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Warsaw at War... Memories of Poland in WW2

When Stefan Mucha discovered his father had suffered at the hands of the Nazis during WW2, he decided to discover more about the fate of his countrymen during that time. This is the story of Poland under

German occupation during the Second World War.

"This was Warsaw... Warsaw still fighting... Great Britain declared... General Rokossovsky... A city of a million people ceased to exist... They went through two months of hell, of torture and agony... The German conditions are hard... Warsaw is no more... Another town may rise bearing the same name... You shall know no peace... They called us the inspiration of the fighting people's the inspiration of the world... We are a nation with the right to live and we demand our rights... And yet we know that one day the world will follow us..."

These fragmentary words are a transcript of the last desperate radio broadcast received in London by the Polish Government Delegation from the Polish 'Home Army' fighting in the Warsaw Uprising of September 1944.

When I was a young boy I could never understand how or why my father would at times drink sour milk (even though there was fresh in the fridge), milk so yellowed and sour that it was almost solid in the bottle (the smell of which would make me wretch at the thought of anyone being able to drink it), of how he would eat stale and sometimes mouldy bread rather than throw it away, or how he would eat gristly meat rather than just cut out the best pieces and leave the rest.

As children we were never allowed to waste any food whatsoever, and if we did I could never understand why he would get so angry.

But I didn't know then, that for three years in a Nazi 'forced labour camp' these sour, stale and unpalatable foods were a matter of life and death for him and that he ate worse to survive.

Friday, September 1st, 1939.

The wail of air-raid sirens across Warsaw. From the sky above, the ominous drone of German heavy bombers, bomb doors opening followed by the deafening blasts of high explosive bombs. Bombs tearing the heart of Warsaw apart thus bringing my father's childhood world to a devastating end.

Twenty seven days later, following a murderous campaign of artillery and arial bombardments, the city of Warsaw finally surrendered leaving

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40,000 civilians dead with thousands more wounded. The dead - men, women and children are hastily buried under street pavements, under the grass verges, and in the city parks.

Skeletal horse carcasses that had been stripped of their flesh by starving Varsovians lay decomposing on the streets. The stench of death was everywhere. The Nazi reign of terror had begun.



BBC Stoke and Staffordshire

Bombs tore the city of Warsaw to shreds

"When I was a young boy I could never understand how or why my father would at times drink sour milk or how he would eat stale and mouldy bread..."

Stefan Mucha on how his dad's labour camp upbringing affected him

During my father's lifetime he rarely if ever spoke of his wartime experiences or that of his family and relatives in Poland. Whatever these experiences were, they so traumatised him that he was never able to discuss them openly with us, his family.

Poland was a closed subject.

This much I now know. My father Zbigniew - Konstanty Mucha was born at 26 Bednarska Street, Warsaw on March 11th, 1925.

By summer 1938, the family had moved to an apartment in 28 Panska Street. When the war came this section of Panska Street was incorporated into the area known as 'The little Ghetto' so my father and his Christian parents would have been evicted to make way for the Polish Jews who were being forced out of their own homes and into the Ghetto area.

Where my father's family lived after this is unknown.

Brutality

My father's parents were murdered by Nazi soldiers in Warsaw, sometime in the summer of 1942. Having witnessed the brutal execution of his parents my father was seized and deported by train to Nürnberg on August 28th 1942, as a 'forced labourer'. He was sent to work in a ball-bearings and munitions factory named MUNA-Feucht, a few kilometres south east of Nürnberg where he remained until his liberation in April 1945.

Shortly after 'liberation' my father made his way down to Italy (like many of the 30,000 forced labourers freed from the Nürnberg 'camps' and factories who were Polish) to enlist with the Polish 2nd Corps, under the command of General W. Anders. In the latter part of 1946, the Polish 2nd Corps was to return to the UK to be demobilised.

Many Poles chose to return to Poland and their surviving families. But believing that all of his family had perished during the war, and probably hearing reports of Poles returning to Poland being arrested and tortured by the Soviet NKVD (forerunner of the KGB) then sent of to 'Gulags' my father decided to make a new life in the UK.

Whilst in England my father transferred to the newly formed Polish Resettlement Corps and in 1948 when the P.R.C was itself being wound up he decided to enlist with the Royal Tank Regiment of the British Army, in which he served for 25 years - much of it fighting 'communist' backed insurgents in Malaya, Aden, the Middle East and in East Africa.

Tracing the steps

Some years after my father died aged 61 (he died in 1986), I began to try and search for any survivors of my father's family but without any success. Despite this lack of success I decided that I would still like to try and find out what life may have been like for my father living in Warsaw between 1939 and 1942 and how these events had shaped the man my father subsequently became.

As part of this process of learning and understanding, I started collecting photos of Poland taken mainly by Nazi soldiers in occupied Warsaw. It was these 'tourist' photos that really moved me, as I had not really understood the environment that my father lived in after September 1939.

The more photos I collected (many through eBay auctions) the more I became aware just how many ordinary German soldiers had been participants in the most brutalising events in Warsaw and of how many of these events they had photographed throughout Poland during the years of German occupation.

A city of ruins...

I learnt that Warsaw between 1939 and 1945 was a city of ruins, of street executions, of public mass-hangings, of oppression and starvation; it was curfews, random street roundups, black market racketeers, deportations and beatings; it was blood stained walls and naked corpses left on pavements covered with newspapers.

Warsaw was the sound of machine pistol and rifle shots and the screams of thousands day and night, without end - and I began to understand just a little of what my father, and hundreds of thousands of Varsovians, had to endure every day, and of the emotional scars that they still carried with them even after sixty years!

I also learnt that the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw was a major 'tourist' attraction for these German soldiers and countless photographs were taken of the living conditions in the Ghetto and of the Ghetto's 'untermenschen' or 'subhuman' inhabitants.

Many more photographs exist of the Warsaw Ghetto, and the ghettos at Lodz, Lublin and elsewhere across Poland than is generally thought of.

German soldiers made a point to visit these places of suffering to take photos to send back home just like we would today perhaps take photos of the animals at day trip to the zoo!

These 'tourist' images show a shattered Warsaw, the dying and dead; haunting photographs of men women and children that a few weeks or even just days later would all have been 're-settled' through the Treblinka death camp.

Images of conquerors lording it over the conquered.

Sickening

I also learnt that the market for Holocaust 'memorabilia' is a large marketplace with many WW2 artefacts and photos of Poland being regularly traded on eBay's German web site (and of course on other auction web sites).

For me it is tragic to see that the Polish Jews of Warsaw (and of the rest of Poland) are still being exploited by a new generation of Germans today - sixty odd years after the majority of those photographed were murdered.

A photograph of a bombed out street scene from Warsaw will sell for 5-10 euros, add a 'Juden' or two to the subject matter and the price will be 50-100 Euros, add an execution scene, or pile of mangled dead bodies then name your price!

Sixty years on and the memory of countless thousands of Polish victims are still a valuable commodity, just like their hard labour, their gold fillings, spectacles, shoes, fur coats and their cut hair was to the German nation decades ago.

As for Warsaw?

Following the end of the Warsaw Uprising, under the direct orders of Adolf Hitler, the entire surviving population of some 400,000 men women and children were forcibly evacuated from the city between 2nd and 5th of October 1944, so that the city could systematically razed to the ground block by block, street by street until it 'ceased to exist'.

On 17th January 1945, Soviet troops enter an empty Warsaw, Western correspondents who accompanied the Red Army reported " Warsaw is a vanished city. It looks as though the city has been buried for years and has only just been dug up ...Warsaw once one of the great capitals of Europe, is now just a historical expression'

The area that was Warsaw was strewn with about 20 million cubic meters of rubble and ruins which accounted for 90% of its industrial establishments destroyed, 90% of of its hospitals and medical centres, 70% of its schools and institutes of higher learning, 95% of its theatres and cinemas, 95% of its historical buildings, 85% of its residential buildings in which some 800,000 people (out of a pre-war population of 1,289,000) perished.

A line from the 'Song of Warsaw' says: "Those who survive will be free, but those that have fallen are already free"

My father survived but he was never free from the scars of these terrible years, and sixty years on neither are we, his children.

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