1992. Marian lives in retirement with his family in Las Vegas, Nevada.