

Maria's Memoirs

By

Maria Skarbek

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Introduction

This book was originally hand-written by Maria, my mother. Some years later it was typed up on a manual typewriter by Maria herself. It was retyped into Word ensuring that only the typing errors were corrected and that Maria's original words were left unchanged.

This book is also available on the web at:
www.mariasmemoirs.com

Maria's husband's memoir, **Bellum Vobiscum**, is available at: www.bellumvobiscum.com. The title Bellum Vobiscum is Latin for War be with you. It deals with the years 1939 to 1946.

Maria's book covers the period from 1916 to her death in 1985.

George (Jurek) Skarbek, Maria's elder son
Australia 2006



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Preface

When one is old, crippled or handicapped, one has plenty of time and does not know what to do with it. Friends and family are a great help, so is talking on the phone, plus a bit of work around the house and reading. However it is not the same as a normal day full of activities. There are many subjects for reading which are highly interesting, especially in science where so much is happening, but I am unable to read constantly. I think I have a fairly well balanced supply of books (physics, astro-physics, biology etc. plus Science Fiction and Whodunnits). I think that only retired people start writing their memoirs even if they have not much to say, simply for the fun of writing. I intend to do the same, just to fill in the long evenings and nights. Perhaps I have not much to say, but I do have a lot to remember.

I was lucky, as I had a very varied life; sometimes very easy, sometimes very hard, but never boring. Even years of routine I found intermingled with something exciting and highly interesting. Life was, and to some extent still is, full of the unknown, still holds challenges and beauty, but also hardship and loneliness. Times of loneliness are part of life for everyone, I think. Solitude is beautiful, but loneliness one has to get used to and accept as a fact of life.

Today, 28th February 1978, I decided to write about my life, my thoughts, my dreams and desires. I intend to keep myself occupied and to have a look at myself.

I was born on the 18th April, 1916 under the sign of Aries, influenced by Mars. I was born in Petrograd, now called Leningrad, during the First World War and at the beginning of the Russian revolution.

During my childhood and early youth, I was told by my mother and her friends that everyone is born in a state of a tabula rasa (blank board). Later, the environment, different influences and education will form the child to the desired requirements of the parents, IF the parents are able to do the job of forming the child accordingly. However, from the time I could think, I did not agree with this concept. I always thought, and still do, that we are like pebbles on the beach – smoothed down by the elements, but each pebble, each shell is different from the others on the beach, like one grain is different from its neighbour. There must be a difference right in the beginning, or even

before – the genetic code. Therefore, whilst we are what we are to a great degree, what we inherited is the influence of a still unknown past from our ancestors.



It seems only fair to start back as far as one can. Usually one does not have to go very far, as memory fades, and the parents have a tendency to present their youth and their parents in a coloured light. Not only the parents do it, but even history books are changed to suit the accepted present social trend. If you don't believe me, just read Russia's history books before the revolution, read the Lithuanian history as I was taught at school and the Polish one for the same period, which I learned

only after matriculation; in both histories, given as gospel truth to the students, many things are either omitted or misrepresented – to adjust to the current need of the politicians.

Hearsay

I remember quite well only one of my grandparents – my mother's father – Alexander Alexandrovitch. All the others are only known from brief comments made by my parents.

My father was born in the second half of the 19th century; he was born on a farm in Lithuania. The farm was in the oldest part of Lithuania, surrounded by old oak trees, a river and some swamps.



Adolf Wojtkiewicz

His mother, my grandmother Anna, was a widow and already had a son, Jan, of approximately 15 years from her first marriage, when she fell in love with my future grandfather Adolf Wojtkiewicz, who was a few years younger than her. Neither of their families wanted this marriage to take place. His family thought he should marry somebody younger and prettier, although the land she would bring as a dowry was quite acceptable. My grandmother's family was also against this new marriage as was the family of her first husband who wanted to keep

all the land in their hands if possible. But the couple were in love and must have been fairly strong minded to overcome all the obstacles and still get married. He was a gay and handsome fellow, but had bad luck and died young from some 'chest trouble' (T.B.? Hunting accident? I don't know). He left my grandmother with two children: my father Adolf Wojtkiewicz was five and his half-brother, Jan Kiersnowski, about 20. The pressure from both families for the children to relinquish the farms was very strong. Grandmother would not submit to strict supervision of either family. She must have been a very determined woman as she rejected them all and administrated the farms by herself, which in these times was rather unusual for a woman.

Her sons, Jan and Adolf, did not have much in common. Firstly the great age difference between the half brothers and secondly, my uncle Jan was encouraged to be a real farmer, and at the age of approximately 20 was given the largest farm, Lienkiele, with only little supervision by mother from afar. My father, who did show promise of being able to use his brains, was encouraged to study. After completing some necessary subjects at home with a tutor, he went as a boarder to a town school, and after having passed exceptionally well (according to hearsay), was admitted to the university in Petersburg, Russia, to study law.

I asked father how grandmother managed all three farms by herself. Father explained that she did have trouble, being a woman that people at that time did not like having financial dealings with females, therefore grandmother hired an administrator and she also sold grain to Jewish merchants when the grain was still in the fields. She had a smaller profit, but a secure one, as she was not dependent on the weather. Her father told me an odd story:

One year Adolf (my father) was back home during a vacation; mother told him that she had to ride to Rosienie (the nearest town) and did not know when she might be back. The Jewish merchant might call at any time. Would Adolf show him the fields from which she wanted to sell the grain. He would show the best, the worst and average fields. The price would be such and such and not to drop it more than 10%. When the merchant came my father showed him only the average and the good fields, omitting to show the bad one and asked for 20% more than his mother asked. The merchant accepted. When mother came home, Adolf was very proud of his transaction, showing mother money and explaining that he was not such a fool as to show the bad fields. Instead of being praised, his mother got very angry with him and called him a cheat and a liar, explaining that the merchant trusted him, Adolf being a gentleman, but that he, Adolf took advantage of the merchant and was dishonest in his dealings by not showing the poor fields. She told Adolf that he had to go to town, see the merchant, ask his pardon and return some of the money. Adolf was furious. At these times, especially amongst the gentry, a Jew was considered as something not as good as a Christian, therefore it did not matter getting the better of him.

Honour did not come into play with a Jew according to my father's opinion. Mother was adamant – if he, Adolf, did not apologise and return the money, she would go herself, and Adolf would not be allowed to go back to the

university and his allowance would stop as of now; he did not deserve to have an education superior to others, as he was a lot worse than the others, who knew what honesty and decency were. My father did as he was told, but I am not quite certain if he apologised because his mother had convinced him, or because he wanted to go back to the life he loved, full of fun and money, carriages, valets etc. He also liked learning as it came very easily and he knew that he had 'good prospects'. I only know that later in life, father was never an anti-Semite, which often got him into trouble, but he would not budge, he treated Jews and non-Jews alike. But that was very much later.

The second episode, also from his student years: -

One summer when he came home from Petersburg, he was coughing and spitting blood and drinking vodka by the bottle. Week after week he would send his valet for new supplies from town. My grandmother stepped in – no more alcohol, none at all, and he had to take some medicine which she prepared herself from the juice of the cactus – aloe, which according to father tasted vile. He had also to take some remedies prepared from herbs.

My father started to rebel; he still had some money left. First he wanted to send his man to town, but the valet refused, saying the lady (my Grandmother) would sack him and then father wanted to go himself, but the stable hand would not give him a horse as the lady had forbidden this. Father told me that he had intended to walk to the nearest neighbour, but thought he mightn't be able to do it in a day and after a few more tantrums he gave in. Never in my life as I grew up did I see my father drunk, and his lungs must have healed and been all right, even with all the heavy cigar smoking, as he never complained and died at the age of 92¹.

Let me recount one last episode about my grandmother. It occurred years later. Father was already in a high position, working in Petersburg, when one night he learned that his mother was dying and he had to hurry to her. That same night he started to travel home. It took a few days. When he arrived in Pakapornie, he was met by the administrator who told him that his mother was dying, that the doctor could not help, but not to go to his mother's side now as a few hours before she had told the administrator that her son Adolf would come tonight, but she did not want to see him then as she was in great pain. Would Adolf come to her at eight in the morning to be joined by Jan at nine. Mother did not talk much during the hour she was with Adolf, just that

¹ Ed: Adolf died in Melbourne, Australia, 1964.

she loved him more than she should and that she asked God that Adolf be a good man all his life.

When Jan joined them, mother told them that she was leaving Jan the biggest and best farm Lienkele as well as the bad and small farms and that Adolf would get only Pakapurnie. She explained that Adolf had received a lot of money during his studies. He would never make a good farmer and anyway, he could make a very good living without being dependent on the farm. She loved them both and asked Jan to try to be a good brother to Adolf, and Adolf to try and understand Jan. She asked them both to leave and died a few hours later.

That is all I know about my grandparents from father's side.

My mother's mother was supposed to be of Polish origin, but spoke only Russian at home. She belonged supposedly to the gentry and was supposedly very good, very clever, very beautiful and a real lady. She died of tuberculosis when I was a few months old.

I don't remember hearing any interesting tit-bits, good or bad; rather she was referred to as a very nice and quiet person, considerate to others.

My grandfather, Alexander Alexandrowitch I remember very well as he died when I was twelve years old. He was of short stature, had very blue eyes, was an engineer, supposedly of Greek or Turkish origin and a very rich man with a big house, stables, etc, in Novorosyjsk on the Black Sea. But more about him later, as he played quite a big role in my childhood.

My Parents

My mother Julia Alexandronowna Pollak, was born 28.5.1892 on Rostov Don. Both her parents were not young; she was the youngest child of four. Her sister, Marusia, was ten years older and her two brothers were in their twenties. Being an unexpected addition to the family, she was given plenty of love and all that money could buy. She grew, more or less, as a single child with adoring parents.

Accordingly to what mother told me, she was a perfect child who was never punished and did not have to be reprimanded. Somehow I never did believe it, but who knows? Maybe she was an exceptional child or perhaps her parents were very permissive.

She was sent to an exclusive girls' boarding school where she did extremely well, being very ambitious. I saw her matriculation certificate: she was excellent in Russian, French, German, History and Geography, very good in all remaining subjects, except arithmetic (or was it maths?) and painting, where she was considered just good.



Maria's mother - Julia

She did not see much of her sister and brothers, as the brothers were already independent and living in different cities and her sister was attending university. As Julia's mother was ailing, she had T.B., Julia spent most of her school holidays with her mother in either Switzerland or some European Spa.

My mother admitted to only one act of disobedience – she tried to raise white mice in the drawer of her school desk! The mice were confiscated and she

was not allowed to attend the theatre, which she loved so much, for a whole term.

Looking at old school photos I see a good looking girl in a huge white apron, which was part of her uniform, tightly secured around a very small waist.

When she finished school and was presented to society she had plenty of admirers (they were not called boyfriends). I don't know if at this stage she was presented at court or only after she was married. She liked boys but none in particular. She loved balls, beautiful dresses, dancing as much as possible with handsome men and, of course, she loved flirting.

One night in September 1912 she went to the grand ball, properly chaperoned of course. Early in the evening a good looking man with a beard caught her eye. He had a look of self-assurance, seemed unpretentious and moved bearing himself very well. Julia asked who he was and was told that he was a very eligible bachelor in a high position, well off, but not to pin her hopes on him as he had so far avoided getting engaged. Rumour had it that he was probably looking for someone who would be suitable not only here in Petersburg but also on his far away farm. Julia replied:

"I will be dancing with him tonight."

"You can't, you are not even introduced."

"So do something about it, get him introduced to me."

"Your dancing card is completely full, you can't dance with him!"

"I'll look after my dancing card, you just make sure we are introduced, the sooner the better."

They were introduced and they had two dances together.

Julia came home that evening and announced that she was really in love and would marry Adolf Wojtkiewicz. She added that she would prefer to get married soon and that she did not intend to ever live on a farm, either here or far away.

Neither my Mother nor my Father told me how their romance progressed but in January 1913 they were married.

Despite an age difference of twenty odd years, it was a happy marriage. She was good looking, always in a good mood, ready to laugh at the smallest provocation. She loved entertaining and learned quickly what was expected of her.

She admired his position, she loved to mix in circles where most belonged to a group who could be listed in 'Who's Who'. She never lived on a farm, as



Maria with parents - Julia & Adolf

she disliked farms and all that went with them. She was a good and loyal wife, not only in the good times but also when times became hard. She was a very devoted wife and when Adolf became old, she looked after him to the best of her abilities.

My father, Adolf Wojtkiewicz was born in August 1872. In my opinion he had a very good and healthy childhood. Living on a well-to-do and well-run farm, there were very few

taboos for him. He was nursed by a wet nurse and afterwards the same woman kept her eye on him and her own son.

Already as a toddler he was allowed to run free in the large yard as there were always children and grown ups coming and going who could take care in case he should hurt himself. When he became older he was allowed to roam as much as he liked. He always had company as on such a farm there

were always plenty of children of different age groups.

There were some rules. One of them: he had to be clean, dressed and even wear shoes for the evening meal after sunset. This meal he had with his mother and sometimes his brother too. He had to bow his head for the prayer before the meal, he had to have good table manners, he had to know which cutlery and which glasses to use. He was even allowed to take part in the conversation, although the general opinion was that children should be seen but not heard. He was not allowed to use bad language nor to speak slang.

He had to wash before meals and, when it was warm, this was performed in the yard under the pump, where all the labourers had to wash too, and from where the water was brought for the animals.

All other meals he could have when and where he pleased. Mostly he had them not in the house proper, but in the big kitchen where all the labourers and all the children had theirs too. It was a very large kitchen with an earthen floor, benches along wide pinewood tables. The tables were white as they were scrubbed every day with some special homemade soap, probably lye. If he was late for a meal it did not matter, as the cook liked him and would give him something special or some leftovers.

Most of his time he spent with the cowherds and the stable youths. He loved the big forest and the river Dubisa. He was allowed to fight and the children were allowed to hit but not with sticks or stones; that was taboo. Another taboo was not to take young chicks out the nest, eggs – yes – chicks – no.

He was allowed to go swimming and riding at a very early age. The elder boys taught him to swim as they taught other young boys. A few halter necks were joined together and an elder boy who was sitting on a horse, bareback of course, holding one end and the other end was fastened round the learners waist or under the armpits. There were a few planks which led over the river near a bend to allow people to take a short cut without going to the bridge proper. From this little bridge the boy was thrown down into the stream and then hauled up towards the bank. The elder boy was usually very careful in fastening the rope, it was his responsibility and should something go wrong, he would be belted to remember all his life. The river, although not wide and usually not too deep, had many eddies. These caused whirlpools. When Adolf was about six he wanted to try and swim through an eddy. He bribed the elder boy with lollies to let him have a try. Nothing went really wrong, only it

took too long to drag Adolf back, as the boy was without a horse. Adolf vomited a lot and after that he did not like to go anywhere where it was deep. I never saw father swimming where he could not reach the bottom.

Next year he started his education. A tutor was engaged and new taboos were added. In all matters concerning learning the teacher had to be obeyed without question. Homework had to be done before Adolf could go roaming. He also had to be dressed and washed, although shoes could be omitted.

He must have had a good teachers as he enjoyed his lessons, except calligraphy, although he got good marks when at school. I still have a copy of his calligraphy lessons from when he was at school.

Sunday was different. Already before breakfast Adolf had to be dressed, including shoes, and attend prayers held in the largest room. All farmhands were welcome, but none were forced to come. Sometimes they all went to Lenkiele where there was a chapel and mass was often celebrated by a priest.

Fifty years later, when I lived in Pakapurnie, father brought me to his treasure tree in the forest. An old huge oak with a hollow under a branch. Most of the things were perished and unrecognizable, but there was still a glass prism and father did show me how one could get different lights through it, using the carving of the shutters in the children's room. For years I was allowed to play with it when I was a good girl. Then it got lost, I don't remember seeing it after the Second World War.

When Adolf was older he was sent to the nearest school as a boarder. After matriculation he went to Petersburg to study law. He was not a true scholar, but learning came easily to him. He wanted to graduate very well and obtain a good position, which he achieved. When he married he was a civil servant of a grade equivalent to a general (Dzejstwitelny Statsky Sowietnik).

Adolf liked to spend money on his comfort and also to impress people; he also liked beautiful things. He was lucky that he could afford it, although basically he was not a spoiled man, and when times changed he was quite happy in rather primitive surroundings.

Mother had a miscarriage in 1914 after sliding down the stair banister when seven months pregnant. Seeing father coming up the stairs, she became frightened of father, as Adolf had forbidden this kind of fun during

pregnancy. She faltered and slipped, falling down the rest of the stairs. She was ill for a while but recovered completely and I was born two years later. (17th April 1916).

In Russia the Revolution was approaching and in Europe World War One was in progress.

The Tsar regime started to lose ground. The Tsar's family were all killed, also most of his close relatives. The Tsar's adherents, aristocracy and elite had to flee. It affected us: Father was imprisoned in 1918 by the revolutionists for belonging to the suspect 'educated' class.

Whilst my Father was in prison mother took me to her father's place, grandpop Alexander's, who had a big house in Novorosysk on the Black Sea.

Whilst in Novorosysk my Mother, Julia, became an actress because as such she was allowed unrestricted accommodation and also felt safer, as there was less risk for them to be imprisoned, even if she did belong to the group of people who should have, by now, been eliminated in the revolution.

Mother was able to secure a whole two-storey house for us where we all lived together; my mother Julia, her father Alexander, her sister, who was married to a doctor, and their boy of five.

My Early Childhood

My first memories are rather vague and disconnected in time and place.

Firstly I remember the dark, musty smelling, billowing skirts of my nanny. When something unpleasant was happening I could hide behind one or all of these skirts. She was very strict and the final authority. Even mother was afraid of her. I was not really afraid of her, but I knew she was the LAW. I could always find her, she was never far away, and she was the centre of my universe. She would punish everyone who was not good to me, especially my nephew Kolia.

Once, when I was sitting on the potty on the balcony on the second floor, Kolia came, sneering at me sitting on the potty. He kicked the potty including me. Down went the contents of the potty over the balcony and part of it spilled with me on top of the contents. My loud yells brought Nanny but Kolia disappeared.

Some time later Kolia came back and this time wanted to take my toy away from me. But I would not give it to him and started howling. Kolia told me to shut up and offered to show me something new – yellow chicks!

“Now?”

“Now, if you give me the toy.”

“No. No. My toy.”

“No toy, no chicks.”

“You can hold the toy as I look at the chicks.”

“Sissy girl! Come, be quiet, give me the toy.”

“No. I look at the chicks, you hold the toy.”

We went down into the yard. The old stables were quite empty. I didn't know what happened to the horses. Were they requisitioned? Were they killed for meat? I don't know. The stables were dark, only some straw along the wall remained. Even the partitions were gone, used for kitchen stoves. There was a hen and many small, yellow chickens, beautiful chickens inside the stables. I went inside, and Kolia, quickly as he could, closed the door and secured the wooden latch, my toy in his pocket. I did not mind. I was fascinated by the chickens although the hen started pecking at my legs. When I got tired and

wanted to get out and could not, I started to yell but nobody came. I did not mind much as I was never afraid of dark places. I followed the chickens some more and the hen stopped pecking at my legs. Then the hen started moving towards a corner, calling the chickens and they all went and hid under her feathers. I stretched myself out on the straw near the hen and went to sleep. Nanny found me when it was already quite dark after looking for me all over the place.

It was discovered that Kolia was to blame for these events and I knew he was severely punished with a belting, but at the time thought it was because he took my toy.

My next memory is of the beach on the Black Sea where Nanny used to take me. One day after heavy shooting by the revolutionaries we went again to the beach. There were many dead horses, some looked ugly, as their bellies were distended. When I wanted to pat one, Nanny grabbed my arm roughly and led me home, even without me having a swim.

My next memory is of a room which was moving and crowded with people, bundles and furniture. There were many days in this room and I was not allowed out, even when the room was not moving. Only later did I know that we were on a cattle train, converted to accommodate people and their belongings. All these people had gained permission to leave Russia proper (Central Russia) and to go to the place from where they originally came. We were going to Lithuania as father was born there and now Lithuania was an independent country. Only much later did I learn that father was released from prison thanks to friends, especially some poor men, some of them Jews, for whom father had done some favours when he was in a position to do so. Maybe some bribes helped, who knows?

We arrived in Lithuania in the spring of 1921, when I was five years old. We lived there, with only short breaks, for the next twenty three years.

Mother was determined not to live on a farm. If a large city was not available, at least the capital city of Lithuania, Kaunas, would do.

Mother and Father could not have had much cash and, anyway, money had hardly any value. They still had plenty of valuables, such as good pictures, antique carpets and plenty of jewellery, not only mother's personal, but also that which she received in exchange for the more bulky but expensive

furniture, when leaving Russia.

There was also the problem of accommodation as quite a few families arrived from Russia, returning to their native Lithuania. I was considered to be in the way. Perhaps because I was the only child in the house, but I really didn't understand why possibly because my darling Nanny did not come with us and stayed in Russia with her family. She belonged to the true working class and as such had great hopes to better her future.

It was decided to take me to Jan's farm, Lenkiele, as father's farm was very neglected, the house needed repairs and there was no-one suitable to look after me. Both farms were in the oldest part of Lithuania – Somogitia (Zmudz in Polish, Zemajtija in Lithuanian). Most of the ancient folktales originated here, most of the Gods lived in these forests of old, big oaks.



Maria

In Lenkiele lived my Uncle Jan and his wife Melia. They had no children but agreed to have me for a while. The house seemed big with dark rooms, small windows, dark furniture and no children's room with toys and sunshine. It was surrounded by a forest on one side and an orchard from the other two sides. There were no children to play with, I felt rather odd and missed my nanny. I don't remember being either happy or unhappy. I was a big girl, already 5 ½ years old and rather self sufficient.

I recall being fascinated by squirrels which one could see fairly often when one was left undisturbed on the fringe of the forest. Then came winter and plenty of snow. I became worried about the squirrels and wanted to bring them food but was told that they were a nuisance anyway and not to waste food on them as they have plenty of food under the snow, around the oak – their favourite food – acorns.

One evening I decided to find out if there were some acorns left in the snow

under the trees but I was told not to be so silly. I had my wash and was put to bed. I think it was bad luck that I decided to go exploring that night, using the light of the moon. My mother arrived and, not finding me in bed, the entire household started looking for me; first in the house, including the ruined chapel, only to find me cold but happy, just dressed in my nightie, digging snow under the trees looking for acorns. Next morning I was bundled up and Mother took me with her back to Kaunas. There must have been a big row, as in mother's opinion I was not looked after as promised, I could have got a bad cold etc including rheumatism. I did not get either.

In Kaunas we had a small house, no Nanny, only Miss Olga to look after me. I did not like her as she was always fussing. I loved the place where mother was during the day. It was a shop, half of which belonged to mother, and she was selling goods on commission (and mostly her own jewellery to start with) and the other half belonged to a darling lady who had plenty of toys and would let me handle them. Mother must have had a good business as after a short while she was the sole owner of the shop, but I missed the old, dear lady with her toys.

I got tonsillitis and the doctor advised an operation. According to Mother, no doctor in Lithuania was good enough to operate on her darling daughter, so off we went to Berlin – Mother, Miss Olga and myself. Mother thought she might be able to buy a few antiques for her shop and she also wanted badly to be in a big city, at least for short time after being cooped up in Kaunas (population just over a hundred thousand, I think).

I still remember the dreary hotel room, the street 'Unter den Linden' and the doctor's waiting room. I was told that the doctor was a very good man; he would help me, so that I would never again have a sore throat, that everything would be fine and I would have plenty of new toys, that everything would be a pleasure.

It turned out quite differently. The doctor and the sister spoke only German which I could not understand at all, as at that time I spoke only Russian. Only Miss Olga was with me and then I was taken to another room and Miss Olga stayed in the waiting room. The doctor and the sister were dressed all in white. There were no toys anywhere. They dressed me in a white apron, sat me on a chair, strapped me in and made me open my mouth. I did not like either of them as they started hurting me, first in the arm and then in my mouth. The sister was holding my head and something was hurting me badly.

I started to struggle to get out, especially after I spit blood into an oddly shaped dish. I started to yell and they yelled back at me, then they tried to keep my mouth shut. Miss Olga came and told me not to yell as it would spoil the good doctor's work. I yelled and howled even more. At last they let me go.

I think we were all exhausted. I cried and yelled in the taxi and afterwards in the hotel. Mother came and brought me toys and I threw them back in her face. I hated them all. All grown-ups were liars! I would never trust them again.

Mother shouted at Miss Olga because she was unable to comfort me. Miss Olga was shouting back at mother because she never had to deal with such a monster child like me that she did not intend to stay a day longer when we went back to Kaunas. This was the only bright spot during my stay in Berlin.

The consequence was permanent – through all the yelling I damaged my vocal chords and my voice had only a very limited scale. In addition I never trusted my mother to tell me the truth, especially when she said that everything would be fine, that I would be happy if I did what I was told.

When I was nearly eight years old my parents decided that I should have a teacher and, when ready, go to a German school. The German Gymnasium had a very good reputation, better than the Russian and Polish ones. My parents did not want to send me to a Lithuanian school as in Lithuania there was great antagonism towards Poles, especially against those who for generations had been born in Lithuania. This feeling dated back to old historical times when Poland and Lithuania were joined by a Union (early XVI Century). The Poles began to dominate the Lithuanians. The rich landowners adopted Polish habits, the language of the educated classes became Polish, culture and traditions became Polish, the Lithuanians were Polonized. They were pushed back in status, their language became the language of the peasants, their old folk-tales forgotten, their secret rites neglected. Now, after gaining their independence, they were very proud people, but still had a chip on their shoulders as their neighbour, Poland, was a much bigger and richer country. They were protecting their heritage, which might be swallowed up again by the much stronger neighbour.

My parents were given 18 months to get me ready for entrance exams. All subjects were to be in the German language which I did not know at all. I

could read and write in Russian and Lithuanian but don't remember being taught. The only lessons I had were music lessons where I was doing very well. In the first year in Kaunas I had performed my first concert (I was then 5 ½ years old). I played with an orchestra and it was a great success, especially for my teacher who immediately got more pupils than he could cope with. I still read the music very poorly, but played rather like a monkey who was taught tricks. I must have been a clever monkey as the critics were full of praise for the 'wonder child'.

My parents found me a German teacher, fully qualified, who lived with us. In addition to teaching she also looked after me day and night. I thought she was not bad but I did not like her particularly as my time was very much restricted by her. She had to try and cram into me in 18 months what others did in a more leisurely three years. Neither of us was told that I could sit my exams another time the next year, when I would be ten and a half.

I was a real brat and now I am sorry for my teacher, Margot. In summer we went to a resort in Pologna, where mother and her friend with three boys rented a house. We had the upstairs flat with a balcony on which there was a nest of wasps.

On day Margot would not let me go to the beach for a swim as I had not completed my lessons. I was furious but had to stay home. In the evening when I was put to bed and Margot at last got free time and could go out, I got out of bed and went into her room. I opened all her drawers and everything I could put my hands on I tossed through the window into the neighbouring paddock. Satisfied, I returned to bed and went to sleep.

Next morning Margot lectured me about my awful behaviour and told me that I would have to apologise and say that I was sorry. I would not do it, explaining that I was not sorry at all, I was even happy that her things got dirty, and she could not teach me to tell lies. She would not let me go swimming the day before, so there...I was upset, so now she could be upset.

No persuasion helped. Margot told me that for punishment I would have to do double the amount of school work until Saturday when Mother was coming down from Kaunas. I rebelled again, refused to work and just sat biting my pencil. But still she would not let me go out. When lunch break came I was allowed to go to another room. In desperation and also being bored, I ran to the balcony and started jumping up and down where I knew

the wasps had their nest. I was bitten badly and Margot also received a few stings. As I had many stings on my neck which began to swell, she had to take me to the doctor. In the evening I reminded her that I had not even done the usual homework.

“Can I go to the beach tomorrow if I do my homework?”

“You may.”

“Thank you. I will do more than usual until Saturday, and if you race me in swimming I will apologise for yesterday.”

I had no more trouble with Margot, nor she with me. We even started to like each other I think, as a few years later she was again with me during a holiday to Pologna. Or perhaps she liked Pologna and it was not easy to get a job during the summer vacations.

The day of the school entrance examination arrived. I don't remember being worried, Margot was calm too but both parents fussed a lot. I passed better than expected and was told that if I would like to have some additional tutoring, I could jump to a higher class in the next year, which I did. Now I was the youngest in a class of 40. Some were three to four years older than myself, which had some drawbacks. In the new class I was called ‘Baby’ and was determined to prove that I was not.

Some boys and a girl dared me to go to the Russian cemetery at midnight when all the ghosts were awake and waiting. I did not mind, providing someone would help me get out through the bedroom window and catch me in our backyard and later help me back, as my parents would never let me go, especially mother who was uneasy in a cemetery. The Russian cemetery was the most neglected one, especially the corner reserved for the suicides.

The grave of a suicide was agreed on during lunch break. It was in the neglected corner. I was to put flowers and a cross (made by us) on the grave. Both were sprinkled with holy water from our chapel. As arranged two boys helped me get out through the window and we arrived at the cemetery at twenty minutes to midnight. There was quite a crowd waiting for me, even some from the higher class. I was excited and happy, all this to-do just for me, the ‘baby’.

They did not know that I was not afraid of cemeteries or the dead. I had a special attachment to all the dead. I rather envied them. An odd feeling for a

child. Somehow, in my mind, the dead ones were the lucky ones, their struggles were over and they were either with God or not. In my thoughts I could not imagine God who, like a father, would never reject his child, even if it was naughty but ready to do better next time. If God was like father as we were taught, he would not reject his child. If one was dead then there were no taboos, no restrictions, one was permanently happy and could do everything one wanted to do.

Everyone checked their watches. I was told to go at 25 minutes to twelve as it was a long way to go and I had to climb over a high fence as the gates were closed. As I knew the cemetery well, I arrived there before midnight, placed my cross and flowers, said a quick prayer wishing the dead a happy time and started to go back by a short cut, not along the path but jumping over graves, each time apologizing to the one buried there. All of a sudden I felt that somebody was holding my dressing gown (I went in my night gown with a robe thrown over it). I stopped and started to speak to the dead one who I thought was holding me, explaining that I was sorry jumping over his grave, but I had to hurry back as I only had a few more minutes left of my allotted time. No go, someone was still holding my gown. I bent down to pat his grave and realized that a branch had caught on my long dressing gown. I started to giggle, thinking of how silly it was of me imagining the dead one was holding me back. I knew that he did not care if I jumped over his grave as he was certainly not there but far away. When I got back everyone gave a sigh of relief. They were all very nervous as I was a bit late. Next day many knew of my escapade but luckily my parents did not hear about it. After that very few called me 'baby. I liked school and felt happy there.

I loved the school summer holidays even more, which I spent during the next few years in Pakapurniai, the farm where my father spent his childhood.

The house was repainted and one wing renovated. Most of all I loved to be free to roam. Mother and father brought my governess, Tania, and I down, to stay for a day or two and return to Kaunas. Tania was an adorable person. I had already loved her in Kaunas, she was so understanding – she tried to be as discreet as possible when taking me to school and back and later on she even went to the other side of the street, so that a boy could carry my books when bringing me home. Because I liked her I tried to co-operate and do everything possible so that she would not get into trouble with Mother.

Pakapurniai was a place which by now probably does not exist in the Western

world. It is very hard to describe. The farm was very isolated in between of nowhere, surrounded by old oak forests, the River Dubiase and some marshlands with plenty of mysteries for a teenager.

My father was never a real farmer and the work was done by a sharefarmer. Father came down only very occasionally. The house was unbelievably cold. One day when some repairs were being done to the house I heard the comments of the workmen: "There is not even one bloody steel nail in the whole place, it is all done with wood."

The main part of the house where Grandmother used to live and entertain was beyond repair. Even the roof was missing in many places. There were no window panes, the parquet floor had rotted, mice and bats had their nests in the biggest rooms where long ago Sunday mass was held. Most of the rooms were not large, with small windows. Going from room to room one had to go over thresholds (a supporting beam a few inches high placed on the floor). The trees and creepers came right to the house covering the window. There was nothing left of the old furniture and Mother had to buy everything. Only the large kitchen, used so long ago for the servants, journeymen and apprentices, was still being used. I loved the kitchen with its huge table and benches, a large wood stove where rye bread was baked a few times a week. Even now I feel nostalgic remembering the smell and taste of the freshly baked bread. I was allowed to gather the sweet flag, a reed which grows along the river banks and which is spread in the oven before the bread is placed inside for baking.

I loved those summer holidays. Thanks to father who had a quiet word with the governess, I was allowed to do most of what I wanted. I was allowed to go anywhere I liked. I had to wash only once a day, before going to bed. I was allowed to go anywhere I liked, provided I said where I was going to be. For example: in the morning I said I would be with the cowherd, but later on, if I wanted to go riding and swimming, I had to tell the governess and she would come to the river where I intended to swim. Not to supervise, but just to be there in case I should start to drown. If later on I wanted to go into the forest that was all right too if I told her in which direction I would go.

The governess explained why I should let her know – should my mother come unexpectedly, which she sometimes did, and the governess did not know where I was, we both would be in trouble. I let her know and she let me go where I wanted. It worked out quite well because I do not remember being supervised or scolded.

My best friend was the cowherd. He taught me how to make a flute out of a reed and how to make love. He showed me cows in season and calves being born and his penis. Everything was natural, death was natural as well as birth. I was allowed to stay during the night to see a calf being born. I was fascinated when it was unable to stand one minute and in no time was struggling to get up and being licked by its mother. If a cow died, that was also natural. Everything was just right.

The cowherd and the stable youth told me stories about folklore, about the gods and goddesses, about the big serpents, the old oak trees etc. I was very impressed. When they asked me for stories I felt very ignorant not knowing any, but then I started to tell them stories too, mainly from the Bible, the gory ones about Cain and Abel, the Flood, Goliath, Judas etc all very elaborated upon. I loved telling these stories as I had a wonderful audience asking for more. Later on I did it even at school, mainly adventure stories about gods fighting in the sky during a thunderstorm, about the beautiful Goddess. There was always a heroine, pure and good and beautiful, there was always someone very bad, usually dark haired, and there was always a Prince Charming who rescued the heroine at the last moment. At school I used to tell the stories during lunch break and even by instalments, finishing the following day. It was fun having an audience even of older boys and girls.

In Pakapurnaiai I spent a lot of time also in the forests where I would sit quietly for hours looking at birds, squirrels, insects etc. There was so much to see. Even dew-drops were fascinating. In good light, looking through the drop on a grass blade one could see a lot more detail than usual. I thought that moisture helps to see extra things but when I tried with spittle I could see even less. The cowherd did not know why and anyway who cares, I should not be so stupid. Father told me that the liquid should be clean and spittle was not. I tried it with clean water and father proved to be right.

There was the lovely smell of warm earth, of grass, of freshly mown meadows, of decaying old branches. Now after fifty years I can still remember the feeling; it was Paradise Lost.

The boys taught me how to get a fire going without matches – it was easy if you had an uneven bit of glass but I could also do it with just a flint. Everything was simple and without interference, everything was just right. There was a mating season, there was feeding time, there was death too but

there was always life, full of fun and joy.

The stable youth taught me that horses are just like people, one should watch the mean and bad tempered ones but they also could be made friendly if treated the right way. One rule applied: speak nicely, calmly, do not show fear and there is nothing more to it. One has to remember that if a dumb animal is nervous or frightened about you doing something, then one should avoid doing it. Simple isn't it?

Close to the house was the orchard, it was a big orchard. This was the the old orchard divided by linden trees from the 'new' one. Both were really very old. The old one should have been destroyed ages before but it was still there. The 'new one' must have been old too as the linden trees were very tall.

One summer about 1928-9 when I must have been about eleven or twelve years old, Tania suggested more often than before that we should go riding to a farm not very far away. The farm belonged to my father's friend, Pan Vasary. Vasary did not live on the farm. He was a professor of Mechanical Engineering at the Kaunas University and spent his summer holidays in France with his relatives. On the farm lived his only son, Kostia.

A long time previous to this episode, around 1922-3, when I was only about five or six, I had already met Kostia a number of times and felt at the time that I wanted to be married to either father or Kostia. Kostia was then about twelve, which I considered was quite old.

However, in that summer of 1928, when I was eleven or twelve Kostia and I were still good friends. He must have been about twenty-five. I still liked him as he could teach me many riding tricks. He was a Cossack during the Russian revolution and could ride like an acrobat. But I did not like going to his farm so often now as Kostia would talk most of the time with Tania. He stopped teaching me riding tricks, saying that I should exercise more.

I noticed that, in the evening, after I had been put to bed, Tania left the house – not in her usual manner, but rather furtively. Next morning she would still be asleep when I woke up. I decided to find out what she was doing in the evening.

One evening when she thought I was asleep, I heard her leaving the house very quietly. I climbed out through the window and followed her. To my

amazement she went to the orchard but I knew there was nothing interesting after sunset. Hiding in the shadow of trees and bushes, I followed her. She went straight to the path of the linden trees and sat down on a bench. Being dark, I could not see her very well and I was unable to go nearer as there was no proper cover near the bench where she was sitting. Within a few minutes I heard the neighing of a horse and then I saw a man running towards the bench she was sitting on. I wanted to jump out and protect her but the man called out.....and it was Kostia. I could see that he was kissing her but could not hear what they were saying. I waited a while but it became boring so I went home back to bed.

Next morning I decided that I should find out a bit more. I went to inspect the benches and find out where would be the best approach for me next time if I should hear Tania leaving furtively. Some trees near the bench were dead and had been removed and other tall lime trees near the bench grew straight, without any branches I could use as support for legs or hands. I would not have a hope to see and hear if they sat on this bench. It did not take me long to find a solution.

The last time mother had come to visit us, she brought us a tin of white paint so that the inside of some rooms could be repainted. There was still plenty left. Next day I decided to paint the benches in the orchard.

I found the benches near trees which were suitable for climbing and also not too far away so that I could hear what was being said. Those benches I did not paint but started to paint the seats on all the others. I was not worried if I should have to wait a few more nights as each day I painted only a few planks, so that the bench was not suitable for sitting on. I told Tania during the evening meal what I was doing: - being a useful person, preserving and beautifying the benches. I made sure that Tania would know that I had left two benches unpainted, explaining that we should have at least somewhere to sit on in the meantime. Tania listened but made no comment. Very soon I switched the conversation to something else as I believed in the teachings of the cowherd: if you are not telling the truth – be as brief as you can, otherwise the grown-ups will find out. He and the stable youth were experts in dealing with grown-ups.

I did not have long to wait as the next night was THE NIGHT. Tania chose to sit on the bench which was most suitable for my purpose. I was able to climb the tall linden tree even before Kostia arrived. My branch was just above the

bench. I was really lucky.

When Kostia came there was a lot of kissing but this I had seen before and it was not interesting. Then they started talking and that was a great disappointment. It went like this:

“Oh darling, ooooooh my beloved.”

“Ooooooooooh my only one.”

And many more oooooh’s. They did not really talk, they were kissing each other, hugging each other in a funny way: Kostia opening her blouse and she massaging his belly, just like Nanny did when I had a stomach-ache.

At last they started talking but still not much.

“No, dearest, not today, please don’t, no, I can’t... I am not a clean woman, please wait for me for a few days.”

He muttered something which I could not understand. Later on they just sat holding hands and kissing in between. I got bored and sleepy and decided to go to bed as soon as they left. Here and there I decided that if that was what they called ‘courting’ I’d never do it. It was just too stupid.

Next morning I was thinking about the bits I had heard. What did she mean by not clean? I knew she was clean as she had washed herself that morning. Then I remembered – when I had my period, which started when I was eleven, somebody commented that I would not be clean during the next few days. She must have had her period, but so what? As far as I could reason, she was not dirty as blood was not dirty, it was just blood. I could not understand the language of grown-ups and really I did not care much, I thought they all were kind of odd.

I had some more fun in Pakaporniai. Sometimes the boys went to catch yabbies at night. For a few summers I was not allowed to go with them, but this summer when Tania and Kostia were meeting each other, I was allowed to go with the boys. Oh what excitement!

Everyone had a long piece of wood, specially dried and tarred. The eldest boy had a basket lined with special moss and nettles. When we came to the Dubisa River we lit our pieces of wood, illuminating the water and thus attracting the yabbies to the surface. They would crawl out of their hiding places and try to grab bits of old, smelly meat which each of us was dangling, by hand, from a string near their holes. It was my first try to catch yabbies but as I caught only two, the boys decided to give me some from

their catch. I promised them SHOP BOUGHT lollies, coloured ones, not home-made and everyone was happy.

I think the yabbies were kept in well water and then thrown into boiling water. It was much greater fun catching yabbies than eating them. I liked eating them but it was too much trouble, as each yabbie was not even a mouthful of food. They were dark when we caught them but when brought to the table they were red.

Now came the time when wheat and rye were mown, when flax was cut and it was time to gather mushrooms for winter. I loved gathering mushrooms in the big forests, but I was also sad as now it meant that soon I would have to go back to Kaunas, as the school year started in September.

I liked school but not much else, except skiing and skating, but that was still a long way off. I hated meal-times and I constantly heard ‘Marusia kishaj’ (Marusia eat up). I disliked vegetables except for potatoes and hated spinach. I did not like soup either nor the sweets made from currants which we had often as father liked it and it was supposed to be good for one. I did not like to wear shoes or be clean or to be dressed nicely with a bow in my hair, nor to play the piano when my parents had visitors. I had to say ‘How do you do?’ or ‘Pleased to see you,’ when I really did not like to see them nor did I care how they were. I did not like them telling me how beautiful I was as I knew that I was not, nor them asking me questions about school and not even listening when I tried to tell them. I did not like the smell of people. The women were soaked in some sweet scent and the men smelled of vodka and tobacco. I did not like grown-ups and tried to be on my best behaviour so that I could leave them as soon as mother gave me a wink that I could go.

Most grown-ups bored me as far back as I can remember. My mother gave parties very often. Sometimes I would come down from my bedroom. I would sneak under father’s chair and sit there and listen. When father noticed me under his chair, he would take his fob-watch and let it dangle. I could play with it and still listen, but their talk made no sense. To start with it would be ‘how nice,’ ‘how interesting,’ etc. Later on they would speak about somebody who did something or other wrong, then they spoke about the good old times in Russia and how terrible it was now in the time of “from the double eagle to the red banner”. It was years later that I understood they were speaking about the times of the Tsar and the ‘now’ of the Soviet Republic, which they called the Bolshewiks. At those parties everyone spoke only

Russian. I don't think anyone could speak Lithuanian except father and me. Polish was spoken only by father and a few of his friends who were never invited to the real parties.

I liked school very much except for the first year where I had to fight a lot to establish myself. I had many friends and some were my 'Special Friends'.

The German Gymnasium was rather an exclusive high school, being about ten times as expensive as the other schools. One third of the pupils were Germans who paid nothing or very little, the majority were children of well-to-do Jewish parents and the rest, a very small percentage, were a mixed group: a few Poles, Russians, very few Lithuanians and some children of fathers who were in diplomatic service.

I had a good memory and a lot of curiosity and learning came easily to me. I could read as far back as I can remember though I don't know who taught me the alphabet, certainly not Nanny who was illiterate. Maybe my mother's father, my darling grandpop (Alexander Alexandrowich) - I don't know.

Grandfather was a godsend as far as I was concerned. He came to us in Lithuania when I was six years old. He was the only one who always had time to speak to me, or rather to answer questions. Nothing was too much trouble. He would even lie on the ground and watch with me the ants or other crawling things, he would build sand castles with me and he would let me handle his fob watch for as long as I liked, even taking it off the chain.

Grandfather did not arrive with us but approximately a year later. When my parents and their friends left Russia, a lot of people were leaving Communist Russia.

The Tsar, his close family and many of his relatives were killed. Murdered. All the upper class, including the big landowners were in danger of losing their lives or facing long prison sentences where most of them would die. All high status civil servants and army officers were not much better off. It was according to all, just a matter of time. Even the middle upper class was also endangered in the same way. In addition, as in every revolution, there were private feuds to be settled. But some did not want to leave their homeland, which they all loved with a deep passion. Most people, those who left, and those who stayed, were thinking that all this would pass, that the Bolsheviks would be destroyed, at least by the menshewiks and life would return, more

or less, to what it was before 1917. It would only be a matter of survival during the turbulent revolution.

Grandfather belonged to those who did not want to leave Russia. After a year or so, he realized that he could not survive in Russia and agreed to go to his daughter's place in Lithuania for the time being, thinking that, should the revolution last too long, he might go to his other daughter in Paris. Both his sons stayed in Russia; one was killed by a stray bullet in 1921.

I really loved grandfather and all my friends loved him too. He never talked down to us, he never reprimanded us and he could always keep a SECRET. The only person who did not like him was the cook, as she had to move out of her room and from then on she slept in the kitchen nook. Tania and the maid kept their rooms as Tania's was next to mine and the maid's was dark, without a window.

Now that I am 61 years of age, I am old I realize that grandfather did not always do the right thing and my parents were therefore cross with him and told him off unpleasantly. But now being a grandmother myself, I would surely do the same as grandfather did if in return I could have the full confidence and love of my grandchildren, the way grandfather had mine.

Here are a few examples which have stayed vividly in my memory:

I was playing in the backyard when I saw a procession of ants coming from our brick fence and across to our neighbour's house, wandering around our yard and then again going back through the brick fence. There were masses of them. I called grandfather to come and watch.

It did not matter that grandfather was reading his paper. I knew he would come because he liked the things I liked and he enjoyed sharing my excitement. Grandfather and I were both lying on the grass watching the ants, both fascinated. Mother came, told me to get up immediately and not to be so silly looking at some stupid ants and lying on the wet grass. My frock was dirty and I might get rheumatism. She was very cross with grandad, really cross. For me, no crying helped, nor pleading. I was not allowed to watch the ants anymore. But I was given a new toy.

Another time, when the snow was melting, granddad and I got into big trouble. Next to our house was the house of my friend Lida. It had a very big

garden and a pond. Playing with Lida, I noticed that in the pond where the ice had melted, something was moving, swimming. It was neither fish nor frog, nor anything I knew. When I told grandad about it, he explained that it would probably be little future frogs, which looked different from the big ones. Next morning when my lessons were over, we went to the pond. The little things were swimming a bit further out and I could not quite see them. Grandfather found a plank, put it on the ground near the pond with half of it protruding into the pond. I could see much better lying on my stomach and watching them but disaster struck. In my rush to see better I overbalanced and landed in the pond, head first. When grandfather dragged me out I was wet to the skin and although I asked grandfather to let me dry out there, he would not agree, although we both knew that we would be in real trouble – if not rheumatism it might be pneumonia or even worse. I was not told off at all. I was scrubbed in front of the fire and put to bed with an eggnog which I liked, but I heard both my parents telling granddad off and when I sneaked out to him at night, his face was damp and I was sure he was crying. I was very sorry and told him that from now on we would only do what was permitted and never get into trouble again, but granddad told me that he was not upset about us, but that his own daughter, Julia, who was my mother, could speak to him so rudely. But somehow we did not get into much trouble after that, only once more. Maybe we were both more careful, who knows?

The last time I remember that granddad got into trouble because of me, even with repercussions which followed him to the end of his life, was when I had measles.

In those days measles were considered a very serious illness which could result in many other terrible things. The room I was kept in was in darkness. I was not allowed to read, or even to look at pictures for long. I was allowed to play with beads, buttons and toys. I was even allowed to have father's calendar in bed. I loved that calendar which could be moved by hands showing the days of the week, months and explanations about sunset and sunrise, about fishing and game for the appropriate season. This calendar father brought from Pakopurnie when his mother died. Granddad used to tell me stories, according to the season to which I had moved the calendar. But even that was not good enough as I had to be left for long periods alone, so as not to get too tired.

Later on I had some tummy trouble. I don't know what caused it but the food became unbearable, just pulp and mash. I especially missed the fruit. I missed

it very much. One day grandfather brought me a beautiful apple and a piece of watermelon saying that I should be quick or he would be in trouble. The apple went down in no time but the watermelon was messy, having pips. Tania came unexpectedly, early from her shopping and caught us.

She ratted on granddad! It was terrible!

My parents withdrew his allowance completely saying that he was spending the money wrongly, harming me and being a silly old man. He must have been then between seventy and eighty but he definitely was not silly. I did not think so then, and I do not think so even now.

He, who once was a really rich man, did not from then on have even one cent of his own, only part of my pocket money which I tried to share with him. But he would spend it again on me. He had to ask for even the smallest of things, which admittedly were bought straight away if considered necessary. But he was never given money.

Grandfather was very upset but then he decided to do something about it. He could not write to his other daughter and ask her for money as it would be kept in trust by my parents, or so he explained. He made himself a box from wood lying in the backyard, fastened a belt around it and from my pocket money bought some pens, pencils and other small items and started to go from house to house selling them at a small profit. This way he has some money although not much.

Many years later, long after grandfather was dead, I had a fierce argument with my parents about something or other and then I told them how cruel they were, depriving an old man of a small allowance. A man who all his life was used to having money, money which was no hardship for them to give. At first my parents tried to tone it down but I knew that they felt uncomfortable when I accused them. Later my mother told me that it did grandfather only good and gave him an incentive to do something and he did earn money. I still think my parents were wrong but who knows?

It is true that grandfather never complained, he was always friendly and laughed a lot and we were still the best of friends.

When I was a lot older grandfather still shared a lot of my free time with me. When apples began to ripen in the neighbouring garden, I used to climb the

fence and steal as many apples as I could. We had plenty of apples at home, ripe ones too, but the ones which I stole, although often green, tasted a lot better. Grandfather would stand watch and in case of danger give a piercing whistle. We were both very careful and we never got caught. It did not make a thief of me, nor did I become depraved but I had a lot of fun and grandfather was my friend and shared the fun.

When I was about 12 we moved to another flat again. This time it was in the centre of Kaunas on its main street, Laisves Aleja. On the ground floor was mother's shop and in the basement was antique furniture which had to be restored or upholstered. One or two men were usually working there. Part of the ground floor was a restaurant. On the first floor was a picture theatre. We lived on the second floor. Although expensive, it was a small flat. Mother wanted it because of the very large basement, as in addition to the antique furniture, she had there also some modern things. She became a representative for Jena Glass in Lithuania and also sole representative for something like a washing machine. The machine looked like copper on three legs. The gadget which was supposed to do the washing looked rather odd. It was a long stick with a rubber container at its end. This rubber gadget was the size of a large pot and had many holes. One was supposed to fill the copper with hot water and soap, immerse the washing and start poking with the stick. The holes in the rubber had a suction power when pulled up and down and the clothes were supposed to come out clean without much effort. I tried it and it was a lot of effort to plunge the stick up and down. Neither of the things were selling well. People did not believe in the heat resistance of the Jena Glass and mother did not spend time on advertising. The washing machine was also a flop as it was cheaper to hire someone to do the washing by hand in the old way, than to spend money on some new gadget. As far as I know, these two instances were the only ones where mother did not make a profit.

I did not like our flat at all. There was no garden, only a balcony. My bedroom, which I shared with Tania, was small and had in the middle two steps as the projector of the cinema was underneath. Grandfather had an awful room. It was a room intended for the cook, next to the kitchen, with no outside window, only a window into the kitchen. Grandfather did not like this flat either as he found it very hard to go up the steps to the second floor. Quite often he was in pain when coming home and consequently went out very seldom. Tania did not like it either as she now had an additional duty – to take the Alsatian dog for a walk twice a day.

One morning, as usual before going to school, I went to grandfather to say goodbye and give him a kiss. He was still in bed and smoking a cigarette, I could see that he was not feeling well. When I asked him, he brushed it off, telling me that he had to gather strength before going to shower, as the steam in the shower made the ache in his chest stronger. We both cursed the flat and the lack of a backyard.

When I returned from school I wanted, as usual, to go first to grandfather, but was not allowed and was then told that grandfather had left us and was in heaven with his wife and his son.

“What do you mean in heaven? Which heaven? When is he coming home?”

“I am telling you he is not coming back. He is in heaven with his wife and son.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. You know that his wife and son are dead long ago. Where is grandfather?”

“In heaven. God called him. He is happy.”

“God called my grandfather? How? When? Why?”

“Now be a brave and good girl. Your grandfather died this morning and he is now with God.”

“Grandfather...dead...?” and I twisted myself out of the holding hands and ran into grandfather’s room. He looked as though he were asleep but there was blood and foam around his lips which I tried to remove. I kissed him, I hugged him, I shook him, talked to him, implored him to come back and then I realized that he would never come back. Never. He had gone away for always. He was dead! Dead!

I started blaming my parents for this flat which they had taken, the stairs which killed grandfather, for the bathroom without a window where the steam had hurt his heart. For me losing grandfather was a real tragedy. It took many months before I could speak civilly to my parents, and it was not until we moved away from this flat (two years later) that I could think about grandfather without a feeling of hatred to all others, without quarrelling with God who took him away from me. Each night, before going to sleep, I spoke with grandfather in my thoughts, asking questions, telling him about everything which happened to me during the day. The feeling of loss lasted for many years. Nothing will ever erase my feelings and memories of grandfather.

Years later I tried to analyse my feelings of frustration and deep loss. Grandfather never bought me toys or books, never took me to a show but he did sometimes show his disapproval of my behaviour, but always without scolding me. He gave me something which was most important to me. He gave me his time, he gave me the feeling of security and understanding and patience and real love.

Wherever you are, Grandfather, thank you for all you did for me and I hope you are happy wherever you are.

I don't remember being really unhappy. Angry, annoyed, and frustrated, yes, if something went wrong, bad tempered, but not unhappy. Now I know that love was lavished on me but then I did not think about it. I just took it for granted.

I was certainly sometimes a terrible child. Once, it was soon after my measles, when I was still forbidden to go out. Only our maid was at home and had to look after me with strict orders not to let me go out. Seeing that only the maid was home, I decided to go out and took my overcoat. She would not let me put it on. I started pulling the coat towards me and yelling at her, she still would not let me go. I pushed her and gave her a good solid kick on the shin. She fell and hit her head on the wall and it started to bleed. I helped her to get up and said that I was sorry that I had kicked her but she did not answer and kept crying. My mother arrived when we were still in the hall. I was upset but mother did not scold me at all but scolded the maid as, according to mother, it was the maid's fault for not being able to handle a child. Funny attitude, isn't it?

I, being a mother, would have belted my child good and proper and would make it apologise immediately and would have tried to make it up to the maid, but mother never did.

I knew already then that I was in the wrong. Who knows how one should bring up children? I did not grow up to become a monster but wouldn't I have been a better human being if I had been treated otherwise?

When in later years we spoke with mother about it, she still thought that she had done the right thing. I don't agree, but I am not an authority on bringing up children.

These kinds of incidents happened fairly often. Not that I kicked grown up people again. I don't think I ever did after that one time, just my schoolmates. Other people were blamed when the fault was entirely mine. For example, the time when Mother decided I should learn French and have private lessons. At school at this time we had German, Lithuanian, Russian and, in the last three years, English. But we had no French. The teacher chosen for French was an old lady from the high Russian aristocracy. She was poor, a widow, supporting her daughter, who at the age of 40 had the mentality of a child. They were really very poor and my parents often helped her out. Her French was very good as she has spent many years in France and had even studied for two years at the Sorbonne, but she was not a teacher and she did not like children.

I did not want to learn French as none of my friends had to and mother's friends did not speak French when at our place, so why should I learn?

After a few lessons I decided that I did not like either French or my teacher. I discovered that if I kept quiet, pretending to study, my teacher would go to sleep and not bother me and I could read a book which I kept handy for these occasions. One day mother caught us. The teacher was dismissed and mother apologized to me! For giving me an unqualified teacher! When mother thought she did something wrong she would not cover it up. She would try to straighten it out, apologise etc, but mother was not often in the wrong.

This time she explained that she wanted to give financial help to my teacher who was very hard up. When I asked mother why she did not give her money when needed without asking her to work for it, mother's reply was as unusual: "You are too young to understand. When you grow up, you will understand."

The same happened at school. Others were blamed for my shortcomings. When I was not good at some subjects, like geography (which I did not like) it was simply because I did not do my homework nor did I listen during lessons. But it was still not my fault. According to mother, it was the fault of the teacher.

Nothing was ever my fault. I was a perfect child. I was the most delightful child a mother could ask for. I was clever, a good pianist, beautiful etc etc. This kind of talk I heard constantly.

I think that perhaps mother did the right things quite unintentionally. Surely, no normal child is so stupid as not to realize when he or she is in the wrong. And a simple mirror is enough to show that one, whilst not too bad, is definitely not really beautiful. And so, I decided already then, when I was about ten or eleven, that I could not trust mother's judgement. I thought her very clever, she told me that herself and nobody ever contradicted her, but I thought she simply did not understand me.

As far as I can remember, I don't think that I was always a horrid child. I was a rather odd child, not quite like other children in my age group. For instance, I loved cemeteries and was even, to a certain degree, envious of the ones who were dead and buried there. Don't misunderstand me, I was not unhappy, but I envied those who were already dead. It was not a morbid feeling, I simply thought that those who were dead are perpetually happy. I had odd dreams which were real to me, in which I could see myself from above, and in which I knew what other people were really like, and what they were doing. It was not only during sleep that these dreams came but also during the day when I was wide awake.

Once when we were at home and sitting at the table, I had one of my insights and started to cry. "I saw a man, he has lost his ten litas but he is poor and needs the money. Oh please, please let me go and get the money back to him." I was told not to carry on and to finish my meal. When I continued crying and choking on the food, mother asked father to go with me, so that I could see for myself how I only imagined things which were not there. Without a word father got up and taking me by the hand, we left. I knew that he did not think I was imagining this. Father asked me where the money would be. I told him that it was beside the steps of the university and that the autumn leaves were just now covering it and that the man was poor and his trouser cuffs were frayed. Father asked me "Will you recognize him?"

"I can't, I have not seen his face but he has grey trousers, a brown jacket and he is cold. He has no pullover."

Father squeezed my hand but did not say anything and we hurried towards the university steps.

Years later father told me that I went straight to the correct side of the steps, pushed aside some autumn leaves and sure enough there was a ten lita bill there. I grabbed it and urged father to go to Daukantas street as I saw the

student turning there. When we came to the corner, there was nobody there. I started to cry as I did not know where the student went. Father did not say much, as usual. He only said that he would try to find the student and if he couldn't, he would from now on, help other students and there were many who needed money. I stopped crying as I believed my father. He never told me a lie and I trusted him.

It was a strange relationship between us. We never talked much, he never bought me toys and he never, ever interfered with mother's ruling. It was no good appealing to him against mother, but I also knew that father would be trusted as grandfather could. I don't remember father ever telling a lie. He either replied to my questions or told me to buzz off, or even that he did not know the answer. At first I was astonished that a grown-up might not know the answer to all of my questions, but later on I trusted him unquestioningly, if they were delivered in a definite manner. Quite often father would say that he was not certain, that I should ask mother, the priest, governess etc, depending on what the question was about.

Father was quite different from granddad but very important to me, especially during my teens, as grandfather had died when I was 12½, but father was there during all my adolescent years of upheaval. From childhood until late in life I felt comfortable in father's company. I knew we loved each other although we never said it. When I pressed father really hard, he would tell me what he really thought, irrespective of what other people's opinions might be. I don't know if he realized what great influence he had on me. We trusted each other always and I cherish this thought even now.

I loved school, I was happy there. I had many friends and got on well with my schoolmates. Learning new things was pure fun. I was lucky to have some very good teachers who instilled in me a curiosity, who tried to teach me to do my own thinking. I feel indebted especially to three of my teachers: Herr Gilde, our maths teacher, Herr Kruck our teacher of German literature and Doctor Zipfer, our physics and chemistry teacher, who was also a senior lecturer at the Kaunas University.

Our art teacher was also good, although mother did not like her as already in my first year of high school she told me that I would never be good at art but should at least try to appreciate it. Our headmaster, when I was sent to him for some major misdemeanour, told me that being good at school work would not make me a better woman, that one needs more than book knowledge to be

a decent person. My dear Jesuit priest who tried very hard to bring me back to the fold of the church, after I first began to doubt, then completely lost faith (at the age of about 16 or 17). All of them contributed to giving me some foundations. That is what school is for, to give the youngster a foundation for further thinking and living.

My German High School, called gymnasium or rather 'Realschule' was different from other schools in Kaunas. It was a non-classical secondary school which meant that instead of Latin and Greek, we were taught more maths, physics and chemistry as well as modern languages.

It was co-educational which was rather exceptional at that time. It had good teachers, better than average, as they were all paid very well because the school fee was a lot higher than in other schools. It had more sports and exercises for physical fitness than other schools. It had better equipment in the large sports hall as well as in the laboratories. It had a very good and extensive library, whereas some schools had no library at all. Since 1932 we had many teachers imported from Germany, most for propaganda purposes, all aimed at indoctrinating the youth with Hitler's ideas.

At the time when I went to school the emphasis was more on general education than on specialization. Today's programme of education varies a lot from the one I had. For example matriculation, which lasted about two months from May to late June, with only short breaks before each exam. Some subjects had only one exam, but others had two – one oral and one written. I sat for the following subjects:

1. Religion
2. German language and literature (two exams)
3. Lithuanian language (two exams)
4. English (two exams)
5. Russian (two exams)
6. History and Social/Political Science (two exams)
7. Geography and Natural Science (two exams)
8. Mathematics (including Form 3 arithmetic then algebra, trigonometry, analytical geometry, differentials and integrals (one exam lasting over four hours)
9. Physics
10. Chemistry
11. History

12. Introduction to Philosophy
13. Book-keeping
14. Free drawing and according to architectural specifications (very primitive)
15. Needle-work or woodwork
16. Music
17. Gymnastics

Quite impressive isn't it when compared with today's 4 or 5 subjects. Of course, we did not cover as much ground in each subject as the pupils do today. But just think about all the 23 exams in 17 subjects, all the swatting during those two months! We all felt more dead than alive when the exams were over. I did not do too well, as during this school year I had no time for most of the subjects, as I started to become engrossed in religious and other matters. During the time of my exams I studied all the nights, sleeping some during the days to catch up as I wanted to pass, which I certainly did.

During all my school years my marks were very erratic except for maths in which I was always good and geography where I always barely had a pass.

When we started English in the first and second term my marks were nought out of five! We did not want to learn English, it was something like French. Nobody I knew could speak English, why the hell should I? I already had three languages plus some Polish. My parents blamed the teacher of course, but decided to give me private tutoring so that I could pass into the next form. I fell in love with my tutor Madame Sabelski (and a bit with her son too) and passed the exams, catching up during the third term. The next year, being still in love with her, I even became first in class. Most of the time I was good in German, as during the term and yearly exams, one was allowed to choose one of the free topics instead of a problem from literature covered during the year.

I had great fun with physics. Doctor Zipfer taught us that the atom could be split but we were not to put this on the exam papers because the correct answer in our text books was that the smallest indivisible unit was the atom, which could not be split. And that was in 1932/33! The exam papers were probably compiled by some old fogies. Doctor Zipfer was not much to look at; he was short, bald, with a big belly and a dirty waistcoat, but he did show us how interesting everything is. 45 years later in 1978, here in Australia, watching TV and the 'Mad Professor' (Ed: Dr Julius Somner Miller and his

show “Why is it so”) I remembered Doctor Zipfer. He always used to say, “Think, you oafs, why is it so? Think! Just think!” Occasionally, some of us were invited to go to the University where he had his lectures and sometimes I was even allowed to help the students with their experiments.

Herr Gilde, our maths teacher, was quite different. Medium tall, good figure, slightly greying hair. Most of the older female pupils were in love with him. He was a fantastic teacher. He made you think and enjoy it! He used to write on the blackboard a new algebraic quotation and ask the class to figure out how one arrived at this quotation. It was really fun to try and work it out. After the others had their try I, being his favourite pupil, was allowed to have a go. Usually I could arrive at the right answers but in a hopelessly roundabout way, but he did not mind.

Herr Kruck, our German teacher in higher classes, was quite different again. He was no longer married as his wife had left him. He gave the impression that he could not care less about us, that he had to suffer us stupid, slow thinking, unintelligent future grown ups. He was a grave digger during the First World War as he refused to take up arms. He was an odd teacher. He did teach us what he was supposed to teach but at the same time also conveyed, at least to some of us, that what he had to teach was utter rot. I was lucky to belong to the group of his favourite pupils where he would say what he really thought and he certainly did not think conventionally. He went to the trouble to explain why, for instance, he did not like some plays by Shakespeare, but loved some others. Why, in his opinion, even Goethe was not always right, which was really sacrilegious.

Herr Kruck did not mind that I also liked adventure stories and even trashy ‘whodunits’. He only wanted to know why I liked this particular kind of book. Sometimes we even missed a whole lesson, just talking, usually sitting on a bench in the mortuary chapel, as there were seldom dead ones laid out.

Next to our school was a Lutheran cemetery, divided from the school yard by a low fence and a gate which was never locked. The mortuary chapel, a weatherboard primitive building, looked more like a barn than a chapel and had its entrance from the school yard. There were not many Lutherans in Kaunas and only seldom did we have somebody dead in there. We were not supposed to go to the chapel when somebody was laid out, but some of us did. We knew when the verger was out and all who wanted could sneak in, even if the door was locked as the windows were no problem. The coffins

were open and the dead ones looked rather nice, as if dreaming. They were neatly dressed, always had flowers. It was pleasant there, not morbid at all. The cemetery was used by us, the older pupils, quite often even during the playtimes, as here was the only place where the big boys and girls could smoke undisturbed. For a while I was in trouble when our class started to smoke. I was the youngest in our class by at least two years. The group which was smoking told me to piss off, as cigarettes were not for kids. It hurt my feelings deeply. They would not even give me a puff, the mean, conceited buggars!

At home, father did not approve of females smoking, although he smoked cigars non-stop and I always smelled like a smoked salami sausage. Mother did smoke cigarettes but only after heavy arguments with father.

I used to pinch mother's cigarettes, go to the toilet and practice smoking. The first few times I thought it would kill me and I was even sick but to give up and admit that I was still a baby unable to smoke, was even worse than dying. However, I improved and one day, in 1932, after filching a packet of mother's cigarettes, I walked into the cemetery, lit my cigarette and walked past the smoking group and from the pocket of my school uniform was sticking out, as if by chance, a packet of cigarettes. I did not speak to them as that would show that I was desperate for their company, but they behaved quite decently, called out to me and even asked me for some cigarettes. I was fifteen then and have kept smoking until now. Stupid isn't it? The herd instinct is so very strong, especially in the young ones. Although in many ways I was not conventional, I was very dependent on the approval of my equals, a lot more than on adults.

It took many years, many thoughts and hardships until I was able to recognize this feeling and do something about it.

In 1932 when I was in the Tertia Class, the atmosphere of the school began to change slightly. The next year when I was in the Secunda, the change became more noticeable. We had more imported teachers from Germany, had special lectures and films about Germany, about the way of the German youth, about Hitler, about how superior Germany was to all other nations. We got many new books, but all rather similar, all about Germany.

Herr Kruck spent less and less time in the library and I missed him a lot. It was in the library that I first started to like him as he started to teach German

literature only in the last few years. I remember when, as a little school girl, I went to the library and asked him which books were really interesting. He would just shrug his shoulders and say:

“I don’t know, I don’t remember all the books. Go and find out. You can see where the books for your age group are stacked.”

When I returned a book which I liked, I would tell him all about it as I was sorry for him, that he had forgotten such an interesting book. This was the beginning of our friendship, as later on he would start asking me questions, provoking me to silly arguments. He was never really cross, he even brought some of his own books for me. Then in 1932/33 he would ask me, but only occasionally, what I was reading and about my impressions, but he never gave any indication as to whether he agreed with me or not. Only once did he ask me if I did not miss some of my favourite authors and that was the first time I realized that many books, including my favourites, had been withdrawn, being of Jewish origin. Even Lessing’s ‘Nathan the Wise’ disappeared from the shelf. I was too wrapped up in the new books about beautiful great Germany to notice the change.

When I came back from the school holidays, which I spent not in Pakapurniai but in Cytowiany (Mr and Mrs Romer’s place), the school had changed drastically. It was my final year, my matriculation year 1933/34. I was 17 and now I was in the Prima class.

From nearly a thousand pupils only a few hundred came back to our school after the holidays. All the Jewish children left and went to a newly founded school. It was the year when Hitler came into power. Some of my close friends were Jewish and I missed them a lot. It was not an easy year for me as I had many, many problems.

Until this year I was a true Catholic, or at least I tried to be one, to the best of my abilities. I had a very good relationship with God, he was never far from me, I could always talk to him. Now, thinking back, I think I spoke with God the way Guaretschi’s Don Camillo spoke. Each morning before school I would go to the church to say a good morning and a short prayer, usually a ‘Thank You’. But now I began to change. I think the beginning was a book by Renan, which I believe was called ‘The Life of Jesus’. Christ was presented as an exceptional human being without blame, to be followed and admired, not as God, but as man. I started checking up in gospels, psalms,

other translations, asked my Jesuit priest for reference books etc but the damage was done, the gulf grew wider and wider and I was unable to become a Catholic again.

There were also problems with my parents. Many problems.

In response to religious matters I called them to their face, hypocrites. I was furious with them that they were giving bribes; I blamed them more than those who accepted their bribes. Only many years later did I realize that in the times when they were young, it was a normal thing to do, they were brought up in Tsaristic Russia. And, in respect of bribes, Lithuania did not differ much either.

I could not accept the inequality of living conditions between the poor and the well-to-do.

These talks and arguments we usually had in the evenings when my parents came home, with me sitting, as usual, at the piano, as I had quite a large program for the Conservatorium. Those arguments ended when I got hysterical and a bleeding nose and all my piano keys were covered with blood.

I did not like the friends mother chose for me and I did not approve of anything suggested by her. Father did not speak much, did not suggest anything, only listened. Mother's arguments would usually finish with, "When you grow up you will understand how one should live, you are still only a child, just wait till you grow up."

My reply was, "I hope I never grow up if I should turn out the way you are! I think you are horrid, I hate you all and all you stand for!"

These kind of arguments did not occur very often and usually we got along very well. It sounds odd, but even then I loved my mother. I only hated what she wanted me to feel. I hated what she and many other grown-ups represented. I could not help loving her, I missed her when she went away a few times a year. I knew mother loved me and that father loved us both.

This was the time when I was fascinated more than ever before by the written word. Each new book was a revelation. I discovered something new constantly. I read throughout most of the nights. The books I remember from that year: Upton Sinclair – Jungle, Fink – I am hungry, Dostoyevski – the

Idiot and (his) others, Gogol, Chekov, Goethe's Faust, Shakespeare – essays, Zola, Bronte, Mann, E.A. Hoffman, C. Keller, Zweig. All of Rabindranath Tagore I could find, Nietzsche whom I could quote from memory, Hegel, Spinoza and Kant.

Kant was the worst, although I tried and tried I could not understand him and I still can't. I was frustrated and mother confiscated his Critique of Pure Reason!

Nobody was able to help me. Herr Kruck told me that I would have to work out all my problems for myself. He called it my 'Sturm und Drangzeit', and told me it was like teething. I was furious with him and everyone.

Herr Gilde and Doctor Zipfer were no help either. I asked them about the Suez Canal and about the Eiffel Tower, pressing for details. They would tell me off, explaining that it would take years of studying before I could even begin to understand. But I did not want to wait years, I wanted to understand right then.

A man who lived next to us was a bit of help. He was a drunk, hardly ever sober, but he had a great variety of books and let me read anything I liked. He would even try to answer my questions. He was the first who explained Mendel to me, about the problems in building the Suez Canal and many other things.

I also had another problem – my friends of Jewish parentage who went that year to another school. I could not see them often as they had to study very hard to learn Hebrew, which most of them did not know and, in addition, their parents did not encourage them to see us, those who were still attending the German school.

During that year I admired Hitler. I certainly did and tried to misinterpret him as far as Jews were concerned. To me, the Jews, if I thought of the problem at all, were the 'Chosen Race' and the 'Haunted People' like the Wandering Jew.

One holiday, when in Pakapurniai, my teacher and governess Luba Giershinowitsch, a Zionist, proved it to me. Once, when we were speaking about the Jewish problem she told me, "Here is a Jewish woman who looks after the orchards. I know she is uneducated, I know she wears a wig, an ugly

wig, and you laugh at her wig. I love you, Marusia, I don't love her, but if I ever had to choose between you and her – I would choose her because she is a Jewess from the persecuted race and I am one too. Don't ever make fun of her in my presence as I will belt you without your parent's permission. I do belong to her and she belongs to me – we are the JEWS. JEWS! JEWS!"

Luba, who had got her degree the previous year, was a good teacher in most subjects and she was unsurpassed in teaching a conceited brat like me to understand the problems of race and the will of survival of the Jewish people.

Another problem was school itself. I did not like it much that year and I did not feel happy there anymore. Instead of over one thousand pupils only a few hundred were left. In 1931 there were 46 in my class and now there were only ten. Some of the teachers were missing too, although not my favourite ones. Maybe, because of reading at night I was very sleepy during the lessons and therefore felt guilty because I was not doing my homework I was very much behind in most subjects. I could not make up my mind what I should do with myself. There was no incentive to matriculate.

To start learning now in earnest, now in the middle of the second term? What for? Just for a bit of paper? It seemed stupid and a waste of time.

To go to Uni? I would have liked to study either medicine or mathematics, or even physics, but that was out. We had innumerable discussions about it at home. Mother was unyielding, neither tears nor tantrums were of any help. She explained that she had had a long talk with our Doctor Elkis who had attended me from childhood. He told mother and also me that I was very delicate and could not possibly do the medical course. I was anaemic, my lungs were bad, I had bronchitis each year, I became too excited when deeply interested. Mother was quite convinced that although I was not really ill, I had to be looked after very thoroughly and carefully as I was delicate, almost fragile. During the school years I was exempted from morning gymnastics as it was too much for me. I also had a doctor's certificate stating that I should never be kept too long at school so that I did not get overtired and so on. So how could a frail child study medicine? Impossible.

Not only was I not allowed to study medicine but also mathematics, physics or chemistry as it would require too many hours of studying and according to mother and Dr Elkis, I would be unable to do it with my health. If I was really dead set on going to Uni, I would be allowed to do Geography, History

or some languages. Of all the subjects I could not care less about. The prospects would be to become a teacher which I did not want anyway. I did not have to earn a living as my parents would leave me well provided for. Therefore I decided not to go to Uni at all and just finish conservatorium for which I really did not need to matriculate.

Looking for a way out, I thought about getting married. But to whom? The boys at school were definitely no good. They were all right to carry my books home, even to occasionally give a wet kiss, but certainly not to marry. A few of father's friends whom I did like were already married and had children older than me. Only Kostia was left, and he was then not yet in love with Tania, my governess.

One day I suggested to Kostia that he should get married and settle down. He agreed that it was time for him to get married. When I suggested we two should get married, he was very rude – he burst out laughing.

I felt that he was unreasonable because, although not a beauty, I was not bad looking and we liked each other. I would be a rich woman as my parents would give me plenty of dowries. So what was wrong?

When he stopped laughing he even apologized in a way. I told him that I did not expect from him any love poems, nor did I expect him to come in a formal dark suit with flowers in his hand, dropping to his knees to ask me for my hand. I was even quite ready to be taught about sex and maybe bear him one or two children, but only if he wanted it, I did not care. He could continue to love Tania and be with her as much as he liked.

When I finished my well-rehearsed speech, he explained that he would never marry me, as he would only marry a girl of a nice disposition (sic!) who could behave herself perfectly, who was a real LADY! I lost my temper.

“You, you stupid oaf, don't you know that I can behave perfectly? Just ask your parents or their friends! When we entertain I am a perfect lady, I know, I hear it often enough. You were never invited to these parties because you are too stupid for words and also too young and your manners were neglected when you were a hussar. Who do you think you are? I tell you – a horrid, stupid oaf! That's what you are!”

“Pipe down. How long can you be a perfect lady?”

“If need be, even for hours, of course.”

“Marusia, how long can you say – Yes, Kostia, certainly, Kostia, no problem, Kostia, if it will make you happy. Just as you want my darling Kostia...Now be honest, how long can you be like this?”

“Kostia, I don’t know, I have not tried. But if you want me to be like this sometimes, I think I could do it...Say for half an hour? Honestly, I don’t know. It would depend on how stupid you were of course.”

“I am telling you, I want a wife who will speak like this for 24 hours a day, all the years we are married.”

“You must be mad, it would be horrid and you will never find one like that.”

“I sure will, I even think that I have found one, but am not certain yet.”

He asked me why I wanted to marry him. Was I in love with him?

“Of course not, don’t be stupid, only I don’t know whom I could marry as all the men I know are already married. You are the only one who is free and in addition, you could teach me some more riding tricks, and I don’t want to matriculate.”

When Kostia saw that I was very serious, he took me to his garden and sitting in the high branches of an apple tree, we spent a long time talking.

Kostia helped me to sort myself out. We remained friends. I agreed to get my matriculation certificate. By now, being in the middle of the second term, I would have to do a lot of catching up. I should stop reading anything not connected to schoolwork. Not a pleasant thought but if I had to, I could do it.

Once again I was attentive during classes, cramming as much book knowledge at home as I could and I went early to bed. Everyone was pleased, not only the teachers but also my parents and school mates. I stopped playing truant and tennis during different school lessons. I was able to catch up, and passed all exams. Six out of ten did it.

Afterwards was the matriculation ball at school but it was not much of a ball. We were so few, even with parents, friends and some boys and girls from other schools who had matriculated. We did not have it in the big ballroom as was done in previous years. It was in a small hall which still seemed too big.

During the next few days we had a few pleasant evenings with one or the other teacher outside school where we smoked at last openly and then....a void.

After School

I was free but what could I do with my freedom? I did not know.

One of my friends suggested joining her. She had left school the previous year with a man and gone to Prague. Now she wrote letters from all over Europe. She changed to another man and went to Germany, then to France and Italy. The she wrote from Sweden, of course she was with another man again. But this idea did not appeal to me as to me it did not prove that this was the way to be really free and happy.

My Jewish friends were also in a dilemma. Some wanted to go to Israel, other did not believe that Hitler could be a real menace and wanted to stay in Lithuania. Some of them even wanted to go to Russia as they became very Communistic.

My German friends, at least some of them, were also very unsure. To go to Germany as their parents wished would mean to go into the army for a year or two. They did not want to go to Germany – they wanted to stay in Lithuania.

Neither the parents of my Jewish friends, nor those of my German friends, encouraged associations outside their own circle. We met only seldom and on the sly.

I decided to go to our new farm, Karmelowo, which was only 12km from Kaunas, the capital city of Lithuania.

A few years ago father had sold the farm at Pakarpurniai, as the cost to run it was too high. After Lithuania became independent, a land reform was proclaimed. Bigger farms were confiscated by the government and only 80 to 150 hectares were left to owners, the rest either distributed to the landless farmers or taken over by the government for special farms or agricultural schools. It was no means a purely agrarian reform, but had a very deep political motive. The vast majority of the large landowners were Poles not Lithuanians. I, personally, did not know any large Lithuanian landowners, only small farmers. Father was allowed to keep about 100 hectares which were some fields around the house and part of the oak forest. When money

was required for the farm, father sold the oaks.

My parents were quite well off as mother had become a good businesswoman. She had an antique shop and had buyers not only from Lithuania, but also other Baltic countries. She mainly sold goods which she bought. She also sold on a commission basis. A few times a year she travelled to other European countries looking for antiques and jewellery. She always included France in her travels as she loved Paris and there she could also see her sister, although they were not close at all.

Father never went away, he did not like travelling and anyway, mother was a better buyer. Father knew only about pictures more than mother did.

We still had a cook, a maid and a companion for me who was to teach me Polish. My parents entertained a lot with all the trimmings. I don't ever remember being told that I couldn't have something because it was too expensive.

My parents spent about 100 times more than the wages paid to the cook. The cook had no separate room; she slept in a nook in the kitchen. Servants were hardly ever provided with a separate room and they had no holidays, no sick leave, no old age pension. Nothing. I don't know how it was in the western countries at that time, but in Lithuania and Poland they had no social securities, they had their keep and small wages. Our house must have been better than some others as our servants usually stayed with us a long time. There were a few reasons for this. Firstly, during the summer we sometimes all went away and the cook at least had a fully paid holiday which she could spend as she liked, but was not supposed to leave the house (which I know she did. Good on her!). Secondly, mother did not know much about housekeeping or prices and did not interfere too much. Thirdly, because we entertained a lot, the servants had an additional income from the guest's tips, sometimes amounting to a second wage at least. It was a custom in Lithuania acquired from Russia that the servants waited until the last guest left. The guests had to show that they appreciated the party and they were expected to give tips to the servants. The happier they were, the better the tips.

When father bought Karmelowo, a new house was built there. Compared with Pakapurniai it was a small house. It had a large glass veranda, one dining room, one living room and three bedrooms. Attached to it were two small rooms for the cook and maid. Attached to the kitchen was a hut (one

room with kitchen) providing accommodation for the farm labourer and his family. From our hall stairs led to the attic where grain was stored in big wooden boxes. Under the stairs were steps leading to the cellar where fruit, vegetables and even potatoes were kept.

There was a place left for the bathroom, which was never built and became a larder for homemade hams, sausages, bacon etc. One washed oneself in the big wooden tub in the kitchen. The toilet was not a septic tank just a hole in the ground, and far away, about 350 to 400 feet! Behind the barn and other outbuildings.

In the barn hay was kept for feeding cattle in the winter months and the non-pressed grain was cleared from the straw and husk in front of the barn on clean clay. The working power was horses (real horsepower!) and some men (not mechanics) supervising them with a whip. They went in circles, round and round the whole day long.

The potatoes which were to be used after winter was over were kept in big holes in the ground. Deep holes were dug, not too far from the yards, the holes covered in straw and earth, looking like mounds. In early spring when they were dug out, steam came from these holes. In this way the potatoes were protected from frost, as in the cellar they would freeze and become suitable only for pig food.

There were no water taps in the house. The water came in buckets from the well, let in deep in the back yard. A special wooden bucket on a chain was used to bring the water up from the well. Luckily we did not have to water the cows and horses often, as the creek, which ran not far from the house, was quite adequate.

We had a telephone but no electricity. Father wanted to install a windmill and a dynamo, but never did. There were kerosene lamps, small ones, big ones and elaborate ones. The maid had to fill the lamps each day and trim the wick and clean the glass.

Of course there were no refrigerators or ice chests in the house but there was a huge ice chest outside the house, in the yard. It was a deep hole, the size of a room. In winter it was lined with large blocks of ice – half a metre by half a metre, which the men cut out from the nearby river Neris. The hole was covered with wooden planks, pine needles and earth. The door was also insulated. It was a very efficient ice chest and I don't remember ever having

trouble as the ice melted very slowly. Foods which were used constantly were not kept there. Such things as milk, cream, butter, sour milk etc were kept in a special tightly closed bucket and lowered into the deep well.

In the house every two rooms shared a big stove reaching nearly to the ceiling and protruding only slightly from the walls. These stoves had one opening with cast iron doors to burn wood. When only large ember pieces were left, the door was closed tightly. Higher up was a compartment with a shelf to keep food warm if necessary. The whole tiled surface of this oven got so hot that one could not touch it and this was the way all the rooms were kept warm, even when the outside temperature dropped to minus 25°C or lower. Stoking these stoves was also the job for the maid. The wood for the kitchen stove and the heating of the house was felled in winter, chopped up in spring and stacked for drying in the yard. They were large, round stacks about three metres high.

Not far from the farm was a village, also called Karmelowo. It had a church, a big building partly used as a school and partly for an agricultural college. There were a few houses and there was a shop, something like a general store. It sold vodka, often moonshine, sour cucumbers, fat matches, sugar, and brightly coloured lollies, besides pens, inks and exercise books. It had a few tables covered with newspapers and a couple of chairs where people could wait for the bus which connected the next town, Janowo, with Kaunas.

Through the village and alongside the farm went an old highway which father had used as a young man to go to Russia. Trains did not go through Lithuania, and to catch a train one had to travel to Poland. To get to the nearest railway station one had to travel by horse along this highway.

On the other side of the highway was a forest stretching for a few kilometres to the river Neris where a summer colony for Jewish children was located.

Karmelowo was a mixed farm. Father planted a small orchard. We kept cows and sold milk to Kaunas. Butter and cream were made only for our own consumption as were hams and various sausages. We had pigs and calves for sale. I don't think we had much wheat or grain for sale. For a few years we had hundreds of hens, chickens and, of course, masses of eggs. However they did not last long as they all contracted some disease and had to be killed and their outbuildings burnt down. Later on we kept only a few dozen hens for our own needs.

We had working horses and one colt, partly Arabian. He was bought for me as the other horses were not much good for riding.

I remember another gadget, one which I saw not long ago in a museum. Our iron. It was not a flat iron. It was bigger, made from cast iron, had a wooden handle and an opening which had to be filled with hot embers, not too big and not too small. One had to blow on it and watch through special openings provided that they were nicely glowing and red. Usually one had to use two of them for ironing. One was kept outside in a windy spot so that when one got cold the other was handy and ready for use. To find out if it was hot enough, one had to lift it up, spit on the bottom of it and if it sizzled it was right.

We sold a lot of vegetables such as cabbages, carrots, cucumbers etc and also strawberries. During the full season we sold 200 boxes of strawberries, each two kilos, every couple of days. During the planting season and the watering time (with a bucket and a can) and also during the gathering season, many extra girls were hired. They worked from dawn to sunset with only a short break during the day. They earned four litas a day. (On average my parents were spending 100 litas a day. For comparison – our cook received 30 litas a month plus keep).

The main reason I went to Karmelowo was to train my Arab horse. I was able to continue my musical practice as we had a piano there too.

Usually mother drove me in her Oldsmobile and picked me up when I rang and wanted to go to Kaunas, irrespective if it was for a few hours or a few days. She never fussed about it. This time I wanted to pretend that I might be moving over to Karmelowo for good because I needed wooden boxes and at least one cart as I had to provide a hiding place for a book, with many copies. The book – “Mein Kampf” by Adolf Hitler, also a few books by Rosenberg. These books were hard to obtain in Lithuania as they were banned that year (1935).

At this time I was very much for Hitler and the ‘Glorious New Germany’. I was truly sold on his ideas. My arguments went as follows:

Before Hitler there was unemployment and depression, he promised to give everyone work, even “if he had to paint the Black Forest white.” He did not

have to resort to paint, he simply started production. If it was for arms, why not? Why should he be caught unprepared if other countries started attacking him?

‘Kraft durch Freude’ (strength through fun and pleasure). He provided cheap holidays for the working masses, very cheap, so that even the poor could make use of them. He even bought ships for cruises where the hard-working people were able to spend a few weeks with good meals provided. At least they could see some of their Fatherland!

Hitler Youth – nothing sounded better to me. Every boy and girl, before going to Uni, had to spend a year on a farm. They received no pay, only accommodation and food and had to help the underpaid, overworked farmer. I thought it was an excellent idea that the young people who grew up in towns should at least know how the food which they consumed was produced. As an example, I will quote an incident with a friend of mine, Galina. She always lived in towns being the daughter of a diplomat. It was the first time she had lived on a farm when she came to stay with me in Karmelowo. One morning when I was in a hurry to gather all the available eggs for sale, I asked her to give me a hand. She went happily with me as she was fascinated by everything on the farm, even the cow dung and the smelly pigs. When she found her first egg she called out to me:

“Is it ripe? Can I take it or should I leave it to grow a bit bigger?”

This was a fact and she was then at least sixteen years old, in fact I think she was seventeen.

I agreed with Hitler that the gold parity for the mark was quite unimportant. The goodwill and productive energy of the people should count a lot more than gold stacked in the vaults of some banks. And so on.

Even about the Jewish issue I felt that I had to explain Hitler to others. I explained that he was not persecuting the Jews in general, only those Jews and non-Jews who took money from the poor, just like the Lithuanians who took the farms away from the Poles.

When I think back about my reasoning at that time I must say full marks to the teacher who indoctrinated us and omitted all that might sound wrong. And I must say poor marks for me, as I was so completely naive. It took me

about two years until I grew out of it. It took me nearly a year to realize that ‘Mein Kampf’ was not full of beautiful ideas and goodwill to mankind.

It was over a year before I returned the unused copies to the school saying that I had changed my mind and did not want to keep or distribute this book anymore. I had an unpleasant talk with my previous gym teacher but the books went back to school and we did not part as friends. Herr Kruck must have heard about it, as one day when we met in town, he told me he was pleased to know that I had started to think for myself again and was not afraid to admit that I was in the wrong before.

I did not spend much time that summer on the farm and the Arab horse did not get trained. A few years later father sold it to Kostia who was mad about horses.

Two incidents are very clear in my mind from this summer, both connected with Karmelowo.

The first was later called E.S.P (extra sensory perception). From early childhood I knew that I could see things which others somehow could not. At school, there were quite a few times when I knew things or saw events with senses other than the usual ones. I knew this even before school, but thought it was quite normal for grown-ups not to see what I could see, because they were usually a bit dumb and a bit blind. Only grandpop and father never told me that I imagined things but asked for details. But I knew that they two were from other grown-ups. I got into trouble at school when I would say something which nobody was supposed to know. My schoolmates laughed at me and my teachers told me off. I soon learned to keep quiet, only sometimes, quite unintentionally, it burst out of me. These were small and insignificant incidents. This time it was different.

The second was on a hot day and I decided to go swimming in the Neris river. I often went there with my dog. The road took me over the highway and through the forest. This day I went quite happily, accompanied by my Alsatian dog, Ralph. When I passed the highway and was about to enter the forest I stopped. I was frightened. I did not know why. I went swimming so often and was never frightened as there was nothing to be frightened about. The forest was too small to have bears or wild boars. Foxes never attacked a person. I sat down on a log and started to tell myself I wanted to be reasonable, there was nothing to be afraid of and in addition, I had my dog.

Nothing helped, every time I was ready to go into the forest I was too scared and had to turn back. Disgusted with myself I called the dog and we went back. I decided that I was hysterical and the best thing to do was to go to Kaunas. When I rang home mother was out and nobody knew when she would be home.

I went to the village to wait for the bus. Before the bus came a car stopped near me and a strange looking fellow asked me if he was on the right road to Kaunas. There were two remarkable things about him – he was a Negro with a funny nose and funny hair and he spoke ENGLISH! He was the first Negro I ever saw. We talked for a few minutes and he offered to take me home. Today, in 1978, it would be improper for a well brought-up 18 year old to accept such an offer. I don't know what the proper thing was then but I never hesitated, why should I? He was friendly and someone quite new in my experience and I would not have to wait for the bus as nobody knew when it would turn up.

Speaking English and some German he explained that he belonged to a group of a variety show, which was touring Sweden and was not going back through the Baltic countries and Germany to France.

Now, when I think back, I wonder what he thought of our conversation as I was certainly not inhibited asking questions. There was no reason why I should not ask when I was so curious. Firstly, I started a polite conversation and we spoke about music, but it got us nowhere as he did not like my favourite compositions and I did not know much about the ones he liked.

Looking at his curly hair, I asked him where he got his perm? Here or in Sweden? He explained that it was not a perm, that it was his natural hair. Then I asked him if he was so black all over as were his hands. He laughed and said yes, would I like to see his body? I declined. Don't forget he was the first dark man I saw in my life and he was different from the pictures I had seen of black men.

He did show me the palms of his hands which were not as dark. We talked some more and he also asked questions. He told me that the colour of hair and skin did not matter, that all people had the same blood and the same heart – they all felt the same. Then he stopped the car and did a curious thing. He took a pin from his lapel and pricked his finger and then mine and smeared the blood on a piece of paper. Our blood looked exactly the same. I

understood that he was telling me the truth and I know it now – the colour does not matter, we are all the same. He delivered me right to our home and I never saw him again.

I explained to father why I had come home and told him about being silly and frightened to go swimming. Next morning father showed me the newspapers. A mental patient had escaped from the Calvaria Hospital. He had attacked some girls in our forest and killed one. He killed her in a horrible way: he assaulted her and drove a piece of wood through her. Neither father nor I told mother about it as she would have been upset and worried and it would be the end of my freedom in Karmelowo.

Somehow, I don't know how, father made me mix with the Polish group as he decided it was time I realized that I was POLE! I became a member of a Polish club of water sports. I joined an excursion organized by the Polish group to see a Polish drama 'Wesele' in another town, and somehow I made a few new acquaintances who were Poles. I don't know how it happened but I know that father did it. Szczesna, one of my new friends, who was a true Polish girl, had a picnic once or twice a year which started from her farm. We went by boat for most of the day, with dancing at a hotel in the evening and then returning to her farm. This was a funny arrangement: - when we wanted to swim during our boat trip, boys and girls dressed in swimsuits had to swim at opposite sides of the river Neris which was fairly wide. We were not supposed to go swimming together as it would be improper, but it was quite all right to be kissed and hugged when we were in the boats, and anyway, one could not do much as they rocked too much.

Later on I had a Polish teacher from the Polish school, Pan Mirowski who taught me Polish. I was not too keen as I found reading and writing in Polish to be rather complicated, but the teacher was not bad. He liked books and when I could read fluently he gave me a list of old and contemporary Polish writers and I fell in love with some of them.

Father also engaged a lady, not too old, a Miss Komarowska from a noble Polish family who spent every day with me, speaking Polish only. I rather liked her but in the beginning I found it hard to express myself in Polish.

I don't know how father manipulated it, I would think it certainly was not done by mother, but all of a sudden I was surrounded by Poles. Somehow I belonged to Polish clubs, I attended Polish balls, I went to Polish houses, I

had Polish boyfriends, who were not different from the others, some were fun, some were bores. Some wanted to marry me, others told me their love troubles just as the others did.

My Jewish friends drifted away. Some left Lithuania, some were completely involved with the Zionist problem.

My German friends were engrossed with Hitler and many of them went to Germany. We kept writing to each other, but that was a poor substitute for talking.

The few school friends who remained my friends were: Marusia, a German girl, who became much later the godmother of my son, Jurek. She left school during Secunda and began working. Now she was attending an English Commerce school. I also enrolled and we had at least one afternoon together, first at the school and later talking until late in the night. The other was Mira, a Jewish girl, who did not like the Zionists and wanted to stay in Lithuania, get married and have children. At that time she was studying medicine. She often smuggled me into the Uni when cadavers were being dissected. I was fascinated by the human body and could not get over how complicated it was. I donned the same aprons as the others and was never detected. However, she did not finish medicine. Nor did she stay in Lithuania for ever and ever. She was killed by Hitler's henchmen in one of the concentration camps.

I still had my two old German boyfriends. One was studying engineering, the other physics. They both left with their parents in 1938 for Germany and both were killed in 1941 at the front in Lithuania. One of them I saw a few hours before he was killed.

The first few years after school were taken up with balls, parties, visiting friends in their country places or in Karmelowo. There were picnics, there was swimming and walking and in-between, studying at the Conservatorium.

There was Ninka, a lot older than myself, at least by five years. In my opinion she was definitely oversexed. She had mad parties at her house. Her brother never joined us. Her mother was a quiet, reserved woman and her father spent more time at the museum where he was the curator, than at home.

As I was still inexperienced, Ninka wanted to do something about it. During

one of her parties she called out loudly to one of the young men, asking him to show me his penis as it was freckled. He did not mind obliging, but I was neither embarrassed nor impressed. So what if it was freckled? My sex teachers, the cowherd and the stable youth, had told me long ago that they come in different sizes and colours.

With one of the girls, Jadzia, I became more friendly during the years as she also married a Pole from Poland and had a boy when I had Jurek, but more about her later.

There was Genia whom I liked very much but she came only seldom to Kaunas. This applied also to her sister, Hela and her sister Zosia. We still keep in touch.

I thought I was in love with an elderly man who at that time was a judge, I think. I met him during a holiday in Palanga. We won the first prize for ballroom dancing. He became a bit of a bore, speaking only about how wonderful I was. What finished my love for him was when mother told me that a few years before he had tried to make love to her but mother did not want him, as he was too old for her!

My real boyfriends were rather a mixed lot, each of them not having much to do with the others.

Number one was Czesiek, who, after finishing Uni, became a bank clerk in the Polish bank. He was very nice, very honest, very dependable and well thought of by parents of marriageable girls. He was a good swimmer and it was good talking with him. He thought he was in love with me, but I doubted it, and I was not in love with him.

Olek, a professional violinist and an exceptionally good dancer, and I were just friends. He was teased a lot with just a bit of flirting. He was not in love with me. He was pining for his Great Love – Irka, who lived in Warsaw and he told me a lot about her. He was waiting to go back to Warsaw during the new school year and finish Conservatorium.

Janek, who was a good violinist, was by profession a chemical engineer, related to a famous musician. I thought I liked him a lot, but probably I was not in love with him, as the following incident happened:

After one of the parties he was taking me home, but, being very sentimental, he wanted to drive me to an island on the river Nieris to listen to the songs of the birds who had their nest in the bushes of the cherry tree, which at that time of the year were in full blossom and sweet smelling. I was happy with him. It was a beautiful night, there was a full moon and it was sooooo romantic! He was speaking about love, life, music. I agreed with him on everything. We came to the island, the moon was reflected in the river, the shrubs smelled strong and sweet, the birds were singing. It was so nice. The car was so comfortable, I curled up with my head on his shoulder and.....went to sleep. Afterwards I was very sorry but I must have simply been tired and not very sexily inclined towards him. I had been riding that morning with a stupid horse which would not take hurdles properly. I had a three hour lesson at the conservatorium with the orchestra and I had danced all evening. I know that this is no excuse, but it was a fact. I was happy, happy in his company and, being tired, I just went to sleep. How unromantic. After that night we became just friends.

Vincent. Handsome, tall, well educated, a count and a good Catholic. He was a poor dancer, an average swimmer but good to talk with. He spoke about love and marriage. I liked him really very much and I liked his mother a lot and also his sister, but just not enough to marry him.

It is time to try to describe Kaunas, then the capital city of Lithuania, the city as I remember it when I was still young.

In Tsarist times Kaunas was a garrison town with fortresses and the Sobor (a Greek Orthodox church) in Byzantine style built for the army. When I lived there the Sobor was a catholic church, as Lithuania was 99% catholic. Kaunas had one main street, Laisves Aleja (Freedom Boulevard) about 4km long, all the shops were there, including mother's. There were also a few elegant restaurants, several coffee houses and near it the radio station and the theatre. In this one theatre were performed operas, symphony concerts, recitals, ballets and dramas. Our own talents were rather mediocre, but often we had celebrities from other countries. Here, as a child I heard the famous Russian bass singer – Feodor Shalapin (Chalapin?). He gave only two performances – one in an opera and one recital. After the recital there was a big ball in his honour, but only three children were permitted to attend. I was one of them, another was my friend Irka Paceviciute, who already as a child was painting extremely well. Later on she went to America where she became known, having her own exhibitions. The third was a Russian boy, a

few years younger than me. He was also a pianist and we became friends later on. He went to Canada, became a professional pianist, touring Canada and Latin America. We three children were even mentioned in the newspapers as the future talents of Lithuania (what a joke!).

I did not like my first ball much. It was the official opening of the season which even the president, Smetona, attended, or at least his family and it was a MUST for the first ball. There were too many uniforms, which I did not like even then, too many old people, too long intervals between the dances, too long for supper.

I enjoyed my second ball, the Polish ball. I knew most of the people, and there would not be many old ones, as they couldn't be bothered spending two days coming from farms and going back just for a night of dancing. Next year I went again to the Polish ball.

I was never allowed to go with a boyfriend to a ball. Father is the one who took me to the ball. He was very nice about it and got lost when the ball started and appeared only when it was time to go home as, again, the proper thing to do was to be brought home by father!

I loved dancing and was happy with any good dancer. The following year, at the Polish ball, I met a Pole from Poland whom mother and I had met a few years earlier when we went to Poland during a summer holiday. Then, when in Poland, I did not take much notice of him as he was much too old. I was still at school and he was nearly at the end of his Uni, I preferred his young cousin, a marine cadet. But now, three years later, he was not old at all. He and his mother had come to Kaunas to sell their farm which was in Lithuania. He danced really very well, especially the circular and I thought him the most handsome man at the ball. His name was Zygmunt Kruszewski. I was very pleased that he chose me to be his partner a few times and I certainly did not mind that other girls were jealous. My boyfriends were cross with him, and with me, saying that I should not dance with an outsider, that there were already enough of our boys there and, anyway that he should have stayed at home, or at least not have come to the ball.

Once or twice during the next few days, I met Mr Kruszewski in the street and we even had a cup of coffee together. My parents invited him and his mother to visit us. His mother was a very good looking woman and she looked young, just like my mother did. She had a very pleasant voice and she

was nice to me, but somehow I did not take to her and I did not like the way she praised her son, just like my mother did praising me and looking adoringly at her child.

I still had Polish lessons, but only once a week. I took music again seriously and my teacher, Mrs Malko, was pleased with me. I was selected to play at a few concerts in the Conservatorium, and felt very proud that I was usually placed at the end of the programme, which meant that I played well. The writeups in the papers were good, which did not mean much as they never wrote really badly about us pupils.

I liked Mrs Malko very much although when I went to her at the age of six I hated her. According to me she had a cheek to put me on scales, Hanon and stupid exercises, suitable for beginners only; Me – who had already performed two concerts, including one with an orchestra! How well I do remember my first lessons with her.

During the first lesson I showed off, playing pieces which I knew well. At the next lesson she asked me for something new, she asked me to read simple music and to play scales! She asked about composers and their works. During the next lessons she showed me how to practice scales and I refused to do them. She closed the piano lid and started talking and continued talking for the next few lessons. The gist of her talk was:

I was not a wonder child nor such a pianist that I couldn't even read music properly and my technique was not worth mentioning, that I was only aping and copying, which was not good enough. I must try to understand music, for without the understanding I was like a book with pages missing. She never asked me to become her pupil, she really did not want me much. She said that I played well for my age, as she had heard me during my two concerts and therefore agreed to give me a try when my parents asked her to accept me. She had more than enough of bad and average pupils! She prepared to accept me as her pupil for a trial period under the condition that I do EXACTLY what she told me to do. Should I justify her hopes, she would keep me and help me, but otherwise not. I could do what I liked, if I didn't want to work the way she told me – I didn't have to go back. My parents would find me another teacher, she did not care.

After each lesson I told grandfather all I could remember of her talk. First I was very indignant, then I was a bit doubtful as she was right, I could not

read music properly. I had to hear the music a few times before I gave it a try. After the last talk we both agreed that I should give it a try. Others did it, I should be able to do it too.

Now after twelve years I was her star pupil, getting honours and even for the last few years being top in our conservatorium, which I started attending at the age of sixteen. Until then I was her private pupil, going for a half hour each week. I missed a lot of my lessons during those years. During measles I missed three months, every year I missed a lot having bronchitis for long periods. Also I missed two terms during my matric (University entrance) year. I also missed two months when Mrs Malko was on her....DIET.

This diet was in vogue at that time and was according to a book written by a Mr Suworov. My mother tried it also, but only for a short while. The diet consisted of a complete fast for a few days followed by three days of light food, next the fast was increased to one day a week followed again with very light vegetarian food, and so on, increasing the fast until, on reaching forty days, one was allowed to have water for drinking and even a few glasses of water with a teaspoon of honey. Every second day one had to have an enema, one had to use a spittoon and there were many more instructions which I now forget. It did Mrs Malko a lot of good as, according to her, all her gallstones disappeared. It may have been good for her, but for us, her students, it was hell. When she opened her mouth, even to take a breath, it smelled like the dirtiest compost heap. The room smelled like a public toilet which had not been cleaned for ages. One day I felt sick and had to use her spittoon in a hurry. I stopped going for lessons, giving some excuse or other, until she finished her diet. Now we were friends and we both laughed remembering my first year with her.

I liked her first husband, Mr Malko, a well known conductor in Europe and America. He lived with us for a while when he was invited to conduct the Lithuanian Philharmonic Orchestra for a few performances. Our house was also his headquarters when he toured the Baltic countries. He was an interesting personality, probably hard to live with during everyday life, but he was great fun when staying with us. It was 40 or 45 years later when I met him again. It was in Australia where he had a contract for a year or more and was directing the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. One winter he gave a concert in the Melbourne town hall.

I hesitated to see him after the performance. I thought that it would be

presumptions of me to go and claim acquaintance after so many years. He was a well known conductor and me, a nothing, and my husband a night watchman. But Zyg told me to go, saying that people like to be reminded of old times when they were young. Zyg proved to be right. When I went backstage, saying that I knew Mr Malko from a long time ago, I was admitted to his dressing room. He was drying his neck with a towel. I blurted out in Russian:

“You are still getting soaking wet, just as before! Here, have another towel. Where is the other shirt?” and then I blushed like a teenager. I started stammering ... sorry ... long time ago ... He stopped me.

“Wait a minute, keep quiet. Marusia kushaj! (Marusia eat!) He was smiling, “I place you, Marusia the girl from Kaunas, playing the piano very well. I have not heard about you. Are you a pianist?”

“No, I am not; I am a clerk and work in an office”

“Oh my God, what a waste. Where is your mother, Julia Alexandwowa?”

“She is in Poland with my father.”

We talked for a while and he introduced me to his wife, saying that he did pick them young, beautiful and of lovely disposition. She looked not much older than myself.

When we parted he said: “When we both were in Kaunas who would have thought that we would meet here in Australia. You probably did not know where Australia was”

Some years later he died here, in Australia.

Coming back to Kaunas and the year 1934/1935. I still had two or more years at the conservatorium as I was doing the virtuosity course and had to catch up with theoretical subjects to get my Batchelor degree.

Although I enjoyed the winter season full of fun, I was sorry when it ended and that we had to go to Karmilowo. Friends of both sexes visited me often and stayed either for a few hours or days or weeks. I was not waiting for the next season to start as most of my friends did. I felt restless. I simply did not know what I wanted. I only know that I wanted a change and that I wanted to get out! But I did not know what I wanted to get out from, nor did I know where to.

I became moody. I was not unhappy just disinterested and restless.

Both my parents noticed the change in me and tried to help me. I thought I would like to go to Germany but my parents were against it. Father wanted me to go to England but mother did not. They were both agreeable to let me go and at last they decided on Poland. I was told to apply for admittance to the Warsaw conservatorium, which had a good reputation. I did not mind, although I would have preferred Berlin or London. Warsaw was a big city renowned for its musical traditions, its international Chopin concerts held every fourth year. The next one was due in 1935/36.



Karmilowo farm

Lithuania had no diplomatic relationship with Poland. Our passports were printed with a clause stating that it was not valid for Poland or Spain, but this did not cause problems. One could get there via Germany and get the necessary visas. There was no problem in getting the visa as the Lithuanian passport had a line for Nationality written by hand in red ink.... Lenke (Polish). It was not meant to facilitate the Polish visa but warn other Lithuanian offices that the applicant was of Polish nationality and as such, not suitable for many courses,

including some courses at Uni. This did not worry me in the

least as I grew up with it. I knew that the true Lithuanians hated Poles.

Lithuanians had every right to hate the Poles as far as I could understand. Since the Union at Lublin in the 16th century the Poles were usurping Lithuanian rights. Yet, Lithuania was once a mighty country which even beat the Teutonic Order at Grunwald. But now the bigger landowners who were Poles were bringing their own traditions and pushing out our Lithuanian traditions. Even the Lithuanian language ceased being dominant. The Poles

took over our Lithuanian capital, Vilnius! called it Wilno and even now, after independence, they still keep it, although to them it was just an ordinary town on the outskirts of Poland. They would not give it back to us although by rights, according to me, it belonged to Lithuania. The Poles kept it as it was theirs according to Marshal Pilsudski, General Zeligowski, the Versailles treaty and the Curzon line.

During my school years I got used to the boycott of Polish shops, banks etc, to the smashed windows, to the chauvinistic groups from the Uni who sometimes rushed into the church and beat up those who had a Polish prayer book. Although in the true sense I was neither a catholic, since the age of about sixteen, nor did I feel myself to being a Pole, but when going to high mass on Sundays I would take a Polish prayer book with me. Was it an action of – I dare you? Or was I simply on the side of the underdog? I don't know.

That winter, as usual I spent a lot of time skiing and skating. For skiing we went in groups but skating I used to go alone. After a good windy day the creeks and rivers were fun for skating, as one could go many kilometres on the snow-free ice. One could go really fast especially if the wind was blowing on your back. Skiing was fun too. There were no ski lifts or special runs near Kaunas but one could go along rivers, over hills, through forests and fields. One could go anywhere as everything was covered in snow, even the fences in the fields were no hindrance as they were usually completely covered in snow.

When spring came I started practicing the piano in earnest.

I sent my application to Warsaw – one envelope with the Warsaw address was put into another envelope addressed to the Polish legation in Konigsberg with a covering letter as there was no mail over the Polish / Lithuanian border.

I remember receiving the reply in an official looking and bulky envelope. There was the acknowledgement of my application, the fees would be ... I would be allocated to a teacher and could not choose one. It did not matter as I did not know any. The date of the competitive exams from ... to ... and the most important – a list of my compulsory subjects for the examination. The beginning was for warming up, exercises, scales etc, then an etude of my choice. Already, while reading the letter I decided on the etude by Chopin played all on black keys. A fugue by Bach and then Beethoven. All quite OK

with me but then came a choice of either Hayden or Handel. (O my God! I could not play either of them well at all.) Next were a few things by Chopin, also good, and then a composer that I never heard of, Szymanoski. Who the hell was he? And the last item was to be a piece of my liking with only one restriction, it had to be a modern composer. Then a list of theoretical subjects, which were no different to the ones that I had already covered in Kaunas.

With Mrs Malko we decided on Stravinsky and with great trouble we were able to obtain a piece by Szymanoski, which came from Germany.

Mother in the meantime was busy getting me a wardrobe to which I agreed without looking as, anyway, I knew that it would be what mother and her dressmaker, Mrs Soboska would decide. The matter of money had also to be considered, as Lithuania had restrictions with foreign currency. Mother almost had a fit when she found out that I would not be allowed to have more than 400 litas or approximately 450 Polish zloty. She was looking for ways to be able to give me more. Later when in Poland I learned that a student could survive on 150 zloty monthly and a clerk, even supporting his family could manage on 250 zloty a month. How I managed to be always broke by the last week of the month I don't know. But I do know that I was flat broke in the last week before the new cheque was due, that my boyfriend had to pawn his violin to give me some money to live on.

I was still in Lithuania, not concerned with money arrangements nor my wardrobe but only with my music. Mrs Malko and I both felt apprehensive about the competitive admission exams as the standard of the Polish conservatorium was high by international standards.

My parents made arrangements with our friends in Wilno, Mr & Mrs Oskierka, to look after me. I liked them. A few years later they had a farm in Lithuania not far from Karmelowo, where I spent part of my holidays. Mr Oskierka was a real gentleman, a breed that was disappearing in central Europe. They had a lovely home, beautifully furnished. He had very good taste, being more of an artist than farmer. He had studied in France when young.

It was at his farm, years before, that I had my first offer of marriage, it was also there that I had my first kiss from a man, and not from a schoolboy.

It was also there that I got drunk for the first time in my life. Mr Wladyslas asked me to decant wine from his barrels in the cellar. It was a very simple

procedure: the big wooden barrels had a cork which one had to remove and then insert a rubber hose and suck until the wine was running freely. One could either swallow the wine or spit it out whilst sucking. This tube was then inserted in the decanter. He wanted a few decanters from each barrel. I did it quite nicely, I did not like to spit so I swallowed all the first flows. When I finished I was somehow unable to bring the decanter up, and they found me soundly asleep on the steps, surrounded by all the decanters.

It was also there that I realised how badly I spoke in Polish. They teased me a lot, but in a friendly way, even composing some verses.

It was there that I could speak about my ESP as Mr Oskierka occasionally experienced it himself, about the nuisance of it and the embarrassment that it could cause. He knew father's friend, who predicted my future by reading my stars and star signs. The prediction was made when I was ten years old. I had written it up, including my comments in brackets. It was written in German of course. I would be good at music (sic!) everyone knew it anyway. I would have good abilities in maths and medicine. Some parts about the sun and moon I could not follow (all this I noted in my dairy in 1927, which I re-read in 1978!) That I would marry before the age of 25 and after my twentieth birthday that I would have two sons (mind you not two children but two sons!). That before my thirtieth birthday, around my fifth wedding anniversary, I would be surrounded by death. Death would be everywhere around me, but I would not die and live many, many more years. I would live in another country, very far away, I would have to go over the sea to this other country (my comments in the dairy: hurrah, I will go to America). In this new country, the prediction continued, he could see me and my children and also a husband, but could not tell if it was the same one or another. All of his predictions came true.

At last everything was ready and I could go. Mother somehow managed to get me a pass to cross the border between Lithuania and Poland without going though Germany, and I would be met by Mrs Oskierka and Mrs Lina at the border sentry hut.

I stayed a few days in Wilno, where I went to see Mrs Malko's friend, and I also met a music teacher Mr Jozefowicz, who was now a music critic. He was very old with a crippled wife but they seemed to be very much in love which I though was odd – to be in love at their age. I liked him as he reminded me of my grandfather. He cheered me up, saying that he thought I

would pass and be admitted, although he did not know either how many applicants there would be or how many places.

I remember one or more days whilst in Wilno. Mr Zygmunt Kruszewski showed me around the city, especially the cathedral which had modern lights installed, showing the sculptures without any glare. Mr Kruszewski was quite nice, he even invited me afterwards to a café, Rudicki, where according to him all the intellectuals met, as well as the cheese club members, but it was rather empty at the time we were there. Mr Kruszewski already had his degree and was working at the town hall in the press office on assignments requested by the Lord Mayor.

Next day I left for Warsaw, together with Mr Wladislaw who was going to help me find a suitable room. The extra money which I smuggled out of Lithuania I left with him and he would send me some, bit by bit.

At last I was going to be in a big city, without supervision, but first I would have to pass the exams.

Warsaw

I don't remember my first impressions of Warsaw. My diary had only one line - crowded streets, lovely displays in windows, and so many beautiful shops with so many cars.

The first night I spent with the family Kurzon who were Mr Wladislaw's friends. Dark rooms, dark furniture covered with dark green velvet, many corridors, passages and nooks, many old people and a parrot and a monkey, both of which I saw for the first time in my life.

I retired early that first night. My bed was behind a wardrobe at the end of the corridor. I was unhappy, let down and I somehow felt cheated. I cried. Then, during the night I reasoned with myself and the next day I was happy again.

Mr Wladislaw offered to help me look for a room for myself. I wanted to find one somewhere not too far from the Conservatorium.

Walking along the bustling streets, Warsaw seemed beautiful, full of promises, and all that excitement, just waiting to go around a corner and see the next sights.

But already the next night I slept in my own room which was on the corner of two main streets. My friend Lloyd was on the same floor. Strange noises from the city reached clearly. The noise of the trams, and the chatter of prostitutes, and the noise from the next room where a young couple lived. I heard them laughing and making love. Again I felt restless and but not at all happy.

Next morning I went to the Conservatorium. To my horror I discovered there were 80 applicants and only 12 vacancies! Here I met Olek, my friend from Kaunas who introduced me to some of his friends and we all went for a 'half a cup of black' to a café. I loved this, my first meeting with the youth of Warsaw. I remember two of the men - one whom I later called Red and the other Stanislawski. One was a fanatical atheist and a nihilist the other was a true Catholic determined to serve God and help human beings. These and similar discussions I had during all the years in Warsaw.

The same evening I met Stach, who became dear to me. Olek brought Stach into my room one day, warning that Stach does not like Marx, but does like the pretty models but considers that they all were soulless empty headed and without moral principles, and promiscuous, and even the ancients knew it of such models. Stach was prepared to help me settle in as he also came from Lithuania and being a friend of Olek, Stach knew that Olek had no time for me, being in love with Irka. Olek told Stach that I was green (inexperienced provincial lass), and may be stupid as well, but certainly not a flirt.

We spent only a few minutes in my room as I had to go to my friend's, the Kozron's, and it was a fair walk as they still lived in the Old Town. Stach said he did not mind taking me to them. We did not speak much after a few polite sentences as I was more interested in the window displays than in Stach. I stopped at a bookshop. Stach told me to look in the other window which had all the bestsellers but I hardly heard him as I had spotted the two books that I was unable to buy in Lithuania. "Whispers of the soul" by Tagore and sometimes translated from Sanskrit. I rushed and bought both books. This was the beginning of a friendship with Stach which lasted for many years.

The day of exams came and I was a bundle of nerves. We had a few rooms with pianos allocated for us for warming up exercises. According to me, all the others were playing a lot better than I. I was scared, my fingers felt wooden. I had no proper touch. I started to cry and did not want to go to the assembly hall where other candidates were called. Stach & Olek told me off, calling me a stupid coward. The base player pushed me into the wall and said the doorman would not admit me. The last sentence spoken was by Olek. "Don't despair, stupid rabbits sometimes have luck and even the most stupid ones sometimes have an inspiration."

I feel dreadful when my name was called. I sat down at the piano and lost my sight. I could see neither the black nor the white keys. My legs were shaking so badly that I was unable to keep them on the pedals I felt that at any moment I would burst out crying. The director came to me, patted my shoulder and asked me to play some scales. This calmed me down a little. When I came to play the Chopin and etude I had a lot of trouble and only later I was told that I played the whole piece in the wrong key! I was pleased only with my interpretation of Beethoven. I was quite certain that I had failed. A week later the results were posted on the board but I did not even go

to look. Olek came to tell me the news: I had passed and was even listed nearly at the top! My teacher would be Mrs Jacynowa. Only much later did she tell me that I played one piece really well and my playing of the etude in the wrong key was a masterpiece and even gave me some extra marks.

Warsaw - this and the following next years. I loved every minute. I had started to live and work, but I never missed lessons except occasionally the theory. Most evenings were spent at concerts with supper in restaurants, drinking vodka and listening and occasionally talking till late at night on various subjects. In the beginning I just sat and listened, being scared to open my mouth as, firstly, my Polish was not as good as theirs was, and I considered myself quite provincial. Also my accent was funny as everybody told me, speaking like Poles spoke in Lithuania. It took a few months before I started to take part in the discussions.

The discussions were so varied - about communism and democracy, about sex and free love, about music, new plays and authors. The group consisted of extremists and conventionalists, of rebels and supporters of the establishment. Everybody was criticised by everyone but everybody could listen and could talk. Never in my life had I heard so many different views and opinions. We were a mixed lot from different backgrounds, pursuing different educations. What united us was the love for books, music and plays. The majority were from the Conservatorium in the art school but there were also a few law students, architects, economists, writers and a few engineers. But there was not even one professional soldier, or should I call them military men? Although we did speak about the political situation and Hitler, we did not approve of the army. Marshall Piludeski was all right, but the army was not.

At that time I expressed the following ideas: Females are just as good as males, maybe even better (sic! From the male audience); Free love for everyone, down with the rites of marriage.

Love, TRUE LOVE, did not need rites. I could sleep with anyone I want, the emphasis being on 'I want'. As I did not hop into bed with anyone the boys called me: "the dog which barks does not bite" or "the cow which moos does not give milk." I did not care.

I became more and more carried away by socialism and later by communism. I attended illegal Party meetings, took part in demonstrations of which Stach

despaired.

I went with Stach to Buddhist and Yoga meetings. I did Yoga meditations, I believed, with small reservations, in incarnation. According to Stach, being a female I was not well endowed with spiritual virtues. I also loved dancing, balls, nightclubs; the more the better.

I also liked bridge and could play all night through.

I never missed my lessons and paid the maid who cleaned my room extra money so that she made quite sure that I was up each morning not later than seven, even if she had to pour water over me!

Olek, who took only a brotherly interest in me, told me to smarten up, as I looked so very provincial. I did not care, I had enough boyfriends. I belonged to our group. I took his advice only once. I had a lovely perm – all my natural soft waves disappeared and I had a beautiful frizzy perm done with steam. I thought I looked lovely, but when I came back to Kaunas, Mother thought I looked awful.

I loved to go home during Xmas and summer holidays. Going through Germany I would stop in Koenigsberg or Berlin for a few days and meet my old school friends. I liked seeing them but we started to drift apart. I thought that they were brainwashed by Hitler and they thought me backward as I could not appreciate Hitler's ideas. On the Jewish question they were not too certain, thinking about our mutual Jewish friends, but even here they were sure that Hitler would do only what was good for everyone and be fair. We had fierce arguments, but parted always as friends... the school ties were still very strong. My German friends were also fighting the inequality for the under-privileged working class. They liked the picture I painted for them of the poor working class life as described by one economist of my Polish group.

"If you are really poor, say a poor factory worker, you live in one room somewhere in a damp basement. This room is your bedroom, where the wife is "raped" every time it suits the male, where you all live, where you cook, where you hang out your laundry for drying over the hot stove, (provided you had enough money for wood), where the dampness from the wet socks, the smelly old socks is dripping into the cooking pot, if you have enough money to buy food." It was true that such conditions did exist. My German friends

saw the answer in Hitler's ideas, and I and my Polish friends in improved democracy, socialism or communism.

None of my German friends were interested in the afterlife or reincarnation, they called it decadent.

Coming to Kaunas, I chatted a bit with my parents then slept round the clock, talked with Mother and Father all day, went to Mrs Malko for a day to show her my progress and spent the rest of the time partly in Karmelowo with friends coming and going or coming to town for concerts, dancing and meeting friends, who by now were mainly Poles, male and females.

When I think back about my parents, I still see mother as a wonderful butterfly. She used to rush in, hug me and kiss me and disappear again. She was beautiful, smiling and laughing, full of life, gay and happy. Father would follow her slowly, sedately. I never talked much with Mother, there was nothing to talk about. She considered me wonderful, the best child a mother could wish for and I knew that I was not, but there was no way of showing her how mistaken she was. I loved her for simply being there.

I had some talks with Father. One holiday I told him that I didn't intend to get married ever but that I intended to have at least two children. I expected fierce arguments but there were none. Father listened to all my arguments, why I considered it terrible to be chained to one man for all my life, etc. He did not contradict but asked me to do him a favour: would I please let him know before I started having my children as he had to provide for me and my children's future. I thought it a fair request and promised to do so. Father was satisfied because so far I had never broken a promise given voluntarily.

During another talk I told him that I had a friend in Warsaw who was a prostitute. I thought that would shock Father, but it did not. I met her one morning coming back from a dance and we were the only two customers eating and sipping milk. We started talking, we liked each other and later on became friends and met often during that year. Hers was the usual sordid story. She became pregnant when sixteen years old, her family, poor farmers, threw her out. There followed a few hard, degrading years when she fought for the survival of them both. She was determined to give her child an education, and she managed – her daughter was a boarder at the 'Sacred Heart', the money for the child and herself she earned as a prostitute as it was the only way to earn enough money. I wanted to give her money but she

would not accept it. Instead, she gave me plenty of commonsense advice about sex and love. It was a hard way to earn money but she managed. She would never visit me and I was not allowed to visit her, but I was welcome to wait for her in the early morning hours and to buy her some breakfast. I am very grateful to her for those early morning talks. She helped me to see and feel life from another perspective.

Father was a good listener. I also told him another story about a handsome man who asked me to go to bed with him because he was such an accomplished lover and I would be able to treasure the memory. Only God, he and I would know about it!

Men were conceited, arrogant and simply too stupid for words! Father just smiled and I told him another story.

One of the men I was going with invited me to go to his house as his parents were away on holiday and it was the maid's day off. I knew what he wanted and was furious, as there was not the slightest hint of romantic love. I agreed sweetly, already planning how to retaliate. On the evening he expected me, my friends called for me to go dancing. We were four couples. I invited them to go to this man's place as we would have the flat all to himself, his parents being away. When we came to his flat I asked the others to stand back and rang the bell. He opened the door, smiling... but the smile soon faded when we all piled in and the boys started to make some rude comments looking at the table set for two, with candlelight and look through the door we could see a bedroom where rose petals were strewn over the pillows. I had great fun, but he did not and ignored me. Later in the evening we all went to a dancing place and only at the end did he ask me for a dance. He told me that I had behaved atrociously, that I did not know good manners being brought up in Lithuania. My sweet reply was: "Sooo sorry, but in Lithuania one does not invite a girl home when their parents were out, especially if one cares for her. You felt a fool when we arrived, so what? It will do you good, you have learned a lesson!"

Father did not approve of my reaction but he also had a laugh when I explained how he looked.

That summer I had a few marriage proposals, but I was not interested and decided to be less friendly with men as they were reading more into it. One proposal was really odd.

Leonas, a true Lithuanian, an engineer. It was in Karmelowo where Leonas

and Father talked most of the evening about a windmill for electricity. When Father left the room, Leonas turned to me and said:

“It is time I get married; I would like you for my wife.”

“But...but... I am a Pole.”

“It does not matter Polish girls can make good wives. I am sure we will be happy together.”

“I am very sorry, I thank you, but I do not intent to get married either now or in the next few years. I am going back to Warsaw.”

“I am sorry that you do not love me.”

He left soon afterwards. No speeches about love, no mad kisses, just nothing, not even flowers!

Father was not astonished as he thought that Leonas was not really madly in love with me, but I could make a good wife and, being well provided for might have certainly played a part in the proposal.

It was hard to imagine being married, but to do it because it was a sort of good business proposition – how dreadful!

Anyway, I was fed up with all the dancing, flirting and talking about marriage and sex. I missed Warsaw and Stach. I was happy when the time came to go back to Warsaw.

In addition to Conservatorium I took that year a two/three year course in agricultural education in Chyliczki. It was not a terchial education although the majority of girls had matriculated.

The school Chyliczki was run by women similar to Nuns, ‘Sodalitki’, called the third order. Students were boarders, all were females, all from farms, all were taught how to live on and manage a farm. We were taught how to rotate the crop, how to feed the animals, to help during the calving, to look after bees, to make preserves including sausages, cheeses etc, even how to milk cows. The school and farm were situated now far from Warsaw and we were very strictly supervised in our comings and goings. But being in the conservatorium where I had to attend classes, sometimes in the evenings, I was allowed to keep a room in Warsaw. The girls slept in dormitories and there was strict discipline re lessons, prayers and meals.

Who would have believed that I would fit in and feel really happy there? I really loved it. I made a few friends which would have lasted a lifetime if war had not intervened. There was Duka K. whom I liked very much but criticised her for being a snob, but she could not help being brainwashed from the cradle, as she belonged to the very old aristocracy. There was Parczewska whose father was a barrister in Wilna. She certainly was not brainwashed by the Establishment. She mentioned Zygmunt Kruszewski Senior, the father of the one I knew. She told me that although her father was a better lawyer, Mr Kruszewski was the most honest one, the most upright character according to her father. We three had long discussions about religion, about the rights of men, etc.

My closest friend was Stach, who was doing his final year at the Conservatorium. He was a composer and I thought a good one. We met as often as we could. I liked being in his company. We could talk and talk for hours, in parks, at the Zoo, anywhere. Stach was certain that his love for me was for life, maybe even eternal. I was not certain, I simply did not know if I really loved him or not. Sometimes I was even rude to him, as once when he told me that he was a virgin.

“You should be ashamed of yourself and not brag about it. I am not prepared for you to start experimenting on me, how do you think we will go about? With an instruction book?”

Stach was very hurt and I was truly sorry. But I still did not know. What was I waiting for? A ‘Prince Charming’?

That winter I had a shattering experience – a friend of mine died, committing suicide. She was beautiful and a very talented musician, good at the commerce school, which I also joined for a term simply to find out what it was about. Her parents were very rich by any standard. They were part owners of mines and, through her uncle, a Belgian, part owners of the Polish Private Railway. We were very close. She was brought up a strict Catholic and did not believe in anything, neither in God nor Devil. She did not believe that a boy might love her for herself. She used to say:

“How do I know that he loves me and not the money which is behind me?” No arguments would convince her. She would go off on a tangent: “I am stupid, I am too weak to do any good. I should start something like a colony for lepers. I should be able to help the poor, but I don’t know how. I know

something is very wrong in our society and nobody cares and I, I am just a drone with plenty of money and no guts, no knowledge. I would like to have a 'Deserving Cause' and be carried away but I can't, I am unable to do anything!"

Next night she committed suicide by cutting her wrists, immersing them in warm water and taking a lot of sleeping tablets. When she was found it was too late.

Why? Why her? She was so good, she could have done such a lot of good. Why? Why? Perhaps she did the right thing as a few years later the war started and she would have been unable to survive, mentally, all the cruelty around us.

It was about this time that Mr Zygmunt Kruszewski appeared on my horizon.



Zygmunt Kruszewski

I had met Mr Kruszewski Junior already a few times whilst in Wilno. Pan Wladyslaw warned me not to get too friendly with him because he was having affairs, as females found him very attractive, and as he might some day marry Zosia R., but at present he was still having a lasting affair with a doctor who was very fierce and ready to scratch the eyes of any female who would try to interfere. I assured Pan Wladyslaw that I could not care less, I was not in the habit of chasing males, it was rather the other way around. Next time I was invited by his mother to their home, I met there a Miss Wanda, a good looking female with beautiful large eyes and a superb figure. I

wondered if she was the one Pan Wladyslaw warned me about as she looked me up and down in a not very friendly way.

That Spring Pan Zygmunt came to Warsaw and we spent the whole day together. It was fun. First we went to the Luna Park, which I loved, then we went to see "Pygmalion" and afterwards to an exclusive restaurant, 'Adria'.

He was not much fun at the Adria. He was quiet and looked rather pale. Only later did I learn that he was sick from all the cocktails which I kept ordering.

After that day he kept writing to me and I looked forward to his letters. The girls teased me because I blushed when his letters arrived. Stach became jealous. I liked his letters, they were fun. Sometimes there was only a card with maybe one sentence, sometimes long letters about books, politics, etc but never about music. Never a word of love or sex. There was nothing wrong in liking his letters, I was not chasing him and we were not even flirting. And anyway, it was a very busy year for me.

My weekday began at 5 am, practising at the piano until the bell rang for prayers and breakfast at 7 am. Then lessons, either practise or in the field. Lunch break and again lessons. Then either at Warwaw for lessons or again 2 to 3 hours at the piano. Lights out at eleven. Now the fun began. We might have serious discussions or we would meet boys by jumping out through windows. It was all quite innocent, just for fun, although I received a shock one day.

One of the men I was meeting, who, like most of them, wanted sex of course and I did not, arrived in a posh car, with flowers in his hand and went straight to the headmistress. I was milking the cows at that time but others informed me about his arrival. There was not much we missed noticing between all of us and usually we were able to draw the right conclusions.

I was furious as I had asked him not to call for me officially at Chyliczki. A teacher called me, summoning me to the headmistress's office. I wanted to go in my overalls, smelling of dung, milk and cow manure but was told to change, put on some powder and lipstick and present myself as soon as possible. The headmistress saw me alone and informed me that, not having my parents in Poland, she was in loco Parentis for them. She was quite satisfied with his credentials, she knew his family personally, he was the only son on a good farm, he was well off etc. etc... she thought I should accept his proposal!

I thought I would burst but somehow I kept my temper. It was no good explaining to her that I would rather be dead than married to that creep, good prospects or not!

I was ushered into a small drawing room reserved for special occasions. This

creep was sitting there in a dark suit with flowers in his hand. The same one who, for the last month, had tried to have sex and, not getting it, was now telling me that he was certain I would be the ideal wife and mother for his future children. I was speechless. How could he! I had never encouraged him. Certainly we had a few kisses but so what? He was speaking about his great love, about our future, about his prospects, his financial standing when I interrupted him.

“Stop it. Don’t you realise that I DO NOT LOVE YOU! We will never have ‘future children’. Even a wedding ring would not make me go to bed with you. I will never ever marry you. Don’t you dare call again for me!” and rushed out. I was met by the girls who were excited, a proposal, soooo romantic and they did not have to listen too hard at the keyhole as I did not whisper, did not swoon but spoke rather loudly. They told me that when he left he took the flowers with him!

That evening the headmistress called me into her office advising me to reconsider, she would write to my parents as he was such a good prospect and a very good Catholic! I felt like laughing: he a good Catholic, what a scream! But I kept quiet.

That year I was not doing too well at the Conservatorium. My teacher, Mr Szpinalski, who himself was a known pianist, was not happy with my progress, especially Mozart, which was hopeless. I could not get him right. He wanted me to drop Chyliczki, he knew that during some theory classes I was half asleep. He thought that milking cows was just a waste of time for me and he could not understand that both my parents were very happy with Chyliczki. And Chyliczki was not the only trouble, I attended too many balls, too many concerts and live shows, too many dances, too many discussions etc.

I spent most of my free time with Stach. I felt good in his company, I even thought I might be in love with him but with three exceptions. I did not want sex with him or anyone, I did not like dancing with him as he squeezed one so hard that dancing was not fun and, the most important, he was so jealous, not only of other men, but also of females and even of shopwindows! He wanted my full attention constantly. But I still loved to be with him. I loved his interpretation of music, his translations of poems from Sanskrit into Polish, his kindness, his goodness. But was it LOVE?

At that stage I was getting more and more letters from Mr Zygmunt Kruszewski whom Stach called Z.K. The girls at Chyliczki were sure I was in love with Z.K. as I never spoke about him but about the others. I was reading his letters in the toilet, so as not to be disturbed. But there was nothing to speak about, there was not even the slightest hint of a flirtation. I kept his letters under my pillow and re-read them in the morning and at night.

One day, coming into the dorm, I saw Jadwiga standing in the middle of the room, reading Z.K.'s letter loudly to all the girls. She had taken it from under my pillow. I could have killed her but did not say a word until she finished. All the girls looked rather disappointed. I told them; "See, there is nothing to speak about. We just write polite letters about books etc etc."

The next week I was very glad when Jadwiga was caught pinching apples. It was her turn to pinch really good apples for all of us. Served her right, the stupid so and so, she couldn't even do a simple job like pinching apples. She was not allowed to go out during the weekend and had to say a lot more prayers in the morning and at night.

That Winter I thought a lot about love and men. Men were an odd lot. They spoke about love and passion when all they wanted was just sex. They said that only God and we two will know about the wonder of sex and love and, should the girl fall for this, she would be dropped very soon and if she did not, the stupid men wanted to make her the mother of his future children!

What is love? I could not find the answer but kept trying to find out. I wanted a passionate love, an all-consuming love, either as a love affair but preferably for ever and ever – 'until death do us part'.

There were conflicts between Poland and Lithuania and in 1938 there was even talk of the army being prepared. I was sure that my parents would call me back to Kaunas, as they did. I packed my things, wrote a good-bye letter to Mr Zygmunt and spent a few days with Stach. I was becoming more certain that I loved him but not quite enough as yet and was looking forward to seeing him in Kaunas in August. I was disappointed not to receive a reply from Mr Zygmunt. The last night in Chyliczki we spent talking and neither of us knew how long we would be separated.

Arriving in Warsaw I left my luggage at the station and went to get the remaining things from my room in Warsaw, where a very pleasant surprise

awaited me. There was a letter from Mr Zygmunt and... Mr Zygmunt was there too, waiting for me. I read the letter in his presence. He wrote that on 'wings of longing' he was flying to Warsaw to see me! A wave of unreasonable happiness....I felt myself blushing and...pulled myself up sharply. He must have had some appointments with others in Warsaw on this day and used it only as a manner of speech.

He was the only one who took me to the station, (the others, including Stach, had an important seminar), helped me to find my seat, and when I was ready to say 'farewell' and the train about to pull out, he jumped into the train and laughed, looking at my astonishment. He said that he would like to accompany me to Bialystok.

I thought – could it be that he cares for me? Maybe he is sorry that we will be unable to see each other for a very long time or has he an appointment with someone in Bialystok?

It was a few hours travel from Warsaw to Bialystok. We spoke about 'Kaziuk' a monster fair in Wilno, held annually. The previous year we had spent a whole day together there. He mentioned the little amber boat I gave him the summer before last, when I wanted to go sailing with his group, but was ordered to go home straight after the exams. He spoke differently from usual, nicely and tenderly. He suggested we go outside for a smoke and look at the landscape as our carriage was the last one and we would have a very good view.

It was the deciding talk in our lives but I could not remember it even a short while later.

He said that he was free to ask me to marry him. He told me about his love affairs, but said that he was morally free to ask me to become his wife. He ever spoke about – HER – in a nice way, not saying anything bad about her, not making himself appear any better than he was. It was the deciding moment when I started to trust him implicitly.

He spoke about many things. He would try to come as soon as possible if the political situation would permit, about his general feeling towards me, etc etc but he never uttered the word I was waiting for...LOVE.

I felt truly faint but saw that he was not much better, he was so nervous. I

remember patting his hand and telling him..."Don't worry so much, we have plenty of time, you will see, we will know, it might be all right."

Bialystok, an empty platform. Here he gave me the first kiss and my lips were so dry! Again I tried to cheer him up – "Don't worry, most things do turn out all right. You can write me, if you want, you can address me as "Ty" (a familiar form of address). One more kiss standing on the steps of the train and the train moved away.

I felt happy and also very sad. Why didn't he say the only word which really mattered – Love. Does he think that a marriage proposal includes love as a matter of fact? But it does NOT! Love is more than a marriage proposal!

I remembered last autumn when I was going from Kaunas to Warsaw. It was Czeslow then who came to the Polish border with me. Czes told me he loved me. He was hoping that I would come back home free, without ties. Czes did not ask me to feel bound to him, he only wanted to let me know that he would wait for me, hoping I would come back the same as I was then. Czes had flowers and spoke about love. Zyg had neither flowers nor did he speak about love.

Back to Lithuania

That summer I was unable to settle down to anything. My parents noticed it, my friends noticed it, although I tried to hide it.

I was always waiting for Zygmunt's letters. One day my parents started to ask me questions. (The talk which follows is copied from my old diary).

"Are you longing after Stach?"

"Not really, I know he will come in August."

"Were you flirting with Kruszewski?"

"No"

"Are you on the familiar 'Ty'?"

"Yes"

"You probably saw him fairly often?"

"No"

"Then how come you are on 'Ty'?"

"I suggested it to him."

"You did? But why you?"

"Because he asked me to become his wife."

"Who? Kruszewski?"

"Yes"

"How? Why? When? You hardly know each other!"

"I don't know why he asked."

"And what about you? Do you want to marry him?"

"Oh, for God's sake, leave me alone, give me some peace. My marriage is my own business, you yourself told me so."

"But Malunka darling, you should realise that your happiness is important to us. We don't want to interfere, but tell us – do you truly love each other?"

"Oh my God! Can't you leave me alone! I don't know! Do you understand?? I...Do....Not...Know!"

They gave me peace but not for long. The questions began again.

"Do you know him well?"

"No"

"Where did you meet?"

"A few times back in Wilno. I wrote you about it. Once in Warsaw and now

coming back home.”

“What is the background of his family?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“Who is his father?”

“I think a solicitor.”

“Please do tell us why you like him? Please understand that we don’t know him at all. We would like to know about him and to like him because of you, if he is worthy of you.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything! Stop questioning. I don’t know anything! Anyway, I can’t understand you. One would think that I was getting married tomorrow and I am not even certain if we are engaged or even if we will get engaged. Why all this inquisition? Up till now you have behaved quite decently regarding my boyfriends, even rationally, so why all this fuss all of a sudden?”

Father replied quietly but seriously. “We have the impression that you treat him differently from the others. Your decision about marriage is very important, maybe the most important in your life. Be assured we will never forbid you or interfere with your decision. But allow us to tell you our opinion of your choice. You have not decided yet yourself. Do not decide on the spur of the moment. We are neither against Kruszewski nor for him, as we do not know him at all. One day you might marry him or someone else. Try not to make a mistake in your choice. A good marriage is the foundation of happiness. I know better than you think. I know that for you an ill-matched marriage would be a disaster. It would not only ruin your life but probably his too.”

He was silent for a while and sighed...

“A happy marriage, two well matched people... does not come often. For you it might be even harder than for others.”

After that we did not speak any more about Zygmunt. Each day I wrote passionate letters full of love and feeling....and tore them up and burned them. Our letters were frequent, polite. In the beginning his were nice and kind. Later on they started to sound just polite. At that time he changed from law to diplomatic service and started to work in Germany, Stettin. He told me all the details explaining that as his future wife it would affect me too. My replies became barely polite, just like an aunty would write to her cousin! I did not want him to think that I needed him, that he had some ‘moral obligations’. I did not want his sympathy or pity. I wanted his love – all or nothing. No compromise.

I tried to rationalise with myself. Why did I want him and not someone else? He was good looking, but Vincent was better looking, others had better positions, better prospects etc etc. All this reasoning proved to me that my feelings towards him were stronger than towards others. Was it love? Who knows? Stach and Czes would have made better husbands but I did not want them. I did not care about position, I did not care that he was only a public servant, nor that financially others were better off than him. I did not want the others. Why? Why him? Was that love? I did not care for this type of love. It was so complicated! I did not want to think about it, I would have liked to forget it even. The summer of 1938 was full of activities – sailing, swimming, dancing, kissing passionately, or rushing to Karmelowo to supervise the farming. My parents did not interfere at all. They left me to do my own battle.

I had an unpleasant experience in Karmelowo. We had a new administrator, a Russian man in charge. In the beginning he was very polite, then he pretended to falling love with me, then he tried to rape me, then he threatened to kill himself if I would not marry him! I told it all to Stach and Czes. We decided that my next meeting with him should have witnesses – Stach and Czes. First he spoke about love, then about passion, then about suicide and took out his revolver. He said that if he could not have me, nobody else would – he would kill me and then himself. Stach and Czes appeared and threatened him with the police. He went, still threatening. I felt awful although Stach and Czes told me I should feel like the heroine, but I did not. Father sacked him and became the administrator of Karmelowo. I think I did quite a decent job of it. I am quite sure he never loved me, he just wanted to marry someone with a good farm.

Come autumn, conservatorium and everything as before with only one exception – father did not accompany me anymore to the balls. I was free to do what I wanted. Czes invited me to go to his farm for Xmas, I declined without giving an explanation and he was hurt. Stach wanted to spend Xmas with me and I told him that I had a letter from Z.K. – he might come for Xmas on his way home to Wilna. Stach was quiet for a long time and then he said: “I would like to see him. Do not be afraid, there will be no drama. I don’t even want to talk to him, I simply would like to see him. Remember... don’t ever forget....the only thing I truly want is your happiness.”

My darling Stach. No one could be as good as him!

One day, when sitting in the dentists waiting room, a Mrs Cerkulienie – I saw Zygmunt coming in! Everyone looked at the newcomer, everyone listened, especially as we started to talk in Polish. He told me he had a toothache and would like to see the dentist too. Just then I was called in and he followed me. The cheek! Without an appointment! I tried to explain that he had toothache and was on his way to Wilna. She, who knew me from childhood, told me to shut up and sit down.

When my mouth was open and full of cotton wool, I heard him say that he was my fiancé, that he had a bad toothache and that he hoped she might be able to help him.

Part of me wanted to yell that he was not my fiancé, let his teeth rot, the sneaky brute, but part was happy and kept quiet with all the cotton wool in my mouth.

He stayed a few days but I do not remember much. He was not very talkative as his teeth really hurt him. We went for walks, we behaved very properly, as if supervised and chaperoned. We talked about different subjects. I only remember that I felt like a pupil and he was like a teacher, asking about God in general, about life, about social conditions. I said what I thought, no good pretending.

I remember the first evening he was staying with us that he would like to speak with my parents. Just before he went to talk with them I stopped him and asked: “Please, say to my parents that you do love me. You see it is important to them, they love me, I am their only child, they are worried about me.” He just smiled and gave me a hug and a kiss.

I was so nervous that I was even unable to listen at the door. I do not know what they talked about.

Next day coming home from a walk, he stopped at Konrads, a café, and bought many, many cakes. Why does he buy cakes? I thought. Does he not think our cake will be good enough for him? He didn’t even write a note asking them to be delivered, he took the carton with him! What an odd man! He must love cakes! How odd!

When we arrived home there was nobody there, not even the maid. He gave

me a kiss or rather THE kiss! It was not my first one by any means but I went quite rubbery. But why did he still not speak about love? I wanted to tell him that I had kissed many men, but that this was different, but how could I tell him that? Oh my God, I was a wanton woman! I had never felt like that before. How could I explain it?

I asked myself then and I still ask myself now forty years later – how does one define love? The dictionary speaks about fondness, strong liking, devoted attachment to the opposite sex etc. But those are only the ingredients; I need trust and a lot more and also something intangible, something which was eluding any description.

Zygmunt left very shortly after. Czes came and was furious. He called me a cheat being stupid and inconsiderate. He compared me to a fruit ready to fall off. And there comes an outsider, who might not even care about me and then leaves immediately. Why this outsider from Wilna? If not Czes, it should have been one of them, who were always considerate, who wore the soles out of their shoes... we parted on a quarrel.

Stach came and saw the ring on my finger. He did not know that the ring was given to me by my parents as a Xmas gift. Zygmunt did not give me a ring. A symbol, it does not matter. Stach knew that I had got engaged. There was a long silence and he was the first to break it.

“This Xmas I lost my two dearest – you and my father, whom I buried yesterday.”

He looked so upset, he even had tears in his eyes. We both started to cry clinging to each other.

Quote from diary again.

“Stach, if you want I will be your wife and will do everything to make you happy. Can we get married soon? I would prefer already in January, please?”

“What about that?” pointing to the ring.

“This is not a ring from him, it was a present from my parents.”

For a second he smiled and looked happy.

“Do you love me? Tell the truth!”

“Stach, I like you... more than anyone else.”

“But not love me? Can you truthfully say that you love me?”

“I can’t.”

“And...him? Now speak the truth.”

“Yes”

“Yet you are prepared to tell him that you will marry me?”

“Yes.”

“In a few weeks time?”

“Yes”

“Even without love?”

“There are so many good marriages without true love. I do like you, you know it. You must feel it!”

“Happiness without love? Maybe...but not when I’ll know that you love someone else... Do you know that I love you with all my soul and body?”

“Yes. I know.”

“Does...he...love you? Do you believe him?”

“I....I don’t know if he does love me!”

“My God woman! Do you realise what you are saying? When I asked if you loved him, you said yes. When I asked if he loves you – you said – “I don’t know”. And you still want to marry me? You? Do you realise how you must love him? And you are saying that you will become my wife...if I want it...Did you tell him how you love him?”

“No....I did not.... He never asked!”

Stach rubbed his eyes and said that I must be utterly mad or he is mad, he simply does not understand. He will let me know tomorrow. Just before leaving he asked if I would abide by his decision.

“Certainly. I told you so. You know me, I never go back on a promise.”

...unquote.

Stach, did you know that I loved you? Differently from Zygmunt but I loved you!

Next day Stach told me that he was not going to marry me. He wanted love and not pity. He couldn’t leave Kaunas as his contract with the orchestra did not expire until the summer and we would be seeing each other. He expected me to be tactful and he wanted all his letters to be returned.

Now, it was just after Xmas and I was already waiting for Easter as Zygmunt wrote that he might be able to come and we could decide about our future. His letters were nice and tender, mine polite and pleasant. I was unable to tell him about my love because I did not know if he loved me.

I never thought about myself as being naïve. I considered myself sophisticated. Didn’t I speak and support ‘Free Love’? Did I not say that I

would have a few children, if I wanted to, but not necessarily a husband?

My parents were worried, they would have preferred at least three other men for my husband, although Mr Oskierka gave Zygmunt good character references. They argued that it was a great risk to consider marriage with someone one hardly knew.

Most of our talks ended like this: Looking straight at them I would say: - "You consider me not stupid and well adjusted. I am telling you that if he wants I will marry him. My reason is not a material one, but one dictated by feelings and you can't hold that against me. I promise you, that should I later realise it was all a mistake, I will get a divorce and come home. Stop worrying. You were decent enough to let me go to Warsaw where I could learn to live without supervision. Now I am going to find out what marriage is about. If it does not work out, I will write it down to experience gained.

Zygmunt came down for a few days over Easter. I wanted to stay with him at the hotel for a few hours, but he would not, saying we should wait for the proper time, there should be no dreary hotel rooms, nothing sneaky, it should be for life. I did not press, but felt let down, as I wanted to prove to myself that love does not need the blessings of the church. We decided to get married in June, after my final exams and the concert. There was no engagement party, there was no time for one as Zygmunt had to go back to work in Stettin.

After he left me there was hustle and bustle as mother started to prepare my trousseau. Wedding gown, frocks for different occasions suitable for a diplomat's wife, tablecloths, sheets etc. I did not care much about it, but had no say. We even went to Wilna as mother heard that there they had some special lace suitable for pillowslips. My mother and future mother-in-law were asking me what kind of borders I would prefer: narrow or wide? Only Aunt Olga was a real dear, she told both mothers that she knows what I would like and sent me away to look at the churches and to buy books and records.

During this stay I became quite ill as I had got the foot-and-mouth disease and felt very miserable and in pain. It took a while until I got better and coming home to Kaunas I needed about a dozen fillings and a few extractions.

In my diary for April, May and early June is hardly an mention about the wedding, as it was only a formal thing, the decision had been taken before, nor did I mention much about the final exam as I was certain that I would pass it, I wrote mainly about the concert which was very important to me. Only two would be playing – a violinist in his final year and myself, both with the orchestra. I wrote also about my talks with Mr Pryfer.

Mr Pryfer was father's friend and had children older than myself. I had many talks with him, even back in my school days, and now we were speaking again on the same topic. We usually talked in a small restaurant 'Derby' sipping wine or mead. His philosophy about marriage was as follows: It is of prime importance to know that you really love. This is more important than to be loved. What 'Love' is he was unable to define either, but he gave an example what he thought a woman should feel.

"Imagine you are married, you are very poor, you live in a basement, cold in winter and hot in summer. You both are smelly and dirty as there is no running water. You have to wash his dirty smelly socks...and you do not feel sick because you love him. You do not curse him that you are poor, you might just curse your rotten luck! If you can imagine it – you are in love."

Another point he was very definite about:- two things do go together, just like day and night:

"If you are married, you have a husband. Take it for granted that your husband will have affairs, he will sometimes be unfaithful. That is a fact of life. Don't ever forget it! If you don't like this idea, don't get married, just have a love affair and let the wife worry about you and not you about her. Don't you ever, under any circumstances, make a scene, don't ever show too much jealousy, hide your feelings. A man does not want to feel chained, he wants to feel free! One can put a ring and chain on a bear and lead him, but not a man. Remember if a fruit is forbidden it is very attractive. Don't forbid, don't make scenes, show only concern. Scenes will push your partner away from you. I know, I am speaking from experience. Should he admit to something which you probably already know you might cry a bit, but not too much and be forgiving when he tries to make it up, either with tenderness or presents. Never let the partner feel the chains. Remember it all and even marriage might work out well. The feeling of freedom is very important to humans. We do submit to wishes from others, but only voluntarily, not under compulsion. It should work for both partners."

Exams, concert and wedding were coming nearer. I did not like my wedding frock but let it go and got my way for the frock for the concert, something very simple in the style of the vestals of old Rome.

I had no worries with the bridesmaids as, according to our custom, each one wore what she pleased, each different from the others. Years later in Australia seeing a wedding I was appalled that all the bridesmaids were wearing the same frocks! I thought they were from an orphanage or some other institution. Just imagine wearing the same dress as others! Terrible! How can the girls stand it? It must be a great sacrifice for them to create an overall nice appearance just to please the bride.

The exams passed all right, but I was very worried about the concert as it was my first time to go on the air. To start with I certainly had bad luck. Just before leaving home I went to the bathroom, picked up a razor blade and cut my big finger on my left hand right to the bone! I could not stop the bleeding although we all had a try. I rushed to the chemist next to the conservatorium. He put a dressing on it and told me to give the finger a rest and have some stitches the next day. Mrs Malko was waiting for me at the door and rushed me straight to the room reserved for me to do some exercises and get my fingers soft and warm. Already after a few minutes the finger started bleeding again and I ran once again to the chemist. I came back just a few minutes before I had to appear. Poor Mrs Malko, she was a bundle of nerves.

The hall was full. Good, as I loved playing to a full house, except the places reserved for the critics with their papers and pens. From the wings I got the sign that the microphone was on.

The orchestra began and I hope and pray that all goes well. My first sounds are coming full and pleasantly. How good that I know it really well, I don't have to concentrate, I can let myself go and just listen. I remember feeling quite pleased with my playing and then...suddenly my fingers were wet. Oh God! The damn finger has started bleeding again, the keys are becoming slippery! When I had time I wiped the keys with my hanky but it was so small and got wet so quickly! The finger started throbbing and hurting more and more. How long have I still to go? At least another six minutes, maybe more. Oh, please let me keep playing, playing well, it is on the air! How will I ever be able to get the last few fortissimos? I must! Forget the finger, think about the music! Listen, check your touch, don't be a wet blanket, just

because of a bit of a cut finger! I listen...it still sounds good. Not much more to go... now the last bit... Fortissimo! I made it!

Applause, a quick bow and I rushed backstage. I made it! I made it! A man with a bucket and a clean, large rag tried to clean the piano but could not. The beautiful new Bechstein was pushed aside and the old one brought on the stage. The critics came and said some nice things. Even the director came and congratulated me on the good performance and was astonished that I could have kept playing with this finger. Mrs Malko told him that my wedding would take place tomorrow and that he should congratulate me especially warmly. Instead he became rude and started yelling at me.

“Why the hell does she need a husband and brats? She has her piano, she can represent the Lithuanian pianists in the wide world, why the hell did she spend years sitting at the piano if all she wanted was a husband? And brats to play a lullaby to? If she wants romance and sex, sure, why not? There are plenty of pants around, go ahead, it will only improve the music. Why the hell marriage?”

By now we had quite an audience and he stopped, looked around and switched to another tone immediately. He always could do a switch over quickly. He congratulated me and asked me to convey his condolences to my future husband who must be fool enough intending to get chained, then a quick kiss and a hug so fierce I thought he would break my ribs.

The concert was over, everyone was happy, even my future mother-in-law and her sister who had arrived the previous day. Zygmunt was to arrive only tomorrow, on our wedding day (20th June 1939).

The next morning was very hectic. First, I had to go to the dressmaker for the final fitting as I had not had time the previous day. Then, still without breakfast, I rushed to the hairdresser and hurried back home where both mothers were waiting and all my bridesmaids ready to give me assistance as it was getting late. The frock was delivered and everyone tried to help get me dressed, all in my bedroom, so none had any room. I was very thirsty and hungry but was given only a glass of water – not time to eat! From the other rooms came sounds of animated talking and laughing. All my male friends had arrived. Suddenly there was complete silence. Oh my God! Zygmunt must have arrived and he did not know anyone! I called for Czes asking him to take care of Zygmunt and introduce him to everyone. Czes, the reliable

darling, the only sane one around as even father had disappeared somewhere. At last I was told that I was dressed and ready to leave.

According to our custom, Zygmunt and I travelled in one car, driven by a friend of the family. He was father's friend from childhood and I liked him very much – Pan Wasary. I remember the slow drive to the Carmelite church and me reminding Zygmunt about his promise: he would give me a divorce, or at least a separation immediately, should I feel that the marriage was not working well. He promised once again but said that it was not the right topic whilst driving to church to get married.

Everything gets hazy and blurred. Church, people in the street and many more inside, the organ playing Ave Maria, the priest whom I could hear but understand only bits and pieces. Zygmunt seems so calm! I hear myself promising an oath of eternal fidelity and thinking: I certainly want it for always and always but not because I must, only because I would like it for always and always. At last all is finished. Kisses, hugs and I can't think but keep smiling.

Suddenly I find myself alone in the sacristy. Why was I alone? What should I do? I decided to wait as certainly Zygmunt would come sooner or later. At last he came with Pan Wasary and Pan Silwestrowicz as witnesses. I signed my new name with a shaky hand and we all went to the Metropole hotel where the reception was to be held.

We were driving slowly as we must be the last to arrive. According to an old custom we were met at the door by my parents. Mother was holding a tray with a few pieces of dark rye bread and salt. We dipped the bread into the salt, ate some giving thanks for our daily bread, then we had a large glass of vodka, drinking it to the end and then we had to smash the glasses, throwing them behind our shoulders. Everything was fine, the glasses shattered and we went in. The reception commenced.

According to our custom it was a large reception, about 40 people. Only family and my close friends, Zygmunt's mother and aunty, none of his friends as they were all in Poland. Although Poland and Lithuania had by now diplomatic relations, none of his friends came as it was burdensome to travel to another country for only a few hours.

Eating, drinking, dancing, just as it is the custom at most weddings. I had had

nothing to eat since yesterday's lunch and now with all the drinking, I got drunk. I remember looking at the best man and saying:

"How come I got married to you? I certainly like you very much, but I never wanted to marry you!"

"Don't worry, look to your left, that is the many you are married to."



Maria's & Zygmunt's wedding. Zygmunt is standing behind Maria. Maria's mother, Julia is on her right and Bama (Helena) Zygmunt's mother on her right.

Zygmunt and the best man left during the party, still in tails and went to the Foreign Office to arrange the last formalities before our departure that evening. Now I was a Polish citizen with a diplomatic passport.

I had to go home to change quickly. Checking that the suitcases were not forgotten and then quickly to the station where most of my friends were already waiting. Barely time for a few kisses and the train pulled out.

Honeymoon & Consular Service

I was feeling rather lost. There on the platform were my parents and all my friends, here in the train was Zygmunt, although my husband, rather like a stranger, here was also his mother and his aunt. I did not like the beginning of our married life. I felt that I did not belong here, neither to Zygmunt nor to Mrs Kruszewski. They were all strangers. I couldn't even voice my thoughts to Zygmunt, what would his mother think?



I didn't feel happy at all, just so very tired. Two days before there had been my exams, yesterday the concert and today the wedding.

After a few hours we arrived in Poland and Zygmunt's home, where we were met by his Aunt Ola, whom I liked best of all. Now I think I loved her as after greeting us she said that I must feel tired and she would show me to my room, which was separate from Zygmunt's room. God bless her!

Next day lots of Zygmunt's relatives arrived for a party given in our honour. He had so many

relatives. I didn't know any of them throughout all the years, as one uncle lived in Poland, one aunt in France and another uncle in Russia. I was not

used to masses of relatives. I was trying to sort them out but got lost. I liked only his father who was quiet, but looked nice and pleasant and he was the only one who did not glare at me. The others looked at me as one does at a new animal, just bought on the market!

The following day I looked at myself in the mirror and could see no difference between Mrs Marusia Kruszeswka the woman and Miss Marusia Voitkeviciute (or Wojtkiewicz).

Next evening we left for Germany, (Stettin), going first through Warsaw. We overslept in the train and woke up at a goods depot railway yard. In Warsaw there was again a party for us, again plenty of relatives. By now I was completely lost as to who belonged to whom. But that was not the end as the next stop was Poznan where there were again more relatives. How could one have so many relatives?

Next day we went through Danzig (Gdansk). Luckily no relatives, but I'll never forget Gdansk as here we had our first row. I don't know what about but it had to do with an umbrella. I thought Zygmunt to be domineering and he thought me irrational and we both thought we had made a terrible mistake in choosing each other as partners. However we made it up on the same day and arrived in Stettin happy and full of anticipation to start our life together.

Zygmunt had only one room. A nice room with nice furniture there were flowers to welcome us, but it was only a room. But again I did not measure up to Zygmunt's expectations. He tried to be nice but I thought him inane. Showing me this one room he started to explain as if to a blind person: here is the desk, here is the wardrobe, he even opened it showing masses of white shirts, here is the bed and here is the table, the couch etc. As I was standing in the middle of the room he asked me to sit down, which I did, but then he asked me to get up as I was still in my overcoat. He helped me take it off and showed me where to put it and my hat. He really kept trying but I felt confused and my only replies were "yes, thank you" or "no, thank you." Then he brought a bottle of wine and it became a bit better but when he asked me if I loved him I replied: "I think so, yes." He was nice and kind but everything was so alien – his wardrobe full of white shirts and dark suits, his room not mine, not even really ours, and even he, although a legal husband, was a stranger, a person whom I did not know.

I liked Stettin and settled down very quickly. The German language was

more of a mother tongue to me than Polish and the way of life was quite familiar.

It was a sunny summer and I spent most of the days swimming in the Glamek Sea. There was a good library next door to us and, although I was alone, I felt happy and looked forward to the evenings when Zygmunt would be with me. Except for breakfast we were always eating out and always liked restaurants and here it was even more fun as they were all new to me. He had a car, which I think he loved even more than me and we spent weekends motoring if he did not have to attend parties. I did not like these parties, I felt so inadequate. My Polish was still faulty and I was afraid of embarrassing Zygmunt and therefore kept quiet and answered only when addressed, in very short sentences. I liked the Consul, Mr Nowicki, but felt unsure with his wife who was so sophisticated. I liked Talunia Minishewska but she was younger than myself and we were shy of each other.

The political situation was already tense. I remember that once I travelled with the Consul to Berlin, which was not just an outing. He had to deliver some documents to the Embassy and it was better for him to travel not alone but with a young female.

We spent only a short time in Stettin, as Zygmunt was due for his annual leave on the 1st of August, which we intended to spend partly in Druskieniki, a Polish spa and partly in Lithuania.

The journey was not pleasant. Near the frontier we saw armoured cars, we were stopped for many hours, our entire luggage was inspected, including the car, and I even had to undress completely but they did not find Zygmunt's revolver which he kept in his jacket and, being a hot day, the jacket was hanging on a fence post! Along the road were newly built hangers, marching military men, newly erected barracks. It gave one an unpleasant feeling. They let us go after a few hours.

Druskieniki was nice, I liked it. Zygmunt's mother was also there but she spent most of her time with her friend, Senator Ambramowicz, a very pleasant man. Zygmunt and I had a lot of time to ourselves and we started to know each other. Even an unpleasant memory from Stettin began to fade. It happened when my trunks arrived and, whilst unpacking, Zygmunt saw a letter addressed to him which was never posted. The letter contained a lot about Stach and I considered it school-girlish. Zygmunt wanted to read this

letter but I would not let him, saying that some time later I would show it to him, but not now. He agreed to wait and everything would have been fine but he took the letter and started to draw some lines on the last page and said laughingly that now he would be able to recognise this particular letter and I would not be able to substitute it at some later date. How could he do a thing like this? I never told him a lie. I always hated lies as they were so cowardly. According to me, if one was caught doing wrong it would make it even worse to tell a lie. Zygmunt did not trust me! How could we build up a good marriage without trust? Trust according to me was the essential thing between two partners.

A few days later Czes arrived from Kaunas, loaded with presents from parents and friends and even with a new wedding ring for Zygmunt who had lost his whilst swimming. It was good to see Czes. He always brought with him the atmosphere of home, of love and trust which I always had. I asked him what I should do if my partner did not trust me (without giving details). He was sympathetic but could not advise. He asked me if I thought I had made a mistake marrying Zygmunt. What could I say but the truth, that I didn't know. It was still too early, we were both trying. I promised Czes once again that, should I see that the marriage did not work, I would let him know and come home. He kissed me tenderly and I knew he was my friend for life.

Now here in Druskeniki I felt that Zygmunt was starting to trust me, even when he did not understand.

We left about the 20th intending to go first to Wilno and then to Kaunas. It was an unpleasant drive. A lot of traffic and many young men asking for a lift, as they were called up. Our car was overcrowded. In Wilno there was a card waiting for Zygmunt, advising about mobilisation. Already the next evening he had to be in Molodeczno where his regiment had to assemble. The atmosphere was tense but nobody was really frightened. Why should there be war? Just for the town of Danzig? It seemed quite unreasonable. I was not frightened, just annoyed that our holiday was over earlier than intended. We always had some political tensions but the diplomats were always able to smooth out the problems just by talking. An army prepared and ready in the background gave their talks a nice support.

In Zygmunt's house I felt a complete stranger. His mother, all the aunts and even old Zosia were all the time around him. He had not time even to say a few words to me in private. I was not the only outsider, his father was too. I

hoped that maybe at the station he would sit next to me for a few minutes whilst waiting for the train. It was not to be – his mother took him by the arm and they walked up and down the platform until the train came. I thought he looked handsome in his uniform of Lieutenant. The train came and everyone rushed towards him for a hug and kiss, only his father and I were standing in the background, but he remembered and gave us a quick kiss.

When the train left I decided to leave as soon as possible and told my mother-in-law and she seemed quite happy about it. It was lovely coming home. Open arms, love and smiles. Even father was humming the whole day. Friends came and telephoned. All were happy to see me. I realised only then how I had missed the atmosphere I was used to. It seemed simply heaven.

It was the 27th of August, 1939.

After the first wave of happiness I started to take notice of my surroundings. Father seemed pre-occupied. He brought me newspapers to read. The headlines were alarming. Father hoped that once again, everything would straighten itself out. I received a letter from Zygmunt, not from Molodeczno, but from Wilno! He wrote that he was demobilised and recalled to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw. He did not know for how long. As he was in a hurry, it was only a short letter, promising to write from Warsaw immediately. He suggested I should join him in Warsaw. Why not?

The Beginning of the War

Against the wishes of my mother, I decided to go to Warsaw. I left Kaunas at 4.30am on 1st September 1939. When I was at the frontier in Vievys, I had a telephone call from Mother. She told me:

“There is war between Poland and Germany!”

She cried and begged me to come back home to Lithuania, as Lithuania was neutral. She argued that Zygmunt would be at the front, that I would probably not even see him.

Yesterday I was not certain what I should do, but now, when war was declared, I had no doubts whatsoever. I was certain. My place was in Poland. I would try to see my husband before he went to the front. Germany had attacked Poland for ordinary territorial reasons, threatening Poland's independence. My place was in Poland.

I spent a few days in Wilno, trying desperately to get permission to go to Warsaw. Already as the first day the government issued orders to discourage people from travelling, leaving the trains for the army, and especially not to go to the capital city, where so many wanted to be in times of upheaval. Right from the first day there were heavy air raids. I was scared when I witnessed the first air fight whilst waiting for a train. I remember hoping that none of my German school friends would drop a bomb on me, as war or no war, enemy or no enemy; I knew that they would hate the thought of killing me – me their friend.

The travel to Warsaw lasted a day and a night instead of the usual few hours. The train was shot at, some bridges were demolished and we had to walk for kilometres at a time. I was dirty, thirsty and hungry when I arrived in Warsaw.

I went to one of Zygmunt's aunts where I found a short letter waiting for me. It was more of a scribble than a letter in which he told me that he had to leave and would I try the Foreign Office to find out where he might be. It took me ages to go to the office, as Warsaw was being bombed, trams were not going and taxis were without petrol. At the office I was told that Zygmunt would be leaving that day at 10.30am from the East Station. It was already 10am and I

asked the officer how could I reach the station in time? His reply was: “That is your private business, madam, don’t you know there is a war on?”

I felt desperate and rushed to the nearest taxi stand, near a service station. Showing my diplomatic passport, I requested that they fill up the taxi as I was in a hurry and had to be at the station at 10.30. I would not let them argue, did they not know there was a war on?

I got the petrol and taxi but progress was very slow and getting worse the nearer we came to the station. All the streets were jammed with lorries and cars, the sidewalks were full of people. Near the station we were unable to get through, and I walked. I have never seen such crowds: crates, luggage, people including little children. Part of the station was already destroyed by previous bombing and there were dirty smelly trenches along the street.

At the station I was told that the train reserved for the Foreign Office had already left. Zygmunt was gone, destination unknown. What should I do with myself? I had no money and only an overnight bag. Should I stay with Zygmunt’s relatives? Definitely no! I must try and get some money from the Ministry but I also must decide what I intended to do.

Back to Lithuania? Definitely not.

Back to Wilno and try from there to do something worthwhile? Impossible, as the last train for Wilno had left yesterday.

I had to find some of my friends from the Conservatorium. But here again I struck trouble. The public telephones were destroyed, only one at the soda fountain was working and there was an unbelievably long queue! There were thousands of people and it seemed as if everyone wanted to make a phone call. The queue had been dispersed so many times by air raids. I was able during the next hours to make a few phone calls, but all were out of town, even Irka Gaszdecka was out, although I did remember her having a farm. I decided to join the Red Cross, as their gathering point was not more than twenty kilometres away. I should be able to make it but I was so tired! I decided to make one more phone call. I was standing again in the queue near some crates and gave the man in front of me a bit of a push so that I could at least lean against the crates. The man turned round...it was Zygmunt!

Even now we call this meeting a miracle and we celebrate the 7th of

September!

Without this meeting our paths would have been quite different and we would have been separated for many years, if not for always.

I was not even happy meeting him. I just let go and started to cry. He would know what to do, I could relax! “When did you arrive?”

“This morning.”

“Why did you leave so late, I have been waiting for you for days!”

“I left on the 5th. Permission to come to Warsaw, bombing, torn bridges, walking.”

“Come, now we don’t need the phone. Where would you like to go?”

“I don’t care, somewhere where I can sit down and have a glass of water. I’m so thirsty.”

After a few cups of strong black coffee and innumerable sandwiches I started to recover and felt unspeakably happy. Our meeting in this crowd was to me a miracle and an omen. We were meant to be together! My Zygmunt and I, we will never part again. Never. Together we would manage the nightmare of war and the uncertainty of tomorrow, we would manage as long as we were together.

His train, the second for the Ministry, left in the afternoon. We all had seats. Nobody knew the final destination of this train. Our train was bombed so many times and quite heavily in Czeremcha, where we waited the bombings through in the cemetery, laying close to each other, surrounded by tombs. I was very frightened. We were shot at from diving bombers (Stukas?), there was no food only lemonade and dry sausages. I got stomach ache and fainted, but not for long.

Next evening we arrived in Krzemieniec where Zygmunt (of course!) had some relatives. Mr Czarnocki was the director of the lyceum living in a beautiful white building. I liked all his family. Most of the ministries were evacuated to Krzemieniec and also foreign embassies. Zygmunt did not have to go to work although he enquired each day. We went for walks. It was a charming old town but now overrun by evacuees. I sent a cable to my parents so that they should not worry, as we were safe. A few minutes later all hell broke loose.

It was the local market day, all the town was overcrowded when, without any

warning (there were no sirens in Krzemieniec) bombs started falling, machine guns mowing down people and animals. It was dreadful! There were dead and wounded covering the streets, frightening horses running berserk still attached to their carts. The chaos was unbelievable, there was blood everywhere. A nightmare, a senseless slaughtering. Zygmunt was helping carry the wounded to the hospital, his shoes slippery with blood. Bodies without heads, and heads without bodies lying around.

Next day there was a protest notives (diplomatic notes) even to the Pope. Nobody listened, nobody cared. Next day people started to leave Krzemieniec. The offices closed. Many people, especially the officials, were encouraged to leave Poland and go to Romania as the situation was supposedly grave. There were no official orders and no official news. Officials left in cars. We were offered a lift by Mrs Nowicka, the Consuls wife, but Zygmunt declined. Buses were provided for the staff of ministeries. People were pushing and scrambling to get in. Neither Zygmunt nor I felt like it. Zygmunt decided to go back to Wilno and maybe from there to join his regiment. We bought tickets and left after a friendly farewell from Mr and Mrs Czarnocki. We did not travel far, only 45km – another four hundred kilometres still to go. There were no more trains, all the rails were twisted, the trains destroyed.



Self hand-crafted cover of Zygmunt's memoirs

All of our wanderings during the war years are recorded in a book titled ***Bellum Vobiscum***, (www.bellumvobiscum.com) written by Zygmunt Kruszewski. Reading my diary I am amazed how little I saw compared with Zygmunt. We were together, we covered the same routes, but my private memoirs were limited. I did not see the towns we passed, I did not keep track

of the political events from week to week. My horizon was narrow. I saw only what was in front of me, I was frightened. I was afraid of bombs, of bullets from machineguns, of being wounded and of pain and torture. Scared to become hysterical, as it would have made things worse.

I was frustrated with all the human misery around me, all the suffering and being quite helpless, hating war with an intensity I never knew I could feel. I wanted to harm and hit back at my enemy, Germany, but how? When? I used to bite my knuckles when hearing about all the atrocities, especially those done to the Jewish people. All these feelings grew and intensified during the years, but at the moment of leaving Krzemieniec I was just very frightened.

Walking was a tiresome business on roads crowded with evacuees, with planes diving and shooting at us with machine guns. We were constantly hungry as one could not buy food for money, only occasionally in exchange for goods, but we had hardly any goods left to exchange. Each of us had some kind of rucksack which was a pillowslip with straps attached but there was not much in them. Zygmunt decided to leave the road in Alexandria and bought a dugout, something like a kayak. The man who sold him this dug-out had sons at the Front, fighting to protect the land. Whose lands were they protecting? They were land-less farmers, their landlord's sons were not fighting, they were somewhere safe, they were not risking their lives.

It was good to float down the River Horyn. It was so quiet, floating down the narrow winding river, but we were constantly very hungry. It was also very cold during the nights. The nights were clear with a full moon but, even huddled together and covered with my overcoat, we were shivering, especially at dawn, and so very hungry. One day we heard that the Soviets had entered Poland! They had stabbed us in the back. Now all was finished! We couldn't fight two powerful enemies nor could we let Poland be divided once again by Russia and Germany! Where were the allies? What was happening to the promises and all the pacts? We did not know what was happening in the world. We had no newspapers and people we spoke to had no idea what was going to happen.

Once we were stopped by a gang of communist youths who were going to kill us but there were diverted when they saw their rich landowner moving out. They went for the landowner and we used the time to run away, but decided that we should abandon the kayak and start walking again.

We started walking along the railway lines with the tickets in our pockets. Counting the poles and counting the miles covered, we walked on and on and on. The pack on my back seemed to get heavier and heavier and Zygmunt took it away and carried it for me. My feet seemed to get bigger and bigger and each step was an effort. I felt so tired and wanted just to sit down but we had to go on. Alongside the rails were freshly hewn crosses, sometimes single ones. Sometimes there were a few together. Who were they who died here so recently? Were they local people who settled their grievances during the time when there was no police? Or were they retreating soldiers attacked by whom? The Soviets? The local youth of communists? We did not know then come also the evacuees who could not keep going any longer. No one knew.

At last we came to a town where the Red Army was already there. After an interrogation we were told that there should be a train to Wilno. A train! How wonderful! No more walking! We were even given some bread, not even stale but quite fresh! Lovely! It was heavenly to travel by train. It was only a cattle truck but we could sit on the floor and watch the miles go past. Next day we arrived at Wilno and it was only a few miles to Zygmunt's home in Kolonia Wilenska.

There were already quite a few relatives there, mainly refugees like us but I do not remember them all. What staggered me was the way we were met, no fuss, no ado, not even a real kiss! Just as we would have been met after a few days holiday. We had been bombed, we had been gunned at, we were tired and hungry and had had no proper sleep... but we were met as if everything was quite normal, as if there was no war, as if the Soviets had not hit us in the back, as if we were still free people!

We were given a room to ourselves and already the next morning Zygmunt was told to do some ploughing and I to bring water from the draw well and water the new plants.

There were some quarrels between Hanna and my mother-in-law, something about either too much food or too much wood, I don't remember but Hanna and her son left and Zygmunt and I felt that Zygmunt's mother was not fair. Zygmunt senior, Zygmunt's father, kept in the background and did not say much. However once I caught him looking at my Zygmunt when he was ploughing and Zygmunt senior had such a nice expression on his face, full of love and tenderness, just like my father when looking at me. But when he

saw that I was watching he turned around and left the room. What an odd family, I thought. Why are they afraid to show that they love? That they care?

I remember being very astonished that each sister, that is my mother-in-law, her sister Ola, her sister Jadzia, cooked their food separately and if one of them ate the meal which Zygmunt's mother provided and was cooked by old Zosia, each one had to make it up by work in the garden on the vegetable patch or somewhere else. One sister had the top floor of the house, the other slept in an outhouse, but each sister was somehow made to feel she was not having a free meal. I simply could not understand it.

At last my mother arrived. My darling little mum! It had taken her a few days instead of a few hours. How happy we were to see each other. Hugs, kisses, tears and smiles. It was so good to see her. War or no war she still loved me and Zygmunt and father was waiting for us.

All men had to register including Zygmunt, being a reserve officer. Zygmunt was lucky, he came back the same day, but Hanna's husband Bogdanowicz never came back, nobody knew what happened to him. Many men were never seen again, some only after many years, some were deported deep into Russia and many died during the transportation.

Mother asked what we intended doing and Zygmunt, after giving it a great deal of thought, decided to go to our farm in Karmelowo and do some farming as food was getting scarce and father was too old for farming. It was all right with me. I preferred to go back to Lithuania. Mother arranged everything for me and I left before Zygmunt as he had still a lot of work to do around his place.

Back to Lithuania again

At home in Kaunas there were many refugees from Poland. There were not enough beds so the dining room floor was covered with straw mattresses on which people could sleep. Lisa, our cook, grumbled at having to cook for so many people. All the refugees were from Central Poland which was proclaimed by the Germans as a guberniya (province) wiping Poland off the map. The refugees did not stay for very long; they left either for Sweden or Portugal, trying from there to go to USA or to South or Central America.

It was late autumn when Zygmunt came. We stayed a few days in Kaunas as my parents had ordered a couple of suits and coats for Zygmunt and the tailor was not yet ready. I saw that Zygmunt felt odd at our place, just as I felt odd at his place. Everyone was fussing about us; nothing was too good for us, according to my parents. Zygmunt loved food; therefore Mother was always bringing some from an exclusive delicatessen. He once showed a preference for some bread rolls and now each morning they were bought; also ham, eggs and cream which had to be fresh; all meals consisted of dishes we loved and so on. Zygmunt once asked me:

“How long will your parents behave like this?”

“How do you mean ‘like this’?” They don’t behave any different from usual and they will behave like this always.”

“But why?”

“Don’t you understand that they love not only me but you also? They love giving us presents, they like to see us happy. They were always like that. Why should they change now because of war? What has war to do with loving us?”

As Zygmunt and I were going to stay in Karmelowo, Mother wanted to give us expensive presents to make expensive improvements, etc. but Zygmunt was against it, explaining that he came to work and not to be pampered. Father was the only one who seemed to understand Zygmunt and convinced Mother to stop interfering, explaining that Zygmunt had principles, that he wanted to be independent of financial help. Mother thought that Zygmunt

was pig-headed but she did what Father asked. I was allowed to ask for what I wanted, provided Zygmunt did not mind.

We went to Karmelowo where Zygmunt worked really hard all day. He worked even harder than the farmhands; he was up before the labourers and was the last to come home. In addition, he beautified our backyard, planting hundreds of willows along the fences. I was getting bored; I had nothing to do as even the meals were cooked by “Fat Kasia”, the laundry was done by someone else, I could not go riding as my horse had already been sold. There was no loom in Karmelowo. I started knitting. A friend of mine spun the wool which was beautiful and soft. I wanted to make a pullover for Zygmunt. It was a Sunday when I finished it and Zygmunt was sleeping. I went to awaken him but he only grumbled something. I was so excited as the pullover was really nice. I started to tickle him ... he jumped up, looked at me full of hate, started to yell at me and even grabbed a chair and banged it a few times; I had never heard such a row in my life. The worst I had ever heard before was when my parents had a row.

My mother had brought quite a crowd of people home for a drink after a ball and when they left it was already getting light. Father was telling Mother off, calling her intoxicated and something else; but Father did not shout the way Zygmunt did. What was the reason for this yelling? I did not do anything wrong; I left the room feeling very unhappy and deeply hurt. He was a brute. It was time that I realized that our marriage would never work. I decided to go by the next available bus to Kaunas and straight to our solicitor who should help me get a divorce as soon as possible.

Our marriage was breaking up! I was deeply unhappy. Zygmunt came to me and started talking but I would not even listen to him. He came again, apologized, explaining that he was always impossible when being awakened by tickling; he explained that I should look at it like a disease – such as he being handicapped, crippled or hunchback. I calmed down and started thinking: Crippled? Handicapped like a hunchback? ... How wonderful! That is nothing, only bad luck. I would be able to deal with him being handicapped, no trouble. Simply, I would never awaken him by tickling – and I never did – and we were so happy together.

Zygmunt strained his back and could barely walk. I loved looking after him. His mother came and stayed with us for a while. One day when she was leaving, I had another row with Zygmunt. When Zygmunt started working

on the farm he allocated me the duty of supervising the milking. I had to check that the cows were cleaned before milking, that they were milked dry so that not too much milk would be stolen. It would have been all right except for the first milking which was at four in the morning. It was late autumn and still quite dark and cold. I started to give the first milking a miss as I hated to get out of bed at such an ungodly hour. Just before his mother was leaving he started telling me off: “You behave like a spoiled brat; you have no concept of duty, you don’t keep your promises, you are like an old wet rag – soft without any backbone. I am disappointed at being married to such a hopeless female. This morning there was a lot of milk missing which probably went to the farmer’s piglets!” I yelled back: “To hell with the milk! We have enough; let them have the milk. I hate getting out of bed in the dark and the cold!”

“It is high time that you learned the concept of duty! If you want to, you can give them milk, but you promised that you would supervise the milking. Time that you grew up, you spoiled only child!”

“To hell with the milk and to hell with you! If you think me so awful, why don’t you go? Go now with your mother. I don’t care if I never see you again, you and your damn duty. I hate you!”

A few minutes later, he and his mother left. I looked through the window, hiding behind the curtains which wasn’t necessary at all as he never looked back. He did what I told him to do; he left me and went back to Wilno with his mother! How I hated him for leaving me as I knew that I still loved him, milking or no milking. Our marriage had lasted just over a year! I did not want the marriage to be finished. He and his stupid DUTY! It was our milk, or rather, Father’s. But Father would rather have less milk if I could stay in bed as long as I wished. I was standing there for ages and then it hit me. I will never see him again! I started crying, feeling so very sorry for myself. I threw myself on the bed and started sobbing. I felt someone touch me ... it was Zygmunt! He kissed me and hugged me and explained to me what he thought about the words “duty” and “responsibility”. He explained calmly, wiping away my tears. I listened and had to agree with him; he was right and I was wrong. He told me to forget about the milking in the morning; he would do it. But never you fear, I was the first up and never missed milking time – at least for a while.

I got a cold and was not feeling well and went to see the doctor. The doctor

told me that I was pregnant. Zygmunt was happy. I was neither happy nor unhappy. It was a fact of life; nothing new, nothing startling.

The howling wind made the house in Karmelowo hard to keep warm. The toilet was very far away. I was feeling all right but was fainting fairly often. One mare died during foaling and I had fainted for some length of time so Zygmunt and Mother decided that I should move back to Kaunas. I did not mind as I did not see Zygmunt during the day anyway; he was working or in the forest chopping wood for next summer. In Kaunas a lot of fuss was made about my being pregnant. I was again spoiled and loved every moment of it. Zygmunt came often and when the real snow came I went for visits to Karmelowo. He would not let me go on skis behind the horse but we went on sleighs and he always managed to topple me over a hill and I went rolling down, landing on the soft, dry snow; it was lovely.



Zygmunt on his farm in 1939

The baby was due in September or October. I felt quite well apart from the fainting which did not worry me; I rather liked to faint and was sorry when brought back to consciousness. I picked only at Zygmunt but he never grumbled, the darling, he was always ready with a smile and was always forgiving, always trying to understand.

Summer came and my parents suggested that we should go to Palanga, a spa along the Baltic Sea. Zygmunt was happy to get away from the farm for a while. We went together with Father's friend, Pan Wasary. I loved him dearly. He was an exceptional person. He was an atheist but, to me he was the nearest thing to a saint that I have ever met. He was a professor at the Kaunas University in the faculty of mechanical engineering. I loved to go to his place at the end of the month as it was his payday. It was fun watching how he distributed the money. One-third went into a box labelled "students", one-third was put into an envelope marked "relatives" (as he had some relatives in France who were very poor, being refugees from Russia) and from the remaining one-third a chunk was taken out and put into a jar labelled "emergency" and the rest was divided between him and his son, Kostia.

Each Xmas he received the so-called "thirteenth wage", the majority of which he spent on toys for children of different age groups. He used to put these toys in various bags which were labelled with the age group of children, the bags were put in the back seat of the car and he went (sometimes with me) to different slums in Kaunas. Peering through dirty, curtain less windows, trying to guess the age group of the children, he would select toys, put them on the doorstep, knock at the door and go to other houses. Sometimes I would stay behind and watch the children when they picked up the toys. The expression of wonder and happiness is something I will never forget.

Pan Wasary's wife was a doctor by profession but now she no longer practised. They lived a very quiet life and theirs was the happiest marriage I knew. That summer Pan Wasary was very quiet. Last autumn his wife had died. He himself was in pain and we knew from Kostia that he had cancer.

Palanga was fun. I still could go swimming although the baby was due within the next two months. But I could not swim far and often felt uncomfortable and was jealous of Anett who used to swim far out with Zygmunt. We left after a few weeks as Pan Wasary was due for an operation. The operation was to be performed by his friend, also a professor. We knew that there was not much hope of success but not until much later did we learn that the operation had no hope at all, that it was more or less a legal suicide. Since the death of his wife, his Zoniczka (Sonia) he had lost interest in life. He was still kind to all of us; he adored his grandchild, but he did not want to live anymore.

When Zygmunt and Anett were swimming we used to sit and watch them or do mathematical puzzles which we both liked, and simply talk. He was an atheist, me an agnostic; we talked about life and death, about love and the purpose of life and about loneliness. I understand only part of what he meant but the meaning stayed with me and only much later was I able to understand what he tried to express. Zygmunt and I went to see him on the day of the operation. He was in a single room. He gave us a smile; he looked happy. When I started hugging him his eyes closed, the eyelids twitched, he gave a sigh and his hand which I was holding became heavy. I kissed him but there was no response. The sister and the surgeon came and spoke in whispers and pushed me away – and I realized that he was dead! He died just when I was holding his head in my hands. It was so cruel. Why did he have to die? He was loved and needed by so many. Why should he die without his son, his granddaughter? Why now? Why him? It was not fair! God or Omnipotence should have arranged it differently!

That same night I started bleeding badly and was put to bed with strict orders from the doctor not to move. I did not care. Mother was trying to cheer me up, speaking about the baby about to be born. She said that it would be wonderful when the child came, that nothing could compare with the feeling of the first moment when the child is born. A straight translation from my diary, as my memories are vague:

During the early afternoon of 21st September, 1940, I felt some peculiar pains. Mother called the doctor, thinking that the bleeding would start again. The doctor examined me and said that everything was normal and it is just a labour pain and that I should go to the hospital. As the hospital was not far, I walked, accompanied by Zygmunt and my parents. I had pains but they were bearable. Although the room was nice, I did not like the hospital. After they left I tried to find a comfortable position but could not, neither standing, walking nor lying down. Early next morning it was Sunday; I left the hospital and went home; but it was no better at home and in the afternoon Zygmunt took me back to the hospital. He stayed with me for a long time but, as the pains grew stronger, I asked him to leave. I began to walk the long corridor up and down but not for long because at one end of the corridor was the labour ward from which one could hear screams. What screams! They did not sound human, more like that of animals in pain. I decided on the spot that I would not scream; MY child would not be born hearing those horrid, animal screams. My child will come into this world quietly, not

scared. When I was put on a high bed in the labour ward I asked the doctor and sister to speak quietly and not to shout. The pains got worse, then really bad. The doctor asked me to push and to scream. I pushed but would not scream. I clenched my teeth and would not utter a word. It was ages. How long? Already 34 hours! I was very tired and the pain was not getting better. Time seemed to stand still but my watch was still ticking. 36 hours! Of God, let me have some minutes of peace. 3:00 am – it is getting really unbearable ... incoherent thoughts ... I must stand it ... a fact of life ... for the old sins ... you will bear your children ... pain ... A cool towel on my face, drops of water on my lips and I heard the doctor speaking about a caesarian! And I yelled: “No caesarean, no forceps” and continued quietly “You might damage my child, don’t touch it, I can stand it much longer, just give me time.”

3:11, 3:12, 3:13 ... and I pray: “Zygmunt, my Zygmunt, help me; it is your child too! You always help me, help me now, NOW! Zygmunt! HELP! HELP! Help me stand it another short while; I know you will help, but hurry, hurry! Help! It is your child too! ZYGMUNT! Another voice in the room, like that of Piglet. The doctor was bending over me and saying – “Congratulations. A lovely, healthy baby boy!” A boy? I don’t care. I would have preferred a girl but Zygmunt wanted a son. At last it was over but the doctor told me that I would have to wait a bit longer as I needed stitches. And once again the pain comes, a different pain but it hurts just as much. There were already 28 stitches but the doctor say it is not quite finished and only two or three more. I thought that I would not be able to stand it any more and I knew that now Zygmunt could not help me.

“Would you like to see your baby?”

“All right”

“It is such a lovely baby – just look how beautiful”

He did not look beautiful to me, just wrinkled. I thought about Mother’s promise that I would be unspeakably happy on seeing my baby. Another lie! I did not feel happy at all; I was just tired and wanted to be left alone. I looked at my watch; it was just after 3:16 on Monday, 23rd September, 1940. Next morning Zygmunt and my parents came and the first thing they asked: “What time was the baby born?” I replied: “Between 3:13 and 3:16 am”. Then Zygmunt asked how did I know the exact time and I replied truthfully that I kept looking at my watch and waiting for Zygmunt to help me with the pain. They checked their watches which agreed to the minute. Why were

they fussing about the watches? They explained, all excited, interrupting each other:

In the middle of the night the bell of the house started to ring. Zygmunt, who was not asleep, went to the front door but there was nobody there and the bell was ringing non-stop. Mother and Father got up; they looked at the back door, Zygmunt was checking the wiring and the bell was still ringing. Zygmunt got fed up with the ringing and tore the wiring out. The time was 3:15. They thought that maybe I was then having the baby ... and I was ... Was my call for help transferred to the bell? Who knows? I am sure that it was. I asked Zygmunt for help and he helped just as he always did.



Maria with Jurek (George)

We decided to call the baby Jerzy, Jurek for short or George in any foreign language. Jurek looked old and wrinkled and was so long, but the doctor assured me that he was a normal, healthy baby. It was the first new born baby I had seen and I felt more curiosity than love for this little defenceless creature. I thought that animals produced better-formed babies of their own than I did. It took days until I thought that Jurek was not ugly but rather nice. My stitches healed nicely and I was allowed to leave after 12 days. Zygmunt and I used to look at the baby for hours and I started to think that he was the most beautiful baby ever born! The happiness

did not last long as I got an infection of the breasts and a

high temperature. Feeding time was pure hell and there was more pus and blood than milk. The injection did not help much and the doctor advised to feed the baby by bottle. Zygmunt's mother arrived and helped to look after

Jurek but she received a letter from home advising that her husband was ailing and so she went home. A few days later Zygmunt received a letter asking him to come as his father was very ill. Zygmunt left immediately but he was too late; his father had died. When Zygmunt came back he would not talk about the death of his father. For hours he sat and looked through the window without talking; he had his thoughts from which Jurek and I were excluded.

Only once did he say that it was now too late, too late to explain what should have been explained long ago. The misunderstanding started when he was a child; there was disagreement and both sides felt hurt but kept quiet, not understanding each other. Later on it was not possible to start talking when both sides were disinclined to show their feelings. I could not understand it; I still remembered the look on Zygmunt Senior's face when he was looking at his son through the window. Why were they both so reserved? Isn't it the most natural thing to show what one is feeling? It was not for Zygmunt or for his father.

Jurek was not baptized, only registered in Z.A.K.S. (Registration Office) against the wishes of both grandmothers. The witnesses were Marusia Kruck and Czeslaw Mikolajunas. Jurek was entered as "Jurgis Krusevskis" and was one of the first children born in the Lithuanian Soviet Republic.

Zygmunt's mother stayed with us. Jurek became hers, not mine. I was not allowed to give him a kiss as it was considered unhygienic; and before I was allowed to pick him up, my hands and my frock were examined; all doorknobs were constantly cleaned with methylated spirits. Zygmunt's mother looked happy and radiant; even my previous boyfriend then dropped me for dead when he saw her coming in.

For Xmas she composed a verse about herself, Jurek and me. According to her, I was a terrible mother, dirty, lazy, unhygienic. My mother did not fare much better as she could not be trusted to have the dummy really clean. Zygmunt's mother was the only one who looked well after poor neglected Jurek. She wanted to be called "Bama" (Babcia mama).

I was allowed to take Jurek in the pram but not for long as I did a terrible thing; not realizing that the temperature had dropped below minus 25° C, his cheeks were frostbitten. The doctor whom I rang said to rub his face with ice and keep him for a while on the front porch without heating. Luckily, he was

not damaged permanently, but I was so upset and cried at nights. Bama was right – I was a horrid mother, stupid, dirty, etc. I wanted to do the right things; I wanted to play with my Jurek and spoke with Zygmunt about it, but he was not sympathetic as his mother had experience with children, being a president or committee member for neglected children of prisoners. I should do as told.

He was allowed to pick up Jurek any time he wanted. If Bama and Zygmunt were right, why was the boy of the doorkeeper's family still alive? He was born on the same day as my Jurek. I was over at their place quite often and he should have been dead long ago; nobody cleaned doorknobs, his father – coming back home after sweeping the yard – would sit on the same bed where the baby was playing, his dummy was just wiped on the shirt - not even boiled, the nappies were never sterilized – just washed. The baby had no carrot juice, no orange juice, other than that which I sneaked out from home. This baby was not only alive but looked as healthy as Jurek. I could pick up this baby and even kiss it! How I loved this baby. I was able to be there often as his parents were working in Mother's shop and Zygmunt was working as the Commandant at the Red Army House. It sounded grand but it was not really. However, he liked his job, especially as he was entitled to beautify it, buying new pictures, new ornaments, new sculptures.

The war was still going on but we were on the outskirts of it and did not feel it to the extent as those who were bombed constantly. We led a more or less normal life; we were neither hungry nor cold. When Poland was overrun in September 1939, it was unbelievable that the Polish/German war lasted only 17 days. Now we understood it. We were the first to experience in our country what the word "Blitzkrieg" means. In addition, we had not only Germany as an enemy but also Russia, as Stalin and Hitler had a pact of non-aggression and divided Poland between themselves.

Now in the spring of 1941 Germany had conquered all of Central Europe, Belgium, Holland and even France with her Maginot line and the help of the British who had surrendered after Dunkirk. The question was, what would come next? Could England be attacked? Could the USSR try now to go west? Zygmunt and I did not mind the Communists. We both agreed that it was high time for agrarian reforms, for more rights for the labourers, time for annual leave for the labourer and home-help, time for old age pensions.

The Communists were at least trying to do something. But then came the

exportations. It was dreadful! People were taken from their homes, usually at night, pushed into cattle trucks and railed somewhere deep into Russia. Some might have deserved their fate as they were headed to the labour camps but the majority did not. It seemed that the people were just taken at random, from all classes of society, even children, even those who had nothing to do with politics. Nobody was safe, anyone could be deported. There was no reason at all.

We were baffled and very disillusioned. Friends disappeared and were never seen again. Bama told us that she had to go to Wilno and was taking Jurek with her. She could not leave him here, it would kill her as I was incapable of looking after him and anyway, I would have my exams in June. It was a special class; I had prepared my repertoire with Mr. Szpinalski for future concerts. Zygmunt told me not to be silly, let Bama take Jurek, she loves him and it would be good for her to have Jurek. My parents did not say anything. Only Father saw that I felt distressed and in the morning he told me: "Go for a walk and sort yourself out. It is your child, your husband and your mother-in-law, his mother. Do what you consider is best for all".

I was certain that Zygmunt adored his mother. I was conditioned (or should I call it brain-washed?) never to interfere between my husband and his mother. Her word should be law; I should never cause misunderstanding between them. The word MOTHER was like law, like an institution, unshakable, always right, always to be obeyed. It somehow never applied to the mother of his wife but always to the mother of the husband. She and Jurek went and I spent more and more time with the caretaker's boy, making quite sure never to be caught either by Zygmunt or by my parents. Most of Jurek's toys and spare clothes finished up at their place. The baby always greeted me with a smile, stretching out its arms towards me. I could laugh and cry, nobody took any notice. I loved the baby and missed my Jurek.



Bama - Zygmunt's mother

Germany Invades the Soviet Union

22nd June, 1941, a new war broke out suddenly between Germany and The Soviet Union. The Russians were retreating already on the first day. Kaunas was not far from the German border and already there were many refugees including military personnel. Going towards Russia were mainly the Communists and the Jews; some travelled by car or lorries, some were just walking. There was shooting in the streets which, as the day proceeded, became more fierce.

One government was leaving and the other had not as yet arrived; people were settling their personal grudges, political grudges, some were just looting. The Russians, on their way out, were shooting the anti-Communists, the Lithuanian anti-Semites were killing the Jews, the Lithuanian nationalists were killing the Russians and the Poles. Zygmunt was worried. He could not even speak Lithuanian. He was a typical foreigner working for the Russians. He thought that he should go to Wilno where he would be not only with his son and mother, but also a Pole amongst the Poles.

It was the second or third day of the war when the shooting became really bad. We were all sitting on the floor in the living room as stray bullets were hitting all around. The next-door neighbours were Jews and a gang came into our yard, probably to kill them. Czes was with us. Zygmunt got up and said that he was leaving straight away. He would go first to Karmelowo, get his bike and then proceed to Wilno. He went into the kitchen, opened the window, gave me a kiss and said that he would wait for Czeslaw under the big tree near Czeslaw's home and jumped out into the backyard. He told me to close the window and, should the gang come to our house, tell them that we didn't know where he was.

I saw him climbing over the neighbour's back fence and disappear. Next day Czes told me that he had not seen Zygmunt. The Germans came and a few of my school friends. Georgy Bohnekempfer even spent a few hours with us, to get some rest and to wash his feet as they were hurting. He promised to stop in Karmelowo and to see Zygmunt. He also told me that Zygmunt did a very foolish thing by running away as he certainly would be shot either by the Germans or the Russians, depending by whom he would be caught. I learned later that Georgy died the next day near Karmelowo. Two German officers

were allocated to our house. They behaved all right; we even spoke to each other.

They were quite certain that Zygmunt would be dead by now. By now he certainly would have been caught either by the Germans or the Russians. They explained that neither the retreating army nor the first lot of the advancing army would take any prisoners; there would be no time and every suspicious character was being killed, and in addition there were the self-appointed gangs, either pro or anti-Russians and they simply loved to kill. There was no chance that my husband could travel about 100 km without being killed.

But I knew that Zygmunt was not dead. It was not wishful thinking; I simply knew. I would have known the moment he would have died. I was very worried about my Jurek who was not even a year old. I had to go to Wilno and find them. But no-one was allowed to travel, no-one. Walking would take too long (over 100 km). I began pestering everyone I could think of to get some transport. Our two officers were the best bet. After trying hard to convince me that I should stay put, that travelling was dangerous, they at last agreed to help me. They put me in contact with their friend who was going in a tank towards Wilno and who was prepared to take me, but only as far as Wilkomir. I agreed happily as it was more than three-quarters of the way. Mother cried; even Father tried to reason and hold me back, explaining that we would be going through forests still full of partisans and might be blown up, etc. etc. I did not listen but went.

It was a slow drive and uncomfortable as only the driver had a proper seat and the soldiers and I were sitting on ammunition, small hand grenades and other large explosives. But that did not matter. Each hour we were getting closer to Wilno. In Wilkomierz I had to start walking, but not for long. I was stopped by a military patrol, asked for identification documents, the reason why I was on the roads, and then a major told me to hop in.

It was still the beginning of the German/Russian war and they were not callous as yet; in addition, I spoke fluent German and I was a mother trying to find my baby son. They took me right to Wilno and from there it was only five kilometres. I made it in no time, having only a small bundle in my hand and running most of the time. Only on reaching the gate I stopped and felt afraid to proceed. Part of me knew that they were alive, but were they? Were they unharmed? I really could not be sure. The gate was unlocked and

so was the house. I called out but there was no answer.

I walked in and there was no sound, just complete silence. I walked slowly through the kitchen, dining room living room ... no-one around ... no sound ... and then all of a sudden, a yell! Jurek! And such a happy yell! I rushed toward the sounds and there was Jurek in his cot, yelling to be picked up. My little darling. He smelled so lovely of dirty nappies, of brought-up milk, still full of sleep. I picked him up and he began laughing and grabbed my hair. Auntie came in and greeted me very pleasantly, explaining that today she was looking after Jurek. She talked and talked but did not mention Zygmunt.

She spoke about the fights they had around the house, about Jurek, and I had to sit down dreading the moment when she would ask about Zygmunt. And then she asked me if I had already seen Zygmunt who was ploughing the field. Zygmunt had arrived, he was here, Jurek was here, we were all still alive. What a wonderful feeling – we were alive! I did not go to meet Zygmunt but stayed with Jurek and let him play with my hands as all of a sudden I had to think about Czeslaw's sister Irena. Was she still alive? The day after Zygmunt jumped through the window, she got married. The reception was at our place. Her fiancé was like Zygmunt, also from Poland. Czes and I were looking everywhere for food. We got plenty of wine and also a fair bit of caviar and some tinned food, but only one half-kg of bread and I had no flour at home to bake some.

We were expecting only fourteen people but there were a lot more as some of the political prisoners broke out of the jail and came to our place. There was not enough food. The caretaker was a great help as he gave us a bag of potatoes. Potatoes and caviar went very well together but still it was a very sad wedding. Shortly after they went to Poland. Only much later did I learn that they had a few happy years in Warsaw, had a baby and then in 1944 all three were killed during the Warsaw uprising. All the inhabitants of the block of flats were ordered to come out and all were mown down by machine guns. Their bodies were left on the street. My thoughts were interrupted when Zygmunt came in; he looked so healthy and the lovely smile he gave me ... I could not utter a word; there were no words to express how I felt. With Jurek in-between us, we talked the whole night through.

Zygmunt told me how, on his way to Wilno, he was shot at, how he got through both front lines, how he was often near death. Taking Jurek with us, we went and sat on the front porch. A star was falling down and I wished

Zygmunt eternal happiness. In our country there is a superstition: If you formulate a wish during the time a star is falling, your wish will come true. I don't believe in any kind of superstitions, not at all, but just the same I never would go under a stepladder, I'll go around it. I don't believe in falling stars and all that rubbish, but every time I see a star falling I still wish that Zygmunt should have a happy life and an easy death. I never believed in superstitions either then or now, but I still avoid stepladders, still have a wish and many more things. Stupid, isn't it? However, it can't do any harm and maybe, just maybe it might work?

During this stay my foot started to fester and became smelly so Zygmunt carried me up the hill to the nearest doctor. I had injections and Zygmunt had to change the smelly bandages a few times a day. Most of the day Jurek and I spent on the veranda and Zygmunt brought us fruit, especially strawberries which Jurek loved.

The fighting was over, the Germans soon occupied all of Lithuania and were advancing towards Russia proper. Mother came and took us all home, including Zygmunt's mother, Bama. There were too many Germans allocated to our old house in Kestucio Street 18 and therefore mother found accommodation for all of us in the suburb called "Green Hills" in Viduno Aleja. We had the ground floor and part of the garden and the owner, a Lithuanian teacher, the top floor. The house was quite nice but not quite big enough. Zygmunt and I slept in the dining/living room and Bama shared her room with Jurek. Everyone tried to give us privacy, especially Father who was a darling; he was the first to leave the room if not specially invited.

The Germans and not the Russians were now the bosses. They issued an order that everyone who could speak German had to register. I could not get out of it as all knew that I had finished the German school. After filling out the questionnaire, I was told to report for work at the "Arbeitsamt" (employment office). At that time we knew only vaguely that the Arbeitsamt was not an ordinary employment office but something bad. The Lithuanians, in their majority, hated the Russians more than the Germans as the Russians took away their independence and made them the 17th republic of the Soviet Union but, to us the Poles, enemy number one were the Germans and I was very upset about my assignment.

Going home I met Mr. Safsienowicz and told him that I would have to work in the Arbeitsamt. He thought that it was extremely good that a Pole would

be working there, and he would speak immediately with Mr. Gruzewski who would contact me and tell me what to do. He explained to me that having a Pole in the Arbeitsamt would be very useful as I would be able to help the Poles. He advised me to watch and listen, to memorise as much as I could, to keep quiet and not to voice any opinions, that instructions would come regularly and not to worry; I would be able to catch on quickly and know what would be required of me.

Zygmunt and Bama went to Karmelowo; Jurek was sometimes with them and sometimes with us. I had to leave home at 7:00 am as I had about an hour's walk to work, and came home after 6:00 pm. I found the work easy and less boring than the job I had before at the Red Cross. In the beginning I felt confused interviewing people. I had never had much to do with cheeky female factory workers, nor did I know much about the way prostitutes speak. During the first week I had to interview a prostitute who told me: "I am an honest prostitute and do an honest night's work and I never over-charge. I don't want any other work." I tried to talk her into doing factory work, as I was supposed to do, but she cut me short: "Nobody is going to tell me when or where to work. It is my arse, see? I'll give it to whom I like. It is my arse and no f---ing Arbeitsamt is going to tell me who to give to or not to give it to, or how much to charge. My arse, isn't it? I can do with it what I bloody well like. I don't want your work and tell you boss that I am an honest woman and I never cheat and I don't care about politics." – and off she went. I was embarrassed at having to translate her talk to the boss.

A short time after the Germans occupied Lithuania they started to organize transport of labourers to Germany (not volunteers), either by force or by cheating. There were lists of people for transportation and they were so long that I had trouble memorizing all the names, but luckily there was another Polish lass, Imatrykulata, Irma for short. Most of the time we managed to see the lists and warn the Poles mentioned on them. Those on the list had to move to some other place or leave Lithuania and try to reach Poland. They also had another loophole: a doctor's certificate, preferably stating that they had some contagious disease, especially TB, which was very good as those people were never bothered.

I made new friends – Alma and Stasia Karaliene. We were able to throw food to the starving Russian prisoners and were very nearly caught a few times and we also managed to rescue from the ghetto some little doomed children. Stasia procured sleeping tablets; I had some contacts with the

Jewish population and Alma kept the guard distracted. I had to pick up the children whom, whilst asleep, were thrown over the fence - and find for them a safe hiding place. The best place I found was in South Germany in a nunnery! My old Jesuit priest helped me find this fantastic place.

At home we were hiding a young Jewess, Maryte, for quite a long time as she had nowhere to go. We also had a Miss Stefania whom Alma and I were able to rescue from one of the transports, she being from Central Poland and having nowhere to go.

The Germans were rather naïve at that time. If one spoke good German confidently, they did not distrust you much, especially a young mother with a baby in a pram. Once we were unable to see the new transport lists and were furious with ourselves that we could not warn anyone. Whose idea was it? Alma's or mine? I don't remember, but it was a grand idea because it worked.

We decided to rescue at least some right from the station where the women had to take the degrading delousing showers. We both knew the outline of the station well. Taking Jurek with us, we decided on a very simple procedure. Alma, with Jurek in the pram, returned outside the shower room window and I, pretending to be on official business, showed the guard my Arbeitsamt documents, explaining that I was to supervise the showers. I was let in without any trouble. When the doors were closed, I asked every second woman to jump out through the window where my friend was waiting and we would take them to a safe place. Some agreed immediately and those who started arguing, I ignored; there was no time for explanations.

There was quite a large group outside when I heard Alma's piercing whistle – our signal that danger was near. I jumped out and we hurried all the women – first to our priest for a night and next morning distributed them to other Polish families. Stefania had nowhere to go and therefore came to us. Our house was fairly safe; two elderly people, a young mother with her baby, next door a high Gestapo official, and we had already been vetted before. Jurek was a tremendous help. He helped me with my boss who started to speak about love and sex, a Mr. Krueger. He used to wait for me in the morning near home and bring me home which was very awkward as I was unable to do the illegal messages.

This went on for a while until I had a brainwave. I asked him nicely to come

to our place and stay with us instead of going back home immediately. He accepted happily. I warned the household and the dining room table was set nicely because I did not want to offend him and get some reprisals. The room looked nice with flowers and all the trimmings. In the middle of the room was the pram with Jurek and both grandmothers pretending to be helpful, speaking no German at all! One should have seen his face! He did not stay long, not even for the meal, and he stopped picking me up. My idea had worked perfectly! Jurek was also a great help when I had to take messages, ammunition or revolvers to someone. All those things were hidden in Jurek's sheepskin bag which had a double bottom. For safety, there were a few toys and a few empty baby bottles.

The first time I was scared when I was stopped, but later it was rather fun. If the soldier looked bored, I would let Jurek sleep but, if he was zealous or too friendly, I would pinch Jurek who would start screaming. I would pick him up, including the illegal things and, hugging Jurek, beg them to hurry up as the baby had to be fed – and the bottles were all empty. It always worked. Neither Zygmunt nor the parents knew about all this. Not that I did not trust them but, for security reasons, it was better not to let anyone know if not really necessary.

The time of the German occupation was an odd time. Politically, it was just horrible as the Germans were still advancing but our moral outlook was strangely odd – we lived a double-standard of morality. For example, to cheat is bad but, to cheat the Germans is good. To take human life is unforgivable but not when it is a German's life, then it was even a very good deed. To distribute arms so that people can kill each other is bad but, to help smuggle arms to free Poland or the partisans in the forests is a good thing, and so on.

We were frustrated that the Allies seemed so weak and were unable to hold the front anywhere, not even with Russia's help, but were we frightened? I don't remember; we just lived from day to day or rather, from hour to hour. Only occasionally was I really frightened during this period, like being caught during heavy shooting in the street, or once coming home with Zygmunt I saw our cart with hay in our front yard and rifles poking out of the hay. Luckily, Zygmunt did not notice them and I was able to push them deeper inside.

My parents were very frightened of everything and might even have been

able to compromise with the enemy and I could not endanger Zygmunt as he was already in a bad position, being a true Pole – hated by the Germans and Lithuanians alike. Zygmunt started to learn English from my dictionary but Mother wanted him to learn Lithuanian so that he could enrol at the University and finish architecture which he did not finish in Warsaw. Under pressure of his parents, he completed the law faculty. But Zygmunt refused, saying that he came to work and not to learn. He, Jurek, Bama and Miss Stefania moved for good to Karmelowo and I saw Zygmunt and Jurek only on weekends and even then, not always. Bama worked hard and made sure that others worked hard too. She explained that she needed meat, food, etc., to pay her sisters who were working in her house. My parents and I could not understand her constant talk about payments to her sisters.

Mother was even worried that Zygmunt might be the same some day, even towards me. I was not worried as I remembered when in Stettin he showed me the moneybox and told me to let him know when there was not enough and he would try to get some more the same day. Life proved me right as, although we had and still have many quarrels, we never once argued about money. If there was some, we spent it; if there was none, we went without – it was never HIS money or MY money; it was always ours. Father loved Zygmunt and trusted him implicitly. He did a beautiful thing: Father altered his Will, leaving everything to Mother for her use during her lifetime and, after her death, everything was left to Zygmunt. Father explained that he was certain that, in the event of our marriage breaking up, Zygmunt – being so honest – would do the best to leave me provided for. He considered Zygmunt a much better manager of property than I, his daughter. Thus, there he was leaving all to Zygmunt. How I loved Father for this.

We both knew Zygmunt really well; we trusted him and, through this, his last Will, Father showed me that he loved Zygmunt just as much as I did. Darling Father. Times started to get worse; food hard to get and Zygmunt had to come more often on his pushbike, loaded with food for us. Transport into Germany went more often and more people were killed or simply disappeared; the Jews were being exterminated systematically, brutally.

Life from day to day became more dangerous under the German administration. When the Germans occupied Lithuania, they incorporated her into the “Ostland” (lands to the east of Germany). The chief commissar was Mr. van Reoteln and his henchman (for extermination of Jews and other undesirable people) was Mr. Jordan. One day there appeared posters

concerning Polish and Russian citizens living in Kaunas. We were not allowed to live in private homes anymore; we had to move to the “Small Ghetto” which by now stood empty as all the Jews amassed there had already been killed. Now it was our turn. The ghetto was in a valley along the River Niemen. Houses were without windows and doors; it was autumn and already getting cold. Zygmunt did not have to go as he was registered in Karmelowo, but Jurek and I had to go. It was a toss-up whether we would die of cold or be exterminated earlier. To flee to Central Poland was very risky too – especially with a baby – as all roads were by now very heavily guarded. To try to hide with friends in the country was also not good because I would be found soon as I had to report to work, even when in the ghetto. Mr. Krueger suggested that I apply to become a “Volksdeutsche” as I would be granted it without trouble.

That would be the last thing I would do and I asked him if, in 1915, he would have liked to apply, for instance, for French citizenship. He would not. Then he suggested that I should apply for cancellation of my Polish citizenship and become a Lithuanian. I asked him if he would have liked, in 1917, living in Elsass Lotheringen and being a German, to become a French citizen. He understood. Next day he told me that he had written to Mr. Jordan. Mr. Jordan was tall with regular features, a good figure, cruel eyes and a rasping voice. I will never forget him! I hated him and everything he represented. He was killed by Polish partisans the following year. The interview was very short and one-sided:

“You are a Pole who should be helped, according to Mr. Kruegar? I’ll help you and your bastard child! I’ll help you to a slow death; I’ll make sure your death will be painful and slow. I hate you Poles and all your bastard children! I, personally, will make sure that all of you are wiped out – just as I wiped out the Jews! Out!”

Zygmunt suggested that we should get a divorce because, according to the law, I would revert to my Lithuanian citizenship and so would Jurek, being my son. I hesitated as I thought it would not be fair to Zygmunt, but he only laughed. He was not endangered, living outside Kaunas, and nothing would be changed between us. He would come as usual from Karmelowo – not to visit his wedded wife but to a young divorcee – what fun! Two days later we were divorced, thanks to the help of Father’s friend. Many other couples did the same.

The work at the Arbeitsamt became unproductive. We had a new boss – Ohlschlaeger, I think – and the regulations were tightened; two German females arrived and we had no access to the lists. I caught ‘flu somewhere and was unable to shake it off for a long time and the long walk from and to work made me feel very tired. I managed to get a transfer to HKFP (repair depot for army vehicles) nearer home. Father was getting tasty food for me on the black market but I could not keep my food down and had to go to the doctor.

I was pregnant once again. I was not happy about it but did not mind very much. I wanted to have a girl and she would be called Krystyna because a few years before I had read a book which I liked very much, written by Sigrid Undset called “Kristin Lavransdatter” I liked the headstrong Kristin and saw her problems, and I liked the background of old Sweden hundreds of years ago. My health became worse and I was able to eat only dry bread and to drink black tea, and my cough was getting worse. I was even given time off from work and could stay in bed. It was lovely just to be in bed with Jurek playing all the day in the same room. He did not speak but understood most of the words. He loved to sit on the bed, looking at books, but best of all he liked to bring different things from other rooms and pile them on my bed.

One evening I was not feeling well at all and in the night my bed was wet; the bed and I were covered in blood. The doctor said over the phone that it looked like a haemorrhage and that I should stay in bed and he would come next day. My mother would not let me go to the toilet and brought me a pot which I, of course, refused to use. The haemorrhage continued and I felt really quite weak. When no-one was in the room and the passage seemed to be empty, I got up and went to the toilet, but was caught just when I reached the door. They wanted to carry me back to bed, but I got hold of the door knob and would not let go. They had to let me go to the toilet as struggling was certainly not good for me. I felt something falling out of me; something big. Bama found it; it was a baby, partly covered in a fine skin bag.

Next day the doctor came and after examining me, told us that I had had a very good miscarriage and no cleaning up was necessary. The baby had died of starvation and, through coughing, I pushed it out. I was quite amazed that miscarriage could be that simple. It was 23rd March, 1942. Next day, whilst still in bed, I began thinking that the miscarriage might have been my fault, and I got completely drunk on New Year’s Eve. We had a small party: My parents, Bama, Alma and Erwin. My parents and Bama left early and I

decided that it was time to find out what it meant to be drunk.

As the night progressed, Erwin got drunk and had to go home, Alma was performing solo dances, shedding some garments, and I could still walk straight along a line. Zygmunt and Alma decided that they would fix me, and I agreed. The poured me a tankard of beer – after all the wine and vodka I had already had. I drank the beer and still felt all right. Zygmunt (who was no longer sober) became annoyed and poured me a cup of moonshine, horrid smelling stuff. I drank it, holding my nose, and could still walk straight. I wanted to dance but Zygmunt got vexed and poured me a coffee cup full of some green sweet liqueur.

After drinking it I had to sit down and Zygmunt was watching me when all of a sudden he grabbed my arm and started to drag me out of the room. I asked why he was doing it but he never had the time to explain before I started being sick in the passage. I remember standing in the toilet with Zygmunt holding me and being so sick. I was certain that I was going to die there and then. I do not remember anything more at all. Next morning I found myself in bed, undressed and feeling terrible. Alma was snoring on the couch. If that meant being drunk and people knew about it before, why the hell do people get drunk? After Alma went home, Zygmunt came and sat on my bed and was a bit sympathetic and wanted to bring me some alcohol but, even thinking about it made me shudder. He explained that I should not complain; I wanted to know what being drunk meant and now I knew. It was a lesson. Later on he made me feel even worse as he explained that when they brought me to bed, I was like a piece of wood and he and Alma had fun together as they both felt kind of lonely!

Oh, men! I hated all men in general and Zygmunt in particular and was really furious with him but not with Alma. Only one thing cheered me up a bit – that Zygmunt was still keeping his promise given a long time ago; when one of us was unfaithful, one should admit it and not wait until someone else would hint at it. To me it meant that I could still trust him but certainly would have to watch him. I was thinking about Mr. Pryfer and did not cry, so when he apologized and seemed sincerely very sorry, I forgave him graciously. A few days later when I met Alma, we looked at each other and both grinned.

“Marushka, I am happy that you are taking it the way it was, just some fun and nothing serious. It was a lovely party, sorry about you being drunk, but it

was your idea and now you know what it is to be drunk. Are we still friends?”

“Sure, a small episode would not change our relationship.”

We would still have been friends but Alma returned to Lithuania after the war and we lost touch with each other.

The work at HKP was boring and there was no hope of any sabotage. My boss, Erwin S., was a nice and kind man, although a drunk. I would have liked him even more if he would stop pestering me for a divorce from Zygmunt (he did not know that we were divorced) – he asked for a divorce from his wife, Claire. But he was a kind man and was prepared to wait and wait – even indefinitely, I think. He was a German, but I could not hate him. He was even a Party member with a golden badge which was given only to the first 1,000 members! He did not attract me as a man but I liked him and he was a good man and a good German. (People now sneer when someone mentions a “good” German). I will give only a few examples of his kindness and show that he was humane, although brainwashed.

Many Jewish technicians and labourers were working for the HKP. Every day he ordered some Jews into his office and, when the door was open, he would scream at them but, when the door was closed, he told them to start screaming as loudly as they could, and while they screamed he would hit his riding cane on the leather couch, and those who were not in the know assumed that he was beating them. He put food and cigarettes in their pockets and let them go. I was able to draw his attention to the most desperate cases and he helped to bring them goods which were easy to barter with – like stockings and similar small commodities.

When it became very cold and the workers could barely work in the workshops, he used to come screaming to the workshop, cursing everyone that it was too cold for him to inspect the work properly and stoves had to be kept alight and wood restrictions did not matter. When he saw workers with very poor clothing, he would transfer them to the kitchen or to cleaning offices, still yelling at them. We were able to bring goods suitable for barter and give them to the workers. He knew it but never said a word and just to think that, according to law, everyone who helped a Jew could be exterminated or at least deported. One day there was a fatal incident for him and I am very sorry that I was the cause of it. I received a message that small

Jewish children were being slaughtered in a horrible way at the ghetto; the children were killed in front of their parents. I was given details of the killing – dreadful details. I was asked to try to help.

I was so shaken that I lost my temper and rushed into Erwin S. office even without knocking, and started abusing him and all the Germans, calling them inhuman criminals! He closed the door after me and asked for details but by now I was crying and barely able to give a coherent explanation. He ordered a car and, taking me with him, went to the ghetto. He assured me that the message I had received was certainly exaggerated and that he will prove it to me shortly. When we arrived at the ghetto we were stopped – as he did not belong to the extermination commando, but after showing his golden Party badge, he and I were let through. Already in the first street we heard screaming and wailing.

When we turned the corner we saw an SS-man holding a baby by its legs and hammering the baby's head against the wall; a woman was lying in the gutter; a man – his clothing torn – was hitting his head against the wall. Erwin started yelling at the SS-man who only sneered at him saying that he had his orders and was quite happy to show them. Erwin read, looked around like in a daze, and ... tore his Party badge off and threw it in the gutter, spitting at it, kicking it, speaking quietly: "I am sorry I trusted Hitler ... I was blind ... now I see ... and I am no member of this race ..." He turned and we left. He did not go to his office and next morning I did not see him. In the evening he came to my place to say a short goodbye. He was posted to a "Straf-Kommando" (penalty commando). He promised to write as soon as possible. I never received a letter from him. I am quite certain that he was killed and I only hoped that his death was a quick one.

I took it very hard as his death was my fault. I should have kept my temper but, by losing it I did not help anyone, and killed him. I could not speak about my feeling with anyone as they would not understand and would say "Good luck, one German less!" – and I could not even speak with Zygmunt otherwise I would have to explain how I got the message and a lot of other things which I was not allowed to say.

Again, I was not feeling well and felt very tired and was unable to do liaison work, being too tired to walk long distances. I went to our Polish doctor who advised me to go to an official German doctor as he thought that I might get some temporary sick leave. I was lucky and got a long leave. That summer I

spent in Karmelowo where there were a few of Zygmunt's relatives. There was Wilunia and her husband whom I liked but not very much, there was Zygmunt's cousin Halina and her husband and I liked them very much and also her sister and mother. But they were all working hard, including Bama, and I felt so useless. However, there was one compensation that summer – I had Jurek for many hours just to myself without any supervision.

We played together, rolled in the grass and discovered all the ants, tried berries, watched cows, walked along the creek looking for the fast-moving little fish. It was heaven! We were even writing letters and numbers in the sand and Jurek, although barely speaking, knew a lot of letters and figures. I knew that our family and I were extremely lucky so far as nobody from the nearest family had been deported; we had enough food and even after the contribution to the Germans was paid, it was enough to give away and to sell on the black market. While Jurek was sleeping during the day, I remember thinking about life and death and about time.

I could not grasp the meaning of infinity and God. I had only a finite mind and I tried coming back to the thought of infinity. It was time for me to go for a check-up and no wonder that I was told to go back to work as I was feeling well again and not only well but also very happy as I was pregnant again. I was certain that now I would have my baby girl, Krystyna, but Zygmunt laughed and said that a second son would be just as welcome. Although the winter began early that year and was very cold, we did not grumble as at last the news from the Fronts sounded good.

The name El Alamein was like sunshine as it was the real true first time that the Germans did not have it all their way and, although El Alamein was so far away, it was encouraging. Maybe the tide was changing. There came even better news, nearer home – Stalingrad! At last the Germans had it hard too! We were all listening to radio "Free Europe" coming in on the waves of London although it was punishable by death when caught listening to foreign news. I also liked the Swiss radio. It was no good listening to the German news broadcast as they never told the truth. We all listened but Zygmunt more than anyone else. When in Kaunas he spent most of the time at the radio, tuned so low that even if someone was listening at the window, he would be unable to hear anything. We were all happy about the news bulletins but in Lithuania, the times were getting harder and harder. More and more people, including many friends, were either deported or imprisoned, including Czeslaw. Some tried to reach free Poland.

During all this time Father was unsurpassed; every second day he stood in a long queue in front of the prison, bringing Czeslaw food. Sometimes he had to stand for hours. He was also very good at obtaining food which we did not grow, like sugar and orange juice for Jurek. He also took Jurek for walks which was a hard job as Jurek would stop at each house to read the numbers, then transpose them and also try to get the numbers upside down. For example:

“Dziadku, (Grandpa) two and six is twenty-six but if I move the two it will be sixty-two, yes? And if I turn the six upside-down it will be ninety-two, yes? And if I shift the two it will be twenty-nine, yes? Luckily we only had a few houses with three numbers which we avoided like the plague. Those walks took hours but Father did not mind; he loved Jurek. At that time father was already seventy or more.

On 27th March – early, before dawn – I started to have my labour pains. Father got a drozka (a sort of fiacre) and took me to the hospital. The hospital was overcrowded, dirty and the sisters were grumpy and overtired. The hospital was nationalized by the proprietor and his sister, Dr. Mazylis, were still there. I did not grumble as even a dirty hospital was better than none and we were prepared to have the baby anywhere. Zygmunt knew what he would have to do in an emergency and we had scissors, cotton-wool and band-aids always near us as none of us knew where we might be the next day. Nobody came to examine me and I was told that the doctor had had a hard day and was sleeping. In the evening I asked to be allowed to go to the labour ward as the pains were very frequent. They let me go but told me not to make a fuss as in half an hour the shift was changing! I demanded a doctor, any doctor would do. The sister in charge came and examined me and asked me to hold back and she would call the doctor who lived only fifteen minutes away. She told me: “Just hold on, dear, I am not allowed to deliver babies and there is no doctor on the premises.” Although I tried to “hold on” I found it impossible, but luckily the doctor came in time and was able to grab the baby.

“It is a healthy, normal boy.”

“Oh, what a disappointment. I wanted a girl.”

We decided to name the boy Roman. It was an easy name to pronounce and it was the same spelling in any language and, in addition, I liked the author

Roman Rolland! The hospital was so very dirty – the floors covered with caked blood and vomit. Zygmunt and Mother washed the floor in the room which I shared with Mrs. Nagavicius – a woman of about forty – who had had her first baby. The nurses wore aprons stiff with dirt on which they straightened out the dressings before pushing them into us.

Two of my school friends died during this time of child fever in this hospital. I left as soon as I could stand on my own two feet. At home I could see Roman without nappies for the first time. His bottom was red raw and his ankles were rubbed to blood! How I loved this poor, darling child who, in the first week of his life, had suffered more than I had in nearly twenty-seven years. As I still had sick leave, I was allowed to look after him and Bama was still in Karmelowo. Roman's sores healed quickly; he stopped crying and looked happy and slept a lot. Once again I got an infection and my breasts were covered with sores and were bleeding at the slightest touch. Roman too had to go on the bottle. I received an extension to my leave and we went to Karmelowo. Roman was a happy and undemanding baby. Jurek was good to his little brother and brought him all his favourite toys. Although Jurek mispronounced some words, he liked to speak in sentences, such as:

“Look, Mammy, how the wheat is bending with the wind.”

“Look how different the stork looks when flying from the sun than when flying into the sun.”

He could not read but knew many letters by now and loved to show off at the big map which hung on the wall. He would show and spell out USSR, Poland and many others.

That year we had a plague of flies – they were everywhere. I kept Roman covered with a net but he had to be changed and fed and his food had to be prepared. We had fly bottles and fly strips everywhere but they were not much help, especially in the kitchen where there were thousands of flies, not hundreds! Probably I was not careful enough because Roman contracted diarrhoea and within a few days he was passing blood – it was dysentery!

We went to Kaunas. Roman stopped crying; he was just whimpering. My leave expired and, although I tried, I could not prolong it. Roman was getting weaker and the doctor did not give me much hope. As there was nothing to lose, the doctor suggested trying to feed Roman with a new preparation

(being developed at the university) which was still not for sale. I had decided that I wanted to give it a try. There was nothing to lose – Roman had maybe hours, maybe just a few days at the best to live. I have to thank my father that Roman is alive and healthy as Father went every day – three times a day – to the laboratories to get a bottle of food for Roman, and it was a long walk. For the first few days we were still uncertain as his skin was still wrinkled and he was just barely whimpering, but then he started to recover and even put on weight. We all felt as happy as never before!

We started to live normally again; that is, we were listening to the radio, we tried to free people from transports, to help those in jail with food or messages and to find extra food. The latter my father did like a wizard. He always knew when someone was selling something. Mother was selling her private belongings quite well and she never hesitated to sell even those things which she really liked – such as her silver mauve large Persian carpet or her beautiful platinum necklace which was embroidered with lovely pearls, all slightly pinkish. She was happy to sell and happy when she could buy us presents, and she was constantly making surprises for all the family – but she never bought anything for herself.

The winter was extremely cold but we were happy about it as the frost helped to push the Germans back as well as kill the germs. Stalingrad fell and on all Fronts the Germans were stopped and were even forced to retreat and the Russians started to advance. The German administration became even worse than before. There were more transports of labour force into Germany, more requisitions from the country. Sometimes we even had to buy food to be able to complete the demanded requisitions. Cows and horses were taken. Many of our friends were leaving Lithuania and trying to reach Central Poland – of course, quite unofficially.

On 6th August I was in Karmelowo with the children and with Czeslaw. When it was getting dark, we all went to meet Zygmunt who had this day to go to Kaunas. When he saw us he started to run – his face was smiling and he could hardly speak from excitement.

“The Second Front has started!”

We all knew what it meant. It was the beginning of the end for the Germans! Now they can’t win this war! Now they have no hope at all!

Times became hectic and frightening. Now there were air raids by the Russians. In Kaunas lived my parents, Roman and I, but Zygmunt, Jurek and Bama lived in Karmelowo. Zygmunt came often bringing milk and some food. The air raids became very frequent. Roman's pram was always kept ready packed near the chimney which usually stayed on, even when the rest of the house crumbled down. In his pram were his nappies and his food, bandages for all and also medicine and some gold roubles for exchange for food and some food for all, if available. Near our house, not more than a kilometre away, was the old fortress with its bunkers which now became perfect shelters.

It was only a matter of estimating whether one had enough time to reach them as the alarm sirens did not always sound on time. Most of the bombs usually fell far away – only two were very close. The atmosphere in the bunkers was very tense with all the crowds of people and children. When the bombs were falling close by, we tried to cover Roman and his pram with our bodies but he was still frightened by the noise of the people and the screams. It was quite unpleasant, but we survived.

The Spring of 1944 again saw refugees on the roads, but now they were going – not to the East but to the West – and they were GERMANS! Or rather, “Volksdeutsche” and German settlers. The Germans were retreating in a hurry. The highway was so crowded that sometimes Zygmunt had to wheel his bike and walk all of the 12 km to bring us food. Then came disturbing news. First there were only rumours but later these were confirmed as facts. The advancing Russian Army would take all able-bodied men into their own army which, in our case, meant the Lithuanian Red Army.

What should Zygmunt do? Some Lithuanians fled to the forests and joined the Lithuanian partisans fighting for independence, but Zygmunt could not join them as he could not speak Lithuanian and was just a “bloody Pole”. To be drafted into the Lithuanian Red Army seemed just as bad. There was a Polish Army in the Polish Underground, fighting for free Poland, but how could he reach Poland? To go to Wilno would be no help as Wilno was now incorporated into Lithuania. We did not know where the Front was from day to day, nor could we guess how the Front would develop. One thing seemed certain: Zygmunt must leave Lithuania and try to reach Poland, but the question remained – how?

I had my own personal problems. What should I do? Let him go alone

through Germany, probably never knowing if he was dead or alive or wounded or taken prisoner or dying? I might be of help to him as I spoke German fluently and knew the German mentality and he could barely speak German.

It seemed impossible to leave my children; they might need me too. But I should not speak about both children. I should choose between Roman and Jurek as Bama had decided to stay near Karmelowo and my parents decided to stay in Kaunas with Roman. With whom should I be? With Zygmunt? Roman? Jurek? Certainly not with Jurek as Bama would not let me interfere with her decisions. With Roman and my parents? It was better, but not much. I could get my way with Father but not with Mother where Roman was concerned. Where would it be safer? In Kaunas? Near Karmelowo? Somewhere in the forests? In Germany or Poland? Nobody knew, nobody could even make a guess!

I felt that I would be unable to leave either the children or Zygmunt. It was a hard decision to make, but make it I must. To my parents it seemed quite simple. I should stay with them and Roman who had then just started to walk. They would look after me and Roman. They always looked after me well, didn't they? My thoughts were different. They certainly would look after Roman and me well, which meant that neither Roman nor they needed me. What about Jurek? I would not be allowed to look after him – Bama would tell me what I should do. She was still young and very energetic and I had to admit, managed life quite well – maybe better than I would, if given a chance. She had experience from the First World War. Zygmunt would not advise. He said that it was my decision and my decision alone.

I decided to go with Zygmunt, hoping that it would be a very short separation from the children as the German Front was crumbling in the East and in the West and everyone was predicting that the Germans would surrender when the Allies would reach Germany. It could not be long. I would go with Zygmunt into the unknown – him I might be able to help. We might be able to reach Poland by devious routes. We would be partners. After I reached the decision, no pleading or crying would shake me. Zygmunt still kept quiet. Mother prepared us lots of goods to take with us but we had to leave most of it behind.

The first to go was all winter clothing which we considered quite unnecessary as the war would be finished long before winter. We took with us a change

of clothes, things to barter, some gold and some food. I could not help it but started crying when I was dressing Jurek for the last time and kept crying when we left him and Bama standing on the highway waving to us. It was not better in Kaunas when parting from Roman and my parents.

We went by train to Germany as we were able to get travel orders for a fictitious job. The German administration was by now in chaos. When I explained apologetically that we missed our evacuation lorries of the K.K.P. and, producing my working card, told them that we were in a hurry to join them, they did not query it at all. Zygmunt advised me to say that H.K.P. had been evacuated to Modlin and that we intended going there. He picked Modlin as – although a Polish town before the war – it was now declared as belonging to the Reich and, being a fortress town, it sounded plausible to have the H.K.P. shifted there. Zygmunt also chose this town as it was the nearest German town to Warsaw! Our travel permit was issued for Modlin! We travelled in open lorries packed with ammunition, civilians and military men. We went through forests full of partisans who, a few days before, had blown up one of the trains. The train stopped at the frontier town Kybarty and every civilian had to get out.

It did look grim. There were holding centres for labourers and all behind barbed wire. We left the milling group of people and went further inland to the farm of my friend, Gramadzki. There were on his farm a few refugees who intended not to travel further as they expected to hear very soon that Germany would surrender. We were not so certain and decided to continue and to reach Modlin. In Kybarty lived my friend, Wanda Judzentowicz. She welcomed us and said that her house was ours. We stayed there for a few days and they were anxious days as the Germans issued orders that all the people had to go and dig trenches against the oncoming Russian Army.

The police were hunting for those like us but we were lucky as Wanda's friend, Veronika, helped us out by bribing a policeman with her vodka and Zygmunt's cigarettes. The frontier was closed to all without a permit and those who were caught were either returned or brought straight to dig fortifications and trenches. A few years later Wanda told us that there was a real massacre at the trenches when the Russians broke through the Front and, of course, the Germans did not surrender when the Russians entered Germany, although many expected its surrender.

At last we were going to Warsaw, admittedly in a very roundabout way, as

we had to go through most of Germany. Zygmunt – who gave it a lot of thought – told me now what he thought we might be able to do. Why should we go first to Modlin and try from there to smuggle ourselves into Warsaw? Why not try to go straight to Warsaw? Our documents were to Modlin, certainly, but would it not sound plausible if we – so eager (!) to join the workforce – would try to take the shortest route and go to Modlin via Warsaw? It sounded not bad to me. Therefore, when we came to Insterburg, we changed trains and went to Scharfenwiese – a town which, a few years before, was a Polish town called Ostrolenka.

Here was our first setback. Firstly, no trains were expected that day for Warsaw. Second disappointment, the language in the streets was only German and only in the toilets and washrooms did we hear Polish but then, only in whispers. The main disappointment was when we learned that to travel to Warsaw one needed special permits. I went to the “Kommandantur” to try for this special permit. It was a long walk and I had to wait for hours and I did not achieve anything. No-one, but really no-one, was allowed to go to Warsaw if there was another way available as Warsaw was considered not safe for people working for Germany (!)

It was already dark when I got back to the station and Zygmunt was waiting anxiously for me. We both felt like crying and we were also very tired and hungry. We had “Speisekarten” (food vouchers) but there was no food at the station, only water. With some trouble we found a place to bed down on the floor near the door as all the station was crowded with military men. There were a few SS-men but even with them around, the Army men were making jokes about the Fuehrer and about food which was not available. Clutching Zygmunt’s hand, I went to sleep with my rucksack as a pillow.

During the night he woke me up because he heard talk about a special train to Warsaw for the Army and he thought that we should try to get into it. I was aghast. How? Especially me – a woman! He said: “Don’t waste time, come and just try!” It was still dark and the platform was crowded with soldiers but I could not see even one woman about. When the train arrived, the soldiers began to climb in and Zygmunt was one of the first up the steps to give me a hand when a military policeman stopped and grabbed my rucksack. I was more than frightened; I was really scared, but I was also desperate. I did show the policeman my H.K.P. papers and my orders to report for work as soon as possible. He started reading and shaking his head, muttering “But you are a woman.” The whistle sounded and by then I was truly desperate. I

grabbed my papers out of his hands and shouted at him: “I know that I am a woman but I am doing a man’s job. You can’t detain me just for some stupid formalities! Don’t you know how urgent it is that all of the workforce is working? Don’t you realize that any delay would be punishable?” ... and, hanging on to my identification cards, I jumped onto the train which luckily started to move.

He was standing, undecided, when the train began to gather speed. I was shaking with fright. What will happen next? How many more military policemen will I have to face? Zygmunt and I talked in whispers so that the others would not know that we were speaking in Polish. But nobody took any interest in us. The soldiers took off their rucksacks and made themselves comfortable either on benches or on the floor, and we did the same. The train stopped but only civilians boarded and no policemen. It was very oppressive. When it became lighter I saw dark clouds gathering and there was thunder in the air. We were approaching Warsaw and the names of the stations were now in Polish, but I was still very frightened.

What would happen when we arrived in Warsaw? Would we be able to explain convincingly our presence; would they let us pass or would they start enquiring in Modlin about our HKP which certainly was not in Modlin!? In addition, we did not even have tickets! Coming nearer Warsaw the train stopped more frequently and civilians boarded the train and they were speaking Polish! At last we were not the only civilians on the train. At last we could speak Polish!

Warsaw 1944

At last we arrived in Warsaw. One exit was marked “For Military Personnel Only”. We went to the other one where all the Polish civilians went. Nobody stopped us and nobody even checked tickets. We went out into the street – a street where we could hear only the Polish language! We were in Poland! We were in Warsaw!

People in the street looked grey and shabby but they were smiling and everyone was speaking Polish. I simply could not get over it so how did Zygmunt feel – he who, whilst being in Lithuania, heard on the streets either Russian (of which he had just learned a little) or Lithuanian (which he could hardly speak)? We wanted to reach Auntie Kruszewski who lived in Falata Street. It was a fair distance and we took a tram.

We had only German marks and they were not acceptable in Poland. Zygmunt explained that we had just arrived and had no other currency. He was told not to worry and to stand near the front of the tram and watch out for the checker. At the next stop, when a man was getting off, he pushed some zloty (Polish currency) into Zygmunt’s hand. Maybe it was a small thing but to me it seemed tremendous. At last we were home among our own people. Everyone was ready to help everyone in an emergency. What a wonderful feeling!

At Auntie’s place we were welcomed with “open heart and open arms” according to a Polish saying. Zygmunt’s uncle died during the war so there was only his aunt who was old and ailing and her youngest daughter, Marylka. Marylka was a lovely girl of about twenty – blonde and very charming. She hugged and kissed us and made us welcome. She told us that she was working with the Underground – of course, the AK (Polish National Army) and was very often away so it would be good to have us there with her mother.

Auntie was just smiling and not saying much. During the few weeks I got to know her better; an old and ailing lady who was nearly blind. She never complained; she was always agreeable to any decisions the others made and she never interfered. During the next few weeks I began to like her very much and also had a lot of respect and admiration for her. Zygmunt told me

her background: She was a Jewess, of a well-to-do family and married Zygmunt's uncle, against the wishes of her family. Zygmunt's uncle married her against all the opposition of his family. When they married she was not accepted either by her family or by his. She had two daughters, both still in Warsaw, and one son who was interned in Lithuania and later disappeared, posted missing. Years later he reappeared in London. Zygmunt's coming to this place was like a home-coming.

It was so good; it could not have been better. Marylka agreed with Zygmunt that it would have been a disaster should he have been drafted into the Lithuanian Red Army. Zygmunt and Marylka argued a lot about the coming uprising of the Polish Underground. Zygmunt was distrustful of the Russians; he thought one could not trust them to leave Poland free and what guarantee did we Poles have? None whatsoever. She tried to shut him up, saying that she knew better and if Zygmunt would stay long enough, he would understand too. How could he know what was happening living in faraway Lithuania? The next few days we spent just walking up and down the streets of Warsaw, looking at the changes around us.

We sold some of the jewellery Mother had given us and bought luxuries for Auntie and ourselves. As the prices were out of all proportion, we decided not to be extravagant except on my name's day and Czeslaw's birthday which we celebrated together. As an example regarding prices, we had a nice three-course meal with a bit of drink, nothing special. The cost of this meal was a pair of golden earrings, very elaborate, with real stones. We visited many friends – some were from Lithuania like the Gordons and Czeslaw's sister, Renia, Szczesna and many others.

I had always liked Warsaw but now I really loved it! It was an unbelievable city, undaunted by war, by all the reprisals. It was full of life, full of spirit and hope. Warsaw was truly alive and was able to make fun even in a tragic situation. It was surrounded by enemies as the Germans not only patrolled the streets with their rifles at the ready but they also took over the best part of the city where one could go through only by tram which was surrounded on both sides by barbed wire and full of rifles poking at you.

The Germans were taking hostages, shooting them even for trifles and, in spite of all this, the city still lived and laughed and was certain that the day would come when everything would be normal again and Poland would be free and independent again. It is hard to explain the spirit of Warsaw whilst

living in normal times but a few examples might help in understanding.

There was a death sentence for selling people goods such as bread, cigarettes, clothing, etc. without ration cards, but one could buy them all – either in the gates of houses or even in shops which displayed their wares quite openly in the windows. Funny slogans were written on walls or suspended from the roofs, like the one which I rather liked: A dead cockerel was strung up and underneath was written the sentence “I committed suicide as I was unable to deliver the required quota of eggs!” One could buy anything – and I mean anything – even trainloads of coal or other goods. Most of the transactions were conducted in cafeterias.

One could even receive Underground newspapers and the latest radio news, all printed locally but illegally, of course. These papers were delivered to houses mostly by elderly people or children. People were taken hostage and shot in public squares; people were deported and taken to extermination camps; and still people were making jokes about themselves and the Germans! Musicians, poor and hungry, went from yard to yard of the big buildings, singing songs full of derision about the Germans, full of certainty that some would survive and triumph in the end. Everyone lived from hour to hour and was happy to have survived the day.

Death was everywhere; the enemy was powerful but so was the spirit of the people. The Underground was very active and well organized as we learned from Marylka. To take constant risks was a matter of daily life. Most of those we met were thinking this way: He died today, my turn might be tomorrow, but a free Poland will live forever! The Germans could and did kill many but they were unable to break the spirit of the people and their hope for a better tomorrow. How I loved this city and its people! My leg, which had bothered me since Kybarty, started to hurt badly and I had to stay in bed. Marylka left early saying that we might see her sometime, maybe even in a free Poland and maybe even soon. Taking only a small first-aid bag, smiling and joking, she left because that night she had to report for assembly at her point of the AK. We went to bed fairly early. It was a quiet night with hardly any shooting when suddenly we were woken by a loud bang! Switching on the light, we saw a big mirror had shattered. Nobody was moving in the room; the frame was undamaged but the glass was scattered over the floor. According to a Lithuanian superstition, if a mirror breaks it means bad luck soon! I became worried. I did not believe in superstition, oh no, not me as I was level-headed, but I was very worried just the same.

Warsaw Uprising

On 1st August, 1944, Zygmunt went alone for a morning stroll as my leg was getting worse. In the afternoon he wanted to go again into the city. I asked him not to leave Auntie and me alone. I begged him; I started crying but he went, saying that he'd be back soon. Czeslaw came and Zygmunt returned saying that something was happening in the city as the trams were not running and the shops had their shutters down. He was going out again to find out the reason for this. I became quite unreasonable, got hysterical and even had a blood nose. Zygmunt was furious with me. Czeslaw tried to calm me down saying that he would stay with us but I went from bad to worse. Zygmunt was not to be shaken. After giving me his large hanky with which to hold my nose, he said:

"I will not be dictated to in my movements by a hysterical female. I will do what I want to do and I am going, that is final. You may cry as long as you like. I will go only to Marshalkowska Street and come back soon. Stop being an unreasonable female. I am not chained to you. I AM GOING!"

At this moment we heard concentrated shooting in the street. We looked through the window and realized that the uprising of Warsaw had begun. In our suburb it was about 4:30 pm on 1st August, 1944. In years to come, many books would be written and films shown about the Warsaw uprising.

My memories are rather confused and fragmentary. I remember being hungry and thirsty and more frightened than usual. From the sky were falling either bombs or ashes or leaflets - stupid, falsified leaflets as if written and signed by Polish leaders, but one saw immediately that they were written by the enemy. No-one else was able to leave the block as everyone was shot at in the street.

There were some tragic instances like one mother who was then separated from her babies whom she had left for a short while with friends a few streets away. I remember the sounds of the tanks, the noise of soldiers' boots running up or down the stairs, the screams of women being raped and the complete silence when some men were being shot in our yard. I remember being shot at like a rabbit when I, and some other women, were allowed to go to the market gardens and dig for vegetables.

I remember a man dying of tetanus in our yard as here we had our military hospital for the Underground, its chief being a famous surgeon. I remember the massacre of the Jesuit chapel with all its priests and people who were attending a special service when the uprising started. Only three escaped and came to our yard and told us the details.

I remember vaguely that I was sort of insane, asking Zygmunt to take me to some clean white snow - or at least a swift-flowing river to wash off the blood, but I got over it and became normal again. I remember German SS soldiers coming to our flat to maybe kill the men and rape me and that I became desperate and started abusing them in perfect German, cursing them, starting with their grandparents and finishing with their grandchildren. I remember that they left politely. Next day Wehrmacht soldiers brought us some dry bread and vodka and showed some snaps. They spoke about their children and their children looked nice and these men looked normal and human in these snaps.

They were also Germans but what a great difference between the SS and the Wehrmacht. My leg started to get smelly and dark and the swelling to get higher and higher. The doctor came and said that it was blood poisoning and I would need some injections.

How I received these injections is, to me, a very special story. In our block there lived a family with three children. The eldest boy – or rather, a man – Adam, I knew from my years at the Conservatorium, was studying philosophy. The youngest girl, Tereska, was just a school kid with long blonde plaits. This Tereska went every night to the city for medicine which was required by the hospital. She had to go through sewers, to jump over or crawl under fences and to cross streets, running. She was shot at every time but still managed to bring what was required, carrying it in her school uniform which had large pockets. To this day her mother is, to me, the unsurpassed heroine.

Her mother explained to me why they were doing it. Of course the mother would have preferred to fetch the medicine herself but she was physically incapable, being too big and unable to squeeze through the small openings. Tereska, being small and agile and old enough to understand, did it because someone had to save human lives. Tereska had already saved many lives and maybe God in His mercy would save Tereska's life and they were both just

doing their duty. I understood and admired the mother but I also despised myself as I didn't think that I would be able to risk the life of my child – even to save the lives of others. I was lucky never to be put in the same situation. Should you still be alive, I thank you both for showing me how one should behave in extreme times. Thank you also for saving my life with which I have not done much, I am sorry to say.

I remember the cellars where we all gathered when the bombs were falling nearby, where children were crying and adults were either praying or playing cards, or having stupid arguments.

Here I suddenly recalled the forecast of the palm reader who had told me that in my fifth year of marriage I would be surrounded by death and he could not say if my husband would come out alive. I became even more frightened as we were surrounded by death and it was my fifth year of marriage. There was no food left, no water - only that which we kept in the bath. The air was heavy with smoke from all the burning buildings. In the first days of the uprising we could hear the artillery of the Russians who were quite close, just over the river, but after a few days this Front became quiet and we could not understand why. It was a continuous nightmare; somehow unreal but, at the same time, more real than anything else which happened to me.

I remember how, one day whilst sitting at the table and drinking some strange brew, we again heard soldiers in the yard and on the stairs. Zygmunt and Czeslaw decided to hide; Czeslaw in Auntie's wardrobe with her sitting in her rocker beside it and Zygmunt under the ceiling between empty suitcases. Zygmunt told me to leave only two plate covers on the table, to hide the overcoats and to say that only Auntie and I lived there. We all knew that if they were found we would all be killed. There was no time to fuss or even to be scared as we could hear soldiers running up the stairs and hammering at doors. There were some single shots, some screams, and again we heard soldiers' boots and then ... silence. They missed our door.

This time nothing happened. When Zygmunt and Czeslaw came out of hiding they both decided never again to hide in such inadequate hiding places. They both decided in future to confront the enemy face to face. I remember how Adam (called Adas by everyone) could not take it anymore and became very odd. His professor, whom he admired greatly, had been shot dead. Adam used to hold a bullet between his fingers and repeat constantly: "This bit of lead, such a small bit, can blow out a life, a precious

life, life which was needed by mankind!” Later on he committed suicide by jumping out of a window.

One day the Germans ordered us to vacate the building, saying that the buildings were to be burnt down soon. We were told to go to the gardens of the military casino. It was the first time since the uprising that we were allowed out in the streets.

Our entire suburb was in the hands of the Germans and only the centre of the city and the Old Town were still fighting. We were all wondering what the partisans were fighting with. Already in the first days there were not enough rifles or ammunition to give to every fighting woman and man. Some had hand-made grenades, some just a bottle of petrol and a match which they were able to throw at the advancing tanks. It was so hopelessly inadequate compared with the bombs falling from the sky with the tanks and with the heavy artillery which was situated near our blocks. When the uprising began, the Soviets were near the outskirts of Warsaw but now they had retreated, leaving Warsaw to fight its own battle.

From the Soviets’ point of view, it was to their advantage if more of the Polish men were killed and the fighting spirit broken because then the Soviets would come and be proclaimed the liberators who could do as they liked. So many people were dying constantly, day and night.

From the gardens we watched our houses set on fire and our city being burnt to the ground. One man grabbed a hose, trying to put the fire out, and was shot dead. The entire street was covered by flames, flying debris and ashes. The Germans were systematic people and did their job thoroughly. Silently the crowd watched but occasionally one would hear a suppressed sob. Even the children were too frightened to cry loudly. Even now, thirty years later, I still can’t look calmly at big, open fires. After we had been a few days in the gardens, there came a new order – everyone must leave Warsaw.

The leaflets, which were distributed by planes, stated that everyone would be given work and that the old people, the crippled and children, would be looked after. We knew what it meant to be given work by the Germans; we knew what “looked after” meant and how those unable to work would be looked after. The working group would be made slave labourers and the other group exterminated. What should one do? How to escape the nightmare? It was physically impossible to join the fighting partisans and

anyway, what good would it do? None of us had arms, none of us would be of the slightest help – we would all be more of a hindrance.

Human life was the cheapest commodity – it was in plentiful supply. Arms were needed more than anything else. Auntie told us that she would not leave Warsaw under any circumstances. Both her daughters were in Warsaw and she would not go away. Hanka, the elder, we had seen that morning, but we did not know where Marylka was. Only years later we learned that Marylka was killed in the Old Town. Zygmunt and Czeslaw wanted very much to know what was happening farther away but no men were allowed in the streets.

In the last two days it seemed that women were tolerated during the day. I should go, being a female and speaking German well, but Zygmunt and Czeslaw hesitated, being afraid of the shooting. We all wanted to find out at least something and, as they could not go, therefore I did. There was not much shooting but still it was unpleasant to hear the whizzing bullets. There were mainly German soldiers in the streets and only occasionally some females. The few civilians walked slowly and stopped often, hugging the charred walls. I was very frightened but decided that stopping would not help; I would either be hit or not. In the side streets I saw groups of people being assembled but was not allowed to go nearer. People of whom I asked questions were just as ignorant as I.

I decided to go to the Staufer Kazerne, the military Gestapo head office. No civilians went there voluntarily but I thought that it might work if I played the stupid and helpless female. It was worth a try. When the gate closed behind me and I was told to go to the information office, I was truly very frightened, but it was too late to back out. I told the officer a really fantastic story. I wanted to go as quickly as possible to Modlin and join my HKP, I must hurry as I was held up by the stupid uprising. He checked my documents and looked suspicious. What clinched my story was asking him to ring Modlin requesting a car which should pick me up here as I was fed up with the uprising and would they hurry please.

The officer was speechless and then he started to grin and asked me to whom he should give the message. Without hesitation, I gave him the name and rank of the top officer of the Kaunas HKP. By now the officer was not even suspicious. He explained to me patiently that it was impossible, that I should go with one of the groups which were now being assembled and try to leave

Warsaw as soon as possible as those who stayed behind would not be considered as working force and I should hurry and go. I think that he thought that, should I be delayed, it would be no great loss to HKP if such a stupid female didn't turn up. Going back I was not even frightened anymore as I had achieved my aim.

I learned that people were being assembled and must leave Warsaw otherwise they might be separated. We had to move out. Our block was still undemolished and we left Auntie there with bits of remaining food, advised Hanka that we were leaving, and joined the mass of people going towards Pruszkow – an outer suburb of Warsaw.

On the streets were dead people, dead children, dying people. We went ahead and death went with us. Death and dying was by now an everyday occurrence. Now it was him or them and in the next moment it could be me or mine. This became a fact of life. I remember the Ukrainians who were even worse than the Germans, bashing people to death and robbing them of their meagre possessions.

I think that we should all have become insane but only very few did. It is hard to describe one's feelings. We were not really callous as everyone was trying to help everyone else but, the moment when someone was beyond help – dead or otherwise – we marched on. Humans are an odd lot. There comes a time when one is unable to absorb anymore human suffering. One does not become indifferent; one simply cannot take it in anymore; it becomes impossible to cry and to suffer for oneself or for others. Is it egotism or just a defence mechanism which stops one from becoming insane? I don't know. One just thinks: "It is war, bad luck." If it sounds unfeeling and egotistical, it only means that I am unable to express what we did feel. The walk along the road seemed long.

We were all tired and most of us carried some bundles on our backs. Some even tried to drag suitcases. In front of us walked an elderly couple; she paralysed, he supporting her; they did not carry anything. When we passed Warsaw proper we were met by local inhabitants. They were standing along the road in front of their houses and offering us what they could spare. Milk was offered to children and we were given fruit, tomatoes, and cooked vegetables from their own gardens. Those who were too poor and had nothing to give were standing with buckets of water and we could drink our fill.

We were all very thirsty. Near Pruszkow we were one big mass of plodding people, herded by the military police and the Ukrainians (German's auxiliary units) of whom we were all afraid. From various side streets people were joining this stream which seemed without a beginning or end. We were all herded towards a sawmill in Pruszkow which was surrounded by barbed wire and armed police. We felt stunned. We had left our city behind, our city which was still burning, still fighting and suffering. We were all tired after days without sleep or food.

None of us knew what the next moment might bring. Quick death or some kind of lingering life? Zygmunt and Czeslaw met some friends and they all put their heads together and started guessing what would be best to do. One thing seemed certain to them; one should try to get out of here. Usually it is bad to be with a mass of people. One should get out and then try to run away – somewhere , anywhere. Priority number one was to get out of here, but how? The men decided that I should go and see someone in charge and get us out. Who should I see? Where would I find someone in charge? Zygmunt pointed to an officer who had just come out and was giving orders to a military policeman. I went.

I was scared as the men had not even briefed me on what I should say to ensure that I did not let them down as they were counting on my help. I had already learned the number one lesson: Don't show that you're frightened; speak calmly and to the point. The Germans were also frightened. One should appear self-assured, speak precisely. The officer listened to my faultless German, my short sentences. He asked for documents, he asked for my husband and took his documents also and, still holding our identity papers, told us to get into the car. I started explaining about my cousins, Czes and Rynca, but he would not listen. We had to get into the car quickly with not even a handshake or kiss with Czeslaw. The officer was travelling in front, Zygmunt and I in the back, flanked by two military policemen, rifles at the ready. What was happening? Were they going to shoot us? Probably not as they could have done it there in the yard, but where were we going? I did not dare to speak with Zygmunt; we were just holding hands. The car stopped near a truck and the officer gave our documents to the driver of the truck and told us to hop on the truck where a few soldiers were already sitting. The officer would not answer any questions and just told us to hurry. It was better in the truck. The soldiers had their rifles beside their seats and looked rather bored and tired. We went in a westerly direction. Zygmunt

and I began to whisper. Zygmunt tried to cheer me up:

“They did not shoot us. It can’t get worse; it might even get better. Just calm down.” We passed a bridge and Zygmunt became interested in the surroundings and told me that we were approaching Modlin. The big red brick building in front of us was the Modlin fortress. I was still not too happy as I was frightened of fortresses, especially those which were occupied by the enemy. It was a big fortress with many buildings. The lorry stopped, our documents were returned to us and we were told to go to the “Zersprengtensammelstelle” (a gathering point of men lost from their units).

We went in the direction indicated and realized that no guard was following us. We stopped, still uncertain as to what was happening. Zygmunt already had ideas. If there was a gate to let us in, there must be a gate to let us out. Simple, isn’t it? He briefed me: I had to go and speak with the man in charge of the gate and explain that I was looking for the Arbeitsamt and my HKP. When I asked Zygmunt what would happen if there was no HKP, he told me not to be stupid as, with all the army trucks, there certainly must be a HKP and anyway not to worry as, with the uprising, the Germans couldn’t be sure what was happening. I had to say that my husband was a sick man but, mind you, not too sick – maybe a stomach upset from malnutrition? Mind you, don’t overdo the sickness.

I did as I was told and everything went quite smoothly. The man in charge of the gate was not from the police but from the regular army. He was pleasant and sympathetic and even gave me a loaf of bread for my undernourished husband. We left the fortress and nobody was guarding us. We even had bread which we had not tasted during the weeks of the uprising.

At last we were free! That night we slept in the cottage of a very poor man who earned a meagre living repairing shoes. This family shared the bit of food they had with us. Our own family could not have been nicer to us. We were the first refugees from Warsaw. They advised us to disappear from Modlin as soon as possible as the police from the Arbeitsamt were hunting people. While walking along a country road, we met a Mr. Sylvester who started talking with us and, after hearing that we were from the uprising, invited us to share the house in which he lived. The house belonged to old Mrs. Wojciechowska in Kosewo.

Kosewo

The first few days in Kosewo we felt we were living in paradise. Grandma Wojciechowska accepted us with open arms. The village people were very generous bringing food, even meat. We were the first to come from burning Warsaw. We slept on beds, we were left in peace. We slept and ate and sat under the cherry tree. Only at night did we feel restless, looking at the glow of the fires over Warsaw. The village elder advised us to look for work as he would have to report us and we would be taken to dig trenches. Marysia Piasecka (who worked as a cook at the airfield) was glad to help us get work. She found work for me in the kitchen which was very good as it was already getting cold and, in addition, I could count on extra food. Zygmunt had to dig trenches but quite near, on the same airfield.

Within a few weeks we had both made a career. Zygmunt became foreman and I was transferred from peeling potatoes to become a typist and an interpreter. Kosewo belonged to the part of Poland which was proclaimed by the Germans as Germany. The population, although mainly Volksdeutsche, could not speak German and I, a Pole, had to interpret to the Major who was in charge of the airfield. My work was not hard and thanks to Marysia we were able to have more food and sometimes even horsemeat. It tasted all right and, after eating it, we were not hungry for a long time.

We both started to feel better and even my gums stopped bleeding. Once again Zygmunt was transferred to another job, this time to loading bombs. He hated this work. These bombs which the men were loading were for bombing our Warsaw. They could not sabotage as they were very strictly supervised by the Germans so all they could do was to work as slowly as possible. We all hoped that the Front would break soon but it stopped again, now only six kilometers away from us. Kosewo was no Eden any longer. Each day there were air raids, bombs falling and flak.

Zygmunt became a storeman, issuing tools. His bunker was close to the kitchen and I could go there during the air raids. His bunker was a hole in the ground covered with planks and earth. We sat on a large bomb during the raids and thought that it would not matter if a bomb did drop on us – we would not feel a thing; we would be lucky and killed instantly. The air raids became very frequent. There were the English planes with arms and

medicine for the partisans, the Russian bombs and their “Katiushas”. It was unnerving.

By now there were many refugees from Warsaw and all were telling the same story. The Front had stopped, the Germans were well dug in, there was no hope of crossing the frontier and there was also little hope that the Russki would come soon. We were thinking about our children and how to reach them but we could not see a way. We had to wait for the Front to break.

It was not easy to wait. It was late Autumn and getting cold. Air raids now became constant and so was the shelling. Zygmunt had no overcoat. For some gold roubles which Mother had given us we bought a blanket and with other roubles we bought moonshine and eggs with which we paid a German tailor to make Zygmunt a jacket. I was not feeling well, starting to cough badly and I always felt tired as we now worked twelve hours or more daily.

I could not get used to the air raids. I became more nervous, especially after being caught in the open with planes shooting or bombing. I was petrified of the “Bordwaffe” (machine guns for low-flying plans). We shared our small room with many people.

We all slept on the floor; there was no privacy and it was always noisy as there were also children. In the village, amongst the houses, the barns and in the orchards were stationed German divisions, amongst them a tank division. An officer, Otto Koch, started talking with me, speaking about his home town in South Germany, a small town called Isny. He showed me photos of his father and the town which nestled between the hills. His father wrote that there was complete peace, no planes, not even flying over Isny. The way in which Otto Koch spoke, one could think that he was speaking about Heaven. The Front between the Rivers Bug and Narev seemed to have stabilized. There was no way in which we could go through the Fronts to Kaunas and Karmelowo. To have some privacy, we used to go to the barn and talk. Zygmunt saw that my resistance was getting very low; quite often I was near panic.

We could not stay in Kosewo much longer as the villages near the Front were being evacuated and people were taken to Germany to dig trenches. Those who were unable to go were simply shot dead, as people who came from other villages assured us. I was no help to Zygmunt at all. I started to go to pieces. Zygmunt suggested that perhaps we should go to Isny although it was

hundreds of kilometres farther from Lithuania, but maybe we could manage from there somehow. I pointed out to him that it would be nearly impossible to get travel orders to Isny – even the Germans were not allowed to travel freely so we did not have a hope. Zygmunt brushed my argument aside: “You go and speak with the Major. He will give you the travel orders.” The Major accepted me the next morning, asked me to sit down and even offered me some imported liqueur. When he heard my request, he asked if I realized that even Germans, even those who were bombed out, had trouble receiving travel orders to Isny. He asked me if I would like to go soon. “As soon as possible, please.”

He began writing and I held my breath as he was writing on the pad reserved for army personnel only. “Reisabefehl” (travel order) to Isny, for both of us. He handed it to me and ... kissed me. I wanted to hit him but I also wanted to get out with the travel order. Should I hit him in the face he might kill me and goodbye to the travel order. I became quite rigid. He let me go and told me that next day he would bring me some travel food vouchers and we would be permitted to eat in restaurants. I thanked him saying that we were not hungry. He just laughed and then the phone rang and he let me go.

I was free and had the travel orders. I came home crying and Zygmunt thought that I had not received the travel orders. I told him what had happened, that I let the Major kiss me and had no guts to smack his face. Zygmunt told me that I had behaved reasonably, smacking the Major’s face would not have achieved anything, that I just kept quiet as otherwise we both might have been dead, or I might have been raped. He told me that I did not bribe the Major, just kept quiet. I calmed down somewhat but I still hated myself and hated war where morals were so different from normal times. I hated them all, even Zygmunt, who could not understand how I felt.

Next day I was not feeling well at all. My skin was painful to touch, I was barely able to walk and in pain. The nearest doctor was about one kilometre away and Zygmunt partly carried me and I partly walked. The German military doctor was nice and asked me a lot of questions, something about heart and rheumatism, but I could hardly follow him. I told him that I certainly had a heart but no rheumatism. The doctor told me that I had a very high fever and that I had rheumatic fever.

As I was semi-conscious, the doctor called in Zygmunt and apologized that he had only aspirin and quinine tablets. He gave Zygmunt a handful of them

and said that, being young, I might survive. And survive I did, but I do not remember much - the way back to Grandmother Wojciechowski, the following days and nights. I was told that the shelling and bombing was constant but I remember only pain and Zygmunt's face bending over me and a wet rag on my face, but I knew that I was sleeping on a bed, on fresh, clean-smelling straw. How many days passed I do not remember.

Our travel orders arrived and even our food coupons and we left the village Kosewo. By this time I could already walk, if supported by Zygmunt, who carried both our bags. Zygmunt took off his coat and put it over me as it was raining and I was shivering, travelling in an open lorry. We came to some towns and travelled by train. Two days? Four days? I don't know; I was still not very well. We stopped in Dresden and stayed with Alma for a few days. I even went into the charming city which I loved, especially the old Zwinger and the surrounding palaces, but most of the time I spent in Alma's room lying on the bed. From Dresden we travelled mainly by night as it was considered safer because trains were not bombed or machine-gunned by night. One day two Lithuanians came into our carriage, Kazys Rakuzinas and Pranas (Pranavicius). They were going to Kempten. It was pleasant to hear Lithuanian speech.

Next we travelled by a funny little train which puffed and wheezed when going uphill. The valley was green and surrounded by hills, all the houses looked clean and none were damaged. It was quiet and peaceful. Even the air seemed to be different. What a contrast to what we had before. We were not even speaking, just holding hands and looking.

Isny in Allgau

Isny was a small, mediaeval town with cobbled streets, a church, monastery, church walls and town gate. Rooves of separate houses were touching each other. It was in a valley surrounded by hills, the highest being the “Schwarzer Grat” (Black Grat) domineering all the others. It had the usual market place, Post Office, various “Gasthauses”, library, chemist shop, etc.

Thanks to the travel orders, we were allowed to stay one night at the hotel and only next morning we went to the Burgermeister (Major) as every newcomer had to report to his offices. He checked our documents and allocated Zygmunt to a factory belonging to Heim, which was working for the war industry.

I coughed a lot during the interview and probably did not look too healthy as the Mayor told me to report to a doctor and come back when I was considered capable of work. He allocated us living quarters, gave us coupons to buy a stove and wood for heating and, after telling us to behave ourselves, let us go.

The room allocated to us was in the house of Mrs. Fleck. The room was in the attic but we thought lovely as the whole room belonged to us. We did not have to share it with anyone. We had two beds (we used only one), a table, two chairs and a wash basin. It was a tiny room but had two windows with a view over the meadow and all this room was just for us. We liked it very much. Mrs. Fleck was not a pleasant woman but we did not expect her to be different. She belonged to the “super race” and we were just the cattle from the “Ost” (East), just good enough to work for the government. She had her own problems as she was supporting not only one or two daughters but also her son who was wounded during the war, and she needed our money from the room. She was not really rude, just unpleasant, but it did not matter to us. Zygmunt did not have to report for work for a few days and I was on sick leave for a few weeks. Wasn’t life wonderful?

We knew that it would not last long but we wanted to enjoy these few days of peace and quiet. We wandered along the cobbled streets, we even bought some pictures which we pinned on the walls, and we also bought a large map which showed Lithuania. How often did we look at this spot, spreading on

the table our most valued possessions – the photos of our family.

Zygmunt had to get up at 4:00 am and returned home after 6:00 pm. It was a long day and he felt tired as he had to stand all day long. His head was aching as he was working in a very noisy hall. The Heim factory was producing weapons or rather, parts for them. After Zygmunt was questioned by a few Germans and vetted, he was given a pamphlet about the secrecy of his work, etc. His mate at the work bench asked him if he intended to keep the pamphlet. Zygmunt replied that he had already read it and found it uninteresting. The mate asked Zygmunt for this pamphlet, not to study it but only because it was very good for cigarette paper.

He also told Zygmunt that the pamphlet did not mention the main point: Heim's factory was producing V2 parts! We thought it was a very good exchange; a bit of useless paper for the knowledge of what one was doing. I was still coughing badly and not feeling very well and the doctor gave me another two weeks off work. He also told me that that would be the last time and he would advise me to find work outside the factory. The factory seemed all right to me. There were many non-Germans, at least fourteen nationalities. They were all given soup once a day and most of the work was indoors where it was not too cold. The doctor was quite emphatic: I should find work outside the factory. I applied, and was accepted, as a kitchen maid and waitress in the guesthouse "Zum Hirach".

We settled down to a routine. Zygmunt got up at 4:00 am, lit the stove with the kindling provided by the Major, added a brick of coal which he had stolen the previous evening at the factory (there was a death sentence for stealing but everyone who could, did steal) and made me a cup of hot water. After he left I still stayed in bed waiting for the room to get a bit warmer and for the water to melt in the bucket so that I could wash myself.

It was quite cold by now and our walls were covered with ice. I got up at 5:00 am. After he finished his work at the factory, Zygmunt came to "Zum Hirsch" (that would be about 6:00 pm) and wait there for me until I was ready to go. Usually it was about 11:00 pm. Sometimes I was lucky and, with the help of the other kitchen maid, Anushka, was able to bring him a bowl of hot soup. He was very tired and so was I. I was coughing really badly and my sandals were no protection against the snow. On the days off, I washed Zygmunt's underwear and he had to stay in bed and dry them with his body heat as there were not enough briquettes for heating. On the

alternate days off, I washed my clothes, wearing his, and he again had to dry them in bed. We had no spare clothing and no coupons with which to buy any. The washing was done in the backyard in a bucket of cold water. I was coughing more and more.

Translated from my diary:

“Zygmunt had an aversion to people coughing and has it still. I think it dates back to his youth when his father coughed and choked. One night when we were just falling asleep I started coughing which was like barking and could go on for hours. He jumped out of bed and started swearing and choking me. My head was under the blanket and he was choking me through the blanket. I did not mind as it would be good to be dead, to be finished with all of it. I really had had it by now. I did not resist when all of a sudden his fingers relaxed and he started to kiss me and to apologise. Oh, the stupid clot, why the apology? I know he did not want to kill me, he only wanted to kill the horrid cough. I do not mind dying.”

The nights were really hard for Zygmunt. Sometimes he had five hours' sleep but usually only four. At this time I was either coughing or started screaming in my nightmares, looking for my children who might have been deported by the Soviets, being so frightened that I would never find them. I was quite reasonable during the days, but at night when asleep, I was unbearable. I was longing for the children. I missed them so much and they were so far away. I got toothache and my face swelled up and my boss told me to go to the dentist. It was a dreadful experience. The German dentist examined me, checked my identity papers and told his young assistant, a girl in the last year of Uni., to do an extraction and, before leaving the room, he told her: “Mind you, no anaesthetic for this Polish pig.”

It took over an hour as my tooth was crumbling. I was sorry for myself and also for the girl. We both cried. She gave me some spirits only slightly diluted with water, asking me not to tell anyone. It was a wisdom tooth and my ear and eye hurt for days and days but even so, the following day I had to go to work. I disliked most of my work. I hated polishing the floors as I had to move all the heavy tables and chairs (sometimes Zygmunt did it for me in the evening before going home), I hated cleaning the windows as my hands were bleeding from the icy cold whilst being wet and I also used to faint falling down from the table and the chair. I hated bringing the buckets full of potatoes from the cellar as they were so very heavy. I liked peeling potatoes

whilst sitting in the warm kitchen, I liked setting the tables, but I hated serving beer as a tray with beer mugs was very heavy. I hated the peak hours as I had to serve eighty people and everyone was in a hurry, and I had to clip the coupons.

I did not like our meals either as Anushka and I were given mostly frozen potatoes covered not with gravy but with cold water from the pan. I liked cleaning the rooms in the guest house as there was a chance to take the unsmoked bits of cigarettes and, when lucky, even a bit of a cigar which we would share in the evening and roll our own. It was cold everywhere and only at about 5:00 pm was the stove lit in the main room but by then I was too tired to be happy about it. Anushka taught me how to cheat on ration cards and we were sometimes able to steal a slice of bread each but no other food as everything was kept under lock and key.

I felt so miserable on my day off that I went to see the German doctor at the hospital. She explained to me that, as my temperature was only 38.6° C, I could not be accepted at the hospital; it should be at least 39° C. Anyway, she would not advise me to apply for the hospital as I would be allocated just a mattress in the draughty passage. I would be better off where I was as only terminal TB cases were given beds, and I was not a terminal case.

Zygmunt was more than good to me. He gave me his teaspoonful of butter each week, saying that he was not hungry. He would not eat his ration of meat (two slices a week), telling me that he had meat in the factory (which I knew was a lie) but still I accepted his butter and his meat. Each night he dried my stockings with his body and never complained. He tried to be cheerful and spoke about our children and a happy future as if it was a fact that would come true and we would only have to wait a bit longer. I felt very tired and old although I was only 28. Some friends came to visit us and stayed for a few days. They were able to keep in touch with us through mutual friends, like Alma in Dresden.

Czeslaw was the first. He was doing all right. He and his friends had a fictitious firm, working for the army. They had lovely letterheads and many important looking stamps on some of the letters. They were allowed to travel throughout Germany as though for the effort of the army whilst in reality they were supplying goods bought on the black market. He stayed only a few days. Wanda and Veronika from Kybarty came too and they stayed each time for quite a while. Karaliene, my friend from Lithuania, came and

brought us good news:

The Jewish children whom we were able to rescue from the ghetto were doing very well in the nunnery and she was even able to see them. At last both Fronts, the one from the East and the one from the West, began to move and we were all so very happy but it did not last long as the Germans started a counter-offensive and the Allies were either stopped or even had to move back. Our spirits fell again but Zygmunt cheered us up with his deep belief that now it certainly would not be long and the Germans were certain to lose this war.

It was already 1945. My friends thought, as did I, that Zygmunt was the best companion one could wish for. Our food situation improved some, not because of the ration cards but thanks to two Lithuanians whom we met when coming to Isny. We were able to sell gold roubles and gold bracelets to buy food and, in addition, I was being paid in food for being a fortune teller. My predictions turned out to come true and some of my German customers became very friendly. The proprietress of the milk shop gave me a glass of milk each day – admittedly, diluted – but still it was milk. Others gave me some bread occasionally.

On my 29th birthday I received one kilo of bread. It was a bit stale and mouldy but it was bread and tasted better than any birthday cake I had ever had. At last, at last it seemed certain that the Germans were going to lose the war, at last there were many German evacuees, at last their cities were razed to the ground too – mainly by the American flying fortresses – at last they had to learn what it meant to be attacked by a stronger force, at last there was fighting on their own German soil, at last they were frightened too. We saw the evacuees, the bombed out, the crippled and the blind, as in Isny there was a field hospital consisting of the old hospital and the school being converted to a hospital. I was sorry for all of them but it was high time they learned what it felt like to be a conquered nation. First we had to take it, now it was their turn. The sooner they realized it, the quicker the horrors of war would be over. But the Establishment still did not realize it.

School children were drafted to the Front, old men were drafted in cadres of “Volksturm” (called Volksdumm by us). The ordinary grey German started to treat us now as if we were not slaves but maybe partly human. Some even tried to get friendly with us. I did not feel hatred towards the masses as they were too brainwashed in the previous years, but I hated the leaders and felt

happy that they at least had to be frightened, that they learned the feeling of the frustration when everything one valued was crumbling. Haim's factory, where Zygmunt worked, was closed as there was no work.

The trains were bombed so often that the factory was now unable to bring the finished goods out, nor was there any hope of receiving the raw materials. Zygmunt would now rest and sleep as much as he wanted. I still had to go to work but my boss became nicer and Anushka and I were given more food. There were also fewer people for the meals as some left Isny. We could buy extra food and clothing as the Mayor of Isny issued an order to shops to sell extra goods in addition to the ration cards. Money was no problem. Firstly, we were both paid when working and unable to spend the money as the ration cards required hardly a quarter of the money we earned and there was no black market that we knew of, especially not for money. One day there occurred a tragic-comic incident. I quote from the diary:

"One shop was selling 2-1/2kg of cheese to each customer (our rations per month were in grams). The queue was enormous. We were near the door of the shop when an air alarm sounded. I wanted to sit the alarm out in the field or the hills but Zygmunt would not hear of it. To leave the queue now (now, when we were so close to the door) – never. He told me to shut up. I begged him, I pleaded. He would not reconsider. His argument was as follows: Nobody would be bombing the small, insignificant town of Isny and anyway, think about 2-1/2kg of cheese. Cheese is cheese.

"Zygmunt, couldn't you forego the cheese for me? Even if it is an imaginary fright. But I am so frightened. Please."

"Marushka, you are unreasonable and hysterical. If you want, you can go. I am not going. I am getting the cheese."

"Zygmunt, is cheese more important to you than my happiness?"

"Don't be stupid. Cheese is cheese."

"I hope you choke on this cheese when you are covered by bricks from the fallen buildings. I hope you die a slow death, you beast!" – and I ran away. I was so unhappy. Zygmunt loved cheese more than he did me. There is nothing left to live for. I could understand him, partly. I was sick, coughing, hysterical. I was a burden. I hoped a bomb would fall on me but I knew that

I could not be so lucky, sitting in the open field. But I could still help myself to die. The doctor had told me that, should I now get pneumonia, I would certainly die. I took off my shoes, put my feet in the puddle of melted snow, and hoped to die soon. I started to think about our sons but decided that it would be better for them without me, a hysterical woman, me with TB, etc., etc. I hoped I would die. The all-clear had sounded a long time ago. If Zygmunt would have wanted to he could have found me, but he did not care. He was probably at this very moment gorging himself with his cheese. I did not want to see him ever again. I heard our whistle – the one only Zygmunt and I knew – and saw him running towards me, the cheese still wrapped. He hugged me, looked at me, kissed me and started rubbing my feet. He put my shoes on, dragged me along and made me run. At home he lit the stove with the last briquette, put me to bed and fed me cheese, bit by bit. Zygmunt still loved me more than cheese. We will survive, we will find our children. War will end soon!” UNQUOTE.

The Allies were coming nearer and nearer. The Germans became unorganized, just like all the other conquered nations did once upon a time. The discipline was gone but still they would not give up. We were advised that Isny, although proclaimed a hospital town, would not surrender but would fight to the bitter end.

Everyone might be killed but nobody should surrender. How stupid the Germans were. They had already lost the war – that was a fact, so why should they now lose their lives as well? Barricades were built, men were posted to guard the main roads to the town and to give the alarm so that the citizens could start fighting with their old-fashioned rifles against the tanks of the Allies. We – that is Zygmunt, Wanda, Veronica and I – decided to leave Isny.

We went to the hills and a farmer took us in. They were a pleasant family; the old farmer, his wife and two daughters. They also had three sons who were somewhere at the Front. We were given a room and were allowed to use the stove. The same night there came a few army men and the farmer let them stay too. They were all young men and I remember one particularly well as he was just a boy. Next morning Zygmunt left at dawn to go to Isny to hear some radio news. Wanda and Veronica were still asleep and the young boy and I were talking. He was speaking about his mother, “Mutti”. He was so happy that now – when the war was practically over – he would soon be with his Mutti on their farm which was not far from here. He would help with the farming as his father was not so young and there were only two

sisters at home; all his older brothers were either missing or dead.

He was smiling happily, looking at his photos from home. The farmer called us for breakfast and we were all sitting around the table when an SS-man came, calling the army men to hurry up. The other men got up quickly and only the nice boy lingered, looking happily around at the farmer's family, at all of us, at the hot stove. He was happy and relaxed, he was near his home which was so similar to the one in which he was now. The SS-man took his rifle in his hand and ... shot the boy ... in his head. I am no writer so I am unable to explain the horror I felt when I saw the boy die. He died with an astonished look on his face.

His "Mutti" would never see him again. The boy's life had expired. His brain and his blood were splashed on the wall behind the place where he had been sitting between all of us. He was dead. For no reason ... or? Later on we learned that he belonged to a penalty commando and that the young SS-man was the master of life and death, without giving any reason.

The next few hours were a nightmare. The farmer's wife, who had become very friendly with this boy, collapsed. The farmer lost his voice and disappeared. The daughters and I washed the blood and the splashed brain from the wall. Zygmunt came later and told us that the French Army was only 5-10 km away. When he heard what had happened and how the farmer's family felt, he took all of us away and we went looking for another shelter. We found one higher up in the hills, even a nice one in an "Almhutte". The boy was dead; for us life still went on but – for how long? The Almhutte (a hut where the cowherds could sleep and cook during the summer season) was empty.

In the loft was fresh hay which Zygmunt brought down so we were able to sleep on soft, fresh-smelling hay. There was a stove and some kindling and there was water in the cow troughs. The water was clean and fresh, coming from the spring in the hill. The hut was surrounded by meadows and forests. It was peaceful and quiet. Before dawn we heard footsteps. Some were single ones, some in groups. They were only men, they were not armed, all wore civilian clothes but had military boots. We did not know who they were. Maybe deserters? Maybe civilians – those who had so beastly treated us foreigners and who were now afraid of reprisals? Perhaps they were just ordinary people who were afraid to be caught during the last few days of the war. We spoke with some of them.

They were all leaving Germany. They were all looking for a way out. Some were trying to reach Switzerland, some were going home to Austria. They were all on the run. I was a bit sorry for them, but not very much. During the last years I had seen too many Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, Russians and Ukrainians who were also walking before dawn, also looking for a sheltered spot. Once it was us but now the fortunes of war had changed and now it was their turn. We had an unusual breakfast with plenty of everything; that is, hot water, Swiss cheese with nice big holes, so fresh and tasty. We had plenty of pressed cocoa – but no bread. Everything was provided by Zygmunt. An odd breakfast but so filling and so nice. Wanda and Veronica were not too happy in this isolated hut and decided to go to a farm, not too far away, where Lithuanians were living.

Zygmunt decided to go to Isny to try to find out more details of the movement of the Fronts. I stayed near the Almhutte, a bit higher up the hill, hiding behind bushes and trees. It was fairly quiet. The rumbling of the tanks was at least 5 km away and none could come my way. I was thinking and dreaming and hoping. Now, very soon, I would again be with my children. A normal life would begin again after two such long years of separation. Perhaps even in the next few weeks, or at the latest, next month – May – I would again have my babies. Were they still alive? Would we be able to find them? Would they remember us? I was thinking about last winter which was the worst; not because of cold and hunger but because I was losing hope. There was the counter-offensive which seemed successful and Zygmunt was transferred to another department and had to work under the horrible Altenried who had already finished off a French worker.

Each morning when Zygmunt went to work, I was afraid that it was the last time I would see him. Thinking about the Germans, I tried to be objective but was hard although I had met new Germans here in Isny. A Mr. Kischel, a painter, who was not better off than us – even worse as his wife was dying of TB – was a sensitive person and hated Hitler and the Nazis. He painted a portrait of Zygmunt and me which we still possess. I thought about the German women who were worried about their men somewhere at the Front and they could not care less about politics. I was sorry for those but then I started thinking about the concentration camps, about the exterminations, about the “Herrenrace”. I hated them. I thought about our lot – I mean, we people from the conquered countries, about all the miseries of millions and about so much death. I hated them, only I could not specify the “THEM” as

people were people, irrespective of nationality, but what made them tick and become so brainwashed? I did not know.

My thoughts returned to yesterday when one German killed another German for no reason. Do we Poles, Lithuanians, etc. also have men like that? Probably we have, but I have never met one. I knew that sons and husbands were dying every second during the war but this was not war, it was a senseless murder. The murderer had a mother, a father and maybe even friends, and later on he might have belonged to the society of German people and might even have had his own children. Why did he kill his countryman? Was it the first time? Did he kill in the name of the Fuehrer or was it for the fun of killing? The murderer looked like any other ordinary person. Didn't the murderer think that the boy had a mother who was probably praying and hoping to see her son? The murderer killed the mother as well. In the name of what did the young boy die? Neither for Fuehrer, Volk and Vaterland, nor for any ideals. Why did he have to die?

It was a very cold morning; even snow was falling on the morning of 29th April, 1945. Some tanks were going towards Isny. I became nervous, thinking that Isny might start to defend itself and that Zygmunt might be caught there. I decided to go to Isny to look for him. If the worst came to the worst, we should be together. I had covered barely a quarter of a kilometre when I saw Zygmunt running up the hill, quite out of breath. When he saw me he started shouting "Hurray, hurray" and was throwing his cap in the air. The Senegalese Division of the French Army (coloured troops from French West Africa) was already in Isny which nobody was defending. French tanks were standing in the market place and our French war prisoners were as happy as happy can be. The French brought barrels of wine from somewhere and everyone was everyone's friend. We were liberated – we could go back to Isny and from there – probably very soon – we would go back home, home to our children.

Isny looked quite different. There were no Germans on the streets, only us, the deported, and the different nationalities. All had their national colours pinned to their clothing, the girls having theirs in their hair. The Burgermeister was imprisoned and shortly left to go free. Mr. Heim, the proprietor of Zygmunt's factory, was also imprisoned but he committed suicide in his cell. The awful foreman, Altenried, was bound to a chair which was placed in High Street near the theatre and everyone passing by was asked if they knew him and, if they did, they could do to him what they liked. He

was beaten up, his head was bleeding, he was half conscious and I was glad that Zygmunt did not hit him as he was an enemy no longer, just the shell of a man who one had once hated.

Now we did not hate; we loved everyone. The enemy was down and out and not even worth the effort of a hit. All the non-German people started to gather into their own nationality groups. Zygmunt organized the first Polish national meeting in the picture theatre. It was an evening to remember. All of us, all Poles were there.

Zygmunt opened the meeting saying that he definitely did not intend to become a president or to have any official function within the community. He wanted it that all the Poles from Isny and neighbouring farms could meet each other. He wanted only to remind us of the years of hardship. I knew his speech. I knew that he could speak well when in a proper mood but I was also caught up in the emotional upheaval when he started speaking about the years of our Gehenna², ending with the certainty of freedom and the hope for a better tomorrow. Many were crying quite openly; not only females but also men of all ages. After his speech he asked for the Polish anthem and we all sang loudly and proudly: “Jeszcze Polska nie zginela, poki my zyjemy” (Poland is not lost as long as we are alive).

Anyone who had not lived through those moments would be unable to understand what it meant to feel free, to be able to speak in one's native tongue openly and loudly, to be able to sing one's national anthem. Although Poland was many hundreds of kilometres away, we here in the hall was part of Poland, part of our people. We were again free. For us, the war had ended and, although it still went on in Asia, somehow it did not matter much to us. We were all quite certain that even in Asia it could not last much longer. We were all certain that, in a few days or weeks, the war would be over. We hoped we would very soon be home and reunited with our families. We were told that we would have to wait, that no-one could go home yet.

It was an odd time. Each national group had its own organizations. There were committees, sub-committees, there were presidents, vice-presidents, chairmen, etc. Most of them were fighting in debates to have the place and title one thought he deserved. Zygmunt was not in the race but he was there to help anyone if help was needed. He straightened out quarrels, personal

² A synonym for Hell, from Greek origins

and political, and also petty intrigues. He was pressed to take over offices and he always refused. Each day we had many people coming and going, asking Zygmunt his opinion, his advice, asking for help.

Zygmunt was available to all, nothing was too much trouble. He was happy to be of assistance and help he did in Isny – a lot – as there were not many educated people and only few who did not seek positions and prestige. People trusted Zygmunt that he would not cheat them. They believed now that he was not out to make some deal for himself. How I loved Zygmunt. People began to “organize” things. That is what we called it but it meant stealing or taking when and what one could; food, clothing, biros, typewriters, etc. The Burgermeister ordered clothing to be issued free.

Zygmunt and others got some SS-men’s black trousers, all pure wool. None of the Germans applied for them as they were frightened that one would think that they were the real SS-men. We did not steal food because by now we had kitchens where food was available for all of us. We had three hot meals a day – peas and meat. In the morning they were a bit raw, at lunch time they were just fine, and in the evening it was just a mashed something with a bit of sand on the bottom. For the first few days we ate four litres each meal. Already after a few days we ate a lot less and soon even forgot what it felt like to be hungry.

I did not see much of Zygmunt during this time. In addition to being available to everyone with any help he could give, he organized a theatre and even got a cast and extras through the Swiss IMCA. He found two professionals but he was the director, the choreographer, the scriptwriter and the general manager in its broadest sense. His group, consisting mainly of young country people, was touring Wuertenberg, giving performances in various towns. He enjoyed every moment of it and in his spare time he was finishing his memoirs, “**Bellum Vobiscum**”. (www.bellumvobiscum.com)

When he was writing them he was quite impossible, forgetting all his appointments and his meals. He was so full of enthusiasm, full of hope for a good future. He infected those around him with his enthusiasm; he lived a full life. Many girls were in love with him; girls who were not as ravished by sickness as I was; girls who were younger, who were prettier, who showed their constant admiration, who were there and just waiting. And what did he do? He advised, admonished, spoke commonsense to them or gave them away at weddings.

To me he was compassionate, full of love and kindness, always cheerful, quite certain that we would find our children and parents, that it was only a matter of time. I became friendly with a Mr. Schroader whom I met whilst working at “Zum Hirsch”. He was a Russian citizen but, because of his German origins (third generation), he became a Volksdeutsche. In Russia he married a Swiss girl; the daughter of a Swiss diplomat. I thought I knew Russia through the time of the occupation of Wilno and Lithuania but he painted a different picture. He was a “Volgadeutsch” as his grandfather came from Germany and settled in the Volga Valley. Financially, he had no trouble as he was one of the chief engineers in the Dnisprostroj.

There was NO freedom of thought or speech. One was allowed only to express thoughts which were given out by the government. His main trouble began when his children started to grow up. Children in Russia were encouraged to criticize their parents, mainly watching the parents’ political outlook. The children could even become heroes of the nation if they could bring their parents to workers’ camps or extermination. The war was a deliverance from his problems – they all went to the West. His wife and daughters were accepted in Switzerland as his wife was a Swiss citizen prior to marriage and he was now waiting for permission to join them. We also got friendly with a Russian family, the Naumow. He was an engineer and she a doctor, and the old mother was with them. They lived in a camp reserved for the Russians. They did not want to go back to Russia as they were frightened and suspected that they would be eliminated or sent to labour camps. Later it was proved that that their suspicions were right.

We were all free and happy but the atmosphere was not quite what I would have expected. There was a tension which grew. None of us could understand the Americans and the English. We knew that they had an agreement with the Russki but we could not understand that the Allies seemed to trust the Russians. We, the displaced people, did not trust the Russians. The French, Belgian and others from the Western countries left very soon and they were all very happy to go home. For us from the East, there were no transports available; we were told to wait.

Many Lithuanians and Poles were varied in their feelings and undecided, but the Russians, the prisoners of war and those deported for labour, were definite in their feelings – they did not want to go back to Russia. During the first days of our liberation, we all shared a feeling of euphoria but now the

atmosphere had changed a lot. Some felt uncertain, others plain frightened, when thinking about the future. I felt as if there was thunder in the air and dark clouds gathering. Again, I saw a dreary picture of human adversity.

There were many tragic moments and one I remember in particular. It was in Kempten. Once again the Russians were rounded up for a transport by Soviet officials. Those who tried to run away were forced back by clubbing and shooting. The Western Allied soldiers were standing around. They were not really interfering, they were not clubbing or shooting but only helping to round up the Russians, just as they usually did, just helping. Some of the people managed to escape and ran towards the church but even here there was no sanctuary; they were battered and dragged out by force. One young mother, holding her baby in her arms, ran up the steeple tower and threw herself with the baby down to their death. After all these years of slave labour in Germany, she preferred death than to return to her home country.

There were many tragic incidents which people tried to assume that they were free. What irony. Another thing puzzled us too. The German armies wanted to surrender either to the Americans, the English or the French, but the Western Allies just stopped and would not advance nor would they let the Germans surrender to them as they had a previous agreement with the Russki (at Yalta) according to which was set out who should occupy what. Did not the Allies realize that one could not trust the Soviets in any agreements? Had they forgotten the Soviet/Hitler pact when it suited the Soviets? Had the West still not learned what to expect? Some people argued that they knew but were too frightened of the Japanese and still needed the Russians and therefore tried to please the Russians.

Reute

All over Germany camps were being organized for displaced persons who were unable to go home. Those camps were mainly for Lithuanians, Poles and other Baltic peoples, but some Russians and Ukrainians were able to hide there too, pretending to be of a different nationality.

Zygmunt heard about a camp to be opened in Reute so we decided to go and have a look. Many other Poles from Isny went too, telling me quite frankly: "If Mr Kruszewski thinks it is good to go to this camp, then it must be all right. If he thinks that Reute is a good camp and if he will stay there, we will stay there too."

The camp in Reute was a big building. Before the war it was a nunnery and later, during the war, it was given to the "Volksdeutsche" and now it was given to the Poles. The commandant, Mr Rusiecki, told us that there was no more room available and that we should look for somewhere else. Zygmunt and he started talking and discovered that they both went to the same school and at the same time, only one was in Class "A" and the other in "B". They had also met during their University years although Mr Rusiecki was an engineer. Of course, now there was space available not only for Zygmunt and me, but also for all those whom Zygmunt wanted to come.

The camp in Reute was a big brick building, three storeys high. It enclosed the yard from three sides and had big, tall gates. There were many passages with doors on both sides. The smaller rooms, rather like cells, were given to single men or women and the bigger ones were for families. There was a big kitchen and a large dining room; there were offices and storerooms. There was a very large hall where Zygmunt (later on) had his rehearsals and we even had some classes, not only for children but also for grown-ups, as people had the desire to learn. We got a nice big room with a table, two beds and two chairs. Zygmunt chose this room as the toilet was next door and the room also had an oven for heating and cooking which, I thought, was quite unnecessary as summer was approaching and we would certainly be home long before winter began.

Our first job was to clean the room from bed bugs. Zygmunt got a shovel, a broom and a bucket from the management. He lifted the lino and I shovelled

while Zygmunt caught the bugs and tipped them into the bucket. When we finished the bucket was a quarter full. We also got some disinfectant which we sprayed about liberally before putting the lino back.

We settled into a routine. I worked in administration, helping Edek Rusiecki who became our friend. The war hit Edek hard. He was one of the first to be taken to the extermination camp on Oswiecim (Auschwitz). Now he was an alcoholic and had trouble with his lungs and kidneys as he was badly beaten up. He had survived all the horrors; he was very compassionate and a very nice and clever person. Edek died of TB some years later in Poland.

My main job was to type lists of people, trying to include as many “dead souls” as I could possibly manage without being found out. We needed the extra food as we had quite a few Russians in our camp who we could not list as they were there illegally. I help to organize lessons for children and at night I played bridge, sometimes all through the night. There were constant parties, constant drinking (mainly moonshine).

People were stealing and bartering, were falling in and out of love, and everyone had a merry time, thinking only about today. I hardly saw Zygmunt. He was travelling with his theatre group around Wuertenberg and doing a good job, appreciated by the Polish communities.

When back in Isny, he calmed down the angry and the frustrated. At weddings (of which we had plenty) he was usually the one who gave the bride away as the fathers were somewhere in Poland and not available. Part of his – what should I call it, ‘authority’? – reflected even on me as I was able to help during the fights when he was away. It usually happened during the late evenings when I would hear the call: “Mrs Kruszewski, come quickly. They are killing themselves with kitchen knives!”

I was not afraid of the fighting men. I could come between them and one or the other would give me his knife, still swearing, but hanging on to me, he would stagger (being quite drunk) back to his room. None was vicious but all of them had spent years facing death, seeing death, living with death. Not many of us were yet well balanced.

Food and cigarettes were supplied by the French administration. The cooking was done by our own people and, sorry to say, it was not always a clean job. One day we all got stomach upsets as the copper pots were not

cleaned properly. Some of us were affected more severely than others. I was one of the last to arrive for the meal and received a lot of verdigris which was present in the pots, and became really sick with dysentery, bleeding, etc. Certainly I was glad that our room was near the toilet. Soon I could not keep any food down. Edek got a doctor who agreed to see me in the camp. By now I was hardly conscious and fainting often. The doctor and Edek got for me some medicine and rice flakes, but I was unable to keep them down.

Although Zygmunt had commitments and could not be with me, I was never alone. People were so kind; there was always someone to help me get up, and the doctor came every day. One day the doctor just shook his head and said that he was unable to help me anymore as I was not too strong before the dysentery but, he said that I might pull through, being still young. He left, still shaking his head.

As I was shivering, one of the women lit the stove and even put a pot of mutton on to boil so that Zygmunt could have something warm to eat when he arrived back from his tour. I remember waking up and being able to reach the toilet and, by hugging the walls, I was able to get back. The room smelled very nicely of soup and mutton.

I was quite certain that I would not live much longer and decided to die on a full stomach with the taste of soup in my mouth and the smell of mutton up my nose. Somehow I managed to reach the stove but there was no way that I could get the pot down, nor could I reach the table to get a knife and fork. With my bare hands I grabbed a piece of mutton and threw it on the floor to cool. I could not pick it up, therefore I sat down on the floor and started eating the cool mutton, and I remember being quite happy.

I must have lost consciousness whilst eating because I remember only that someone put me back to bed. Next morning I felt alive and happy, although still very weak. My dysentery was gone. Incredible things can happen but I would not advise anyone to try curing dysentery with cold mutton but, if there is no medical help left, let the patient do as he wants even if certainly it is bad for him.

I think that happiness goes a very long way. The political atmosphere was not a pleasant one and quite unusual. As a result of war and the barter for political gain, the map of Eastern Europe was in the process of change. Lithuania was not an independent country anymore. It became the 17th

Republic of the Soviet Union with Wilna (Polish) now called Vilnius, as its capital. We Poles now had two well-established and officially recognized governments, each with a president, prime minister, marshal, etc. Our national emblem, the eagle, was either with a crown or without a crown. One government was in London, the other in Lublin. During the war some Poles fled to the East and some fled to the West. Both governments were Polish and they opposed each other. We, the displaced people, could pick and choose the one we wanted or none at all, and stay as displaced people. Representatives from both governments were visiting our camp, giving us pep talks but no real or true information.

One lot advised us to go to Poland as soon as transport became available. The others advised us to stay in Germany and wait.

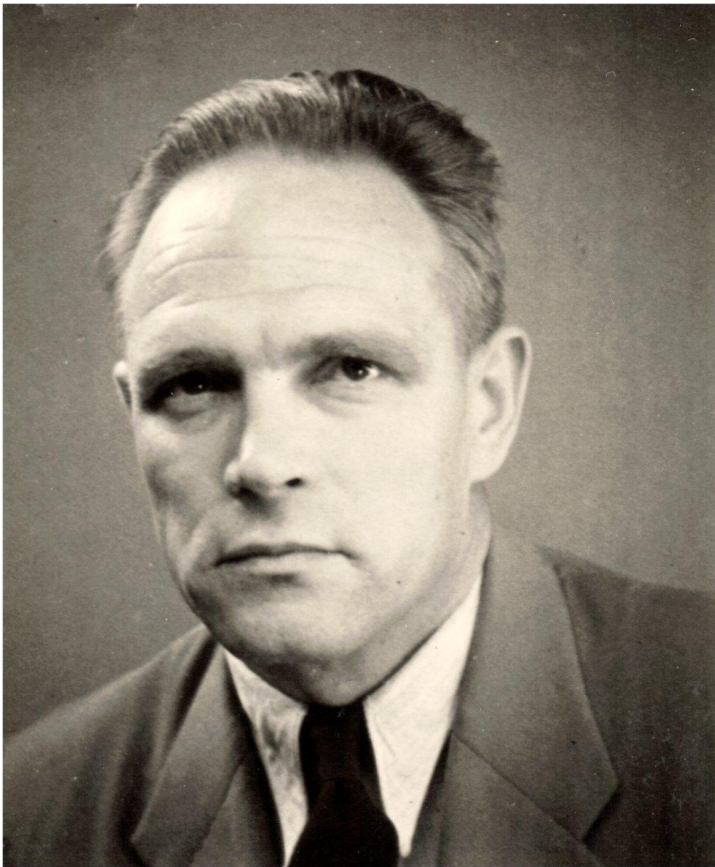
The majority in Reute were too frightened to go back to Poland as there were so many rumours about bad deeds done by the Soviets in Poland. Zygmunt and I wanted to go back to Poland at all costs, as soon as possible. I, being a woman and mother, mainly because our children were there, but I also agreed with Zygmunt; he considered himself a Pole in the first place and he thought that it was his duty to help build up the ruined country; so many of the educated class were exterminated either by the Germans or the Soviets. People were needed now in Poland.

Zygmunt's father was always pro-Communist and Zygmunt was always politically orientated to the left. His father was an atheist, a fanatic supporting all the Communist ideals. Zygmunt was even jailed for a short while for his convictions which went against the Establishment. All his friends were tending to swing to the left. We wanted to go but there was no transport. There were not even lists to sign for those who wanted to go to Poland. Waiting became very hard. Everyone was allowed to mail one postcard, thanks to the help of the Red Cross, but nobody knew when they would receive a reply. Poles from America sent us clothing and food.

We were fed, dressed and warm. We could work if we wanted, we played cards, had parties, plenty of alcohol, and still it was very hard to wait. Spring and summer passed, autumn came with cold winds and rain. In September, 1945, all the church bells were ringing as the Second World War was now finished for all people, including the Japanese. I don't remember feeling elated as, to us, war had finished a long time ago but we were still here in Germany, we still had no news from our families, we still did not know what

would happen to us. People were nervy and jumpy and ready to start a fight for no real reason, especially the “Katzetniks” (men from the concentration camps).

The fights were ugly and brutal; with knives, with legs from the broken furniture, with broken glass. It was often that somebody would call me for help. I was not afraid of the drunks. I think that Zygmunt’s aura covered me too as I could take their knives away and they would give me their bits of broken glass that they had been wielding, threateningly, a moment before. Some of them behaved like children the next morning; they would look a bit sheepish, but very friendly. They invited me to their rooms to show me their production of “moonshine” which they managed to make, even in bathrooms.



Zygmunt - Circa 1946

They were even looting and proudly showed me their new loot which later on they would exchange for something else – just like children do with toys. It was an ugly time.

New Year came, with more parties and more drunks. At last, early in 1946, there was an announcement that two transports would be available for those who wanted to go to Poland. One had to sign one’s name on the list which hung in the main room. Initially, only

a few put their names down – not more than twenty people signed – but when they saw that Mr Kruszewski had signed his name, there then appeared over

eight hundred signatures. The men, singly and in groups, would speak with Zygmunt, and the women came to me for advice.

I only told them our reason for returning to Poland. Firstly there were the children, and each mother nodded, they understood this reason. Secondly, I personally did not believe that all the anti-Soviet propaganda leaflets were true. Poland was not – and I did not believe that it would ever be – a Soviet Republic. The Lubin government had printed the names of the new cabinet, the ministers, etc. Zygmunt knew many of them – they were his friends from school and University. We knew that they were POLES and not Jews in the pay of the Soviets (as the leaflets were saying), nor were they Russians by birth, at least not the majority. Zygmunt could vouch for them. They were Polish people who loved their country, who thought that Poland needed many reforms to help the labourers and the farmers. Zygmunt knew these people personally. They were not in the Government for money or careers; they believed that they could help Poland achieve a better life.

I had nothing against the people in London. They were also Poles, also trying – to the best of their ability – to have a free Poland. But what could they achieve over there in faraway London? What help could they give, even if the American Poles were ready to help them? Were they striving to restore Poland to its former self like it was before the war? If that was the case, I did not want them. I preferred the new ones who might bring changes which were needed long ago. The women listened and nodded their heads. Poland certainly needed some changes to improve the lives of the farmers and the labourers. They belonged to this group so they knew what I was speaking about. I was not speaking for propaganda. I could not care less if they went or not. I was speaking as a mother who would go anywhere if need be – I would go to Siberia or to the Arctic – anywhere - to find my children. I was also speaking as an immature person, voicing my thoughts, thoughts which I already had five, six years ago, which were now strengthened by Zygmunt. I was speaking sincerely, telling them what I really thought. I was amazed to see what influence it had on their attitude. If I did wrong, I am sorry. I was asked my opinion and I gave it.

Poland after the War

In May, 1946, we were told that transport was ready for those who wanted to go back to Poland. Ours was an exceptionally big transport. Zygmunt was asked to take charge, but he declined. We travelled by cattle trucks. We travelled for more than a week. We were all happy but also a bit scared and worried, thinking about what would happen to us after we crossed the border. I don't remember being hungry so we were fed, probably by UNNRA or perhaps the Allied forces. All day long we were singing Polish folk songs. At the border everyone was given zloty (Polish currency) as none of us had any. We were asked where each of us would like to go, and then given free tickets.

Zygmunt decided not to go to Warsaw as it was very ruined, and so we went to Radom where Zygmunt had many relatives, as usual. The travel through Poland towards Radom made me extremely happy. My reason told me that Poland was not as beautiful as say, Switzerland, but to me it was beautiful. This was our countryside, our forests, our hillocks, our meadows, our huts with thatched roofs.

We were home, we were in Poland! Zygmunt's cousin, Julek, and his wife, Kasia, and their son, little Julek, welcomed us and made us feel at home. Kasia immediately made us a bath as we were smelly after the long journey without a proper wash. There were many uncles and aunts and, of course, plenty of friends – even some of my personal friends from Lithuania. Among them was Zosia whose experience was rather unusual. She was from Lithuania, the daughter of a well-to-do farmer. She left Kaunas with a suitcase and a sewing machine and was deported to the far east in Russia. (Her brothers were deported too). She arrived in Radom with trunks, bundles and crates.

She was an exceptionally industrious young female. Not only did she manage to survive when many people died in her transport, but she was even able to amass wealth, and all thanks to her sewing machine. Those four years were not easy for her – she now had arthritis and rheumatism – but she had survived and was happy and comparatively rich. Her father was repatriated from Lithuania and already had a nice farm and good outbuildings in the western part of Poland. After the end of the war in 1945, Poland was shifted

from the East to the West. East from the River Bug Poland was proclaimed as belonging to the Soviet Union but Poland was recompensed by land in the West of Poland which had been taken from Germany and extended down to the Rivers Oder and Nissa.

Polish citizens and Poles from Lithuania who opted to repatriate to the new Poland could not receive an equivalent in property of the property left in the East. People and land were moved around just like on a chequer board. Once it had been from the West to the East, now it was from the East to the West. Should we have stayed in Poland, we would have received a farm and a two-storey villa on a big block with a view. The old farm was only 12 km away from the previous capital city of Lithuania, Kaunas, and the villa was in the new capital city, Vilnius. All this “wealth” was now represented by a piece of official paper stating that we were entitled to properties equal to the ones left in the East. By now it had only a funny historical value.

We were able to get in touch with our families and therefore we left Radom and went to Warsaw. In Warsaw was the new government and many of Zygmunt’s friends and we were told by Kasia that her relative, Zenon Domalewski, whom I also knew from before the war, even had a spare room. To have a spare room in Warsaw was at that stage an exceptional luxury as the town was bombed and burned out during the war. Zenon accepted us happily but he had changed a lot during those war years. He was aged and depressed. He had lost his beautiful violin which he loved very much. The lift was burned out; part of the house was destroyed; only the bed bugs thrived as never before.

The first person whom Zygmunt went to see was his friend, Stefan J. who was now Minister of Shipping and Foreign Trade. We had no appointment and his secretary gave us a doubtful look when Zygmunt told her that it was a personal matter and that they were friends. Luckily, just at that moment, Stefan came out of his room and welcomed us in a very friendly manner and took us into his room. He told us that both our families were alive and healthy, and the children too. He had received a letter a few day ago asking to find them accommodation as they were coming to Poland. They were all alive and even healthy!

I was incoherent with happiness. After two years of uncertainty, at last we knew that they were alive and that soon – really soon – we would see them. Stefan was late for a conference and asked Zygmunt to come tomorrow or as

soon as he could, so we left him and went to look for more of Zygmunt's friends. We went to Jan and Guga and they greeted Zygmunt as one would a brother. It was a wonderful feeling to be amongst friends, to be with people who feel and think the same way.

We talked and talked the whole night through. There was so much to catch up with. Who was alive or who had died, when and how, who is where and who was doing what during all those long years. We all had a laugh as so many of their group were now in ministerial positions and they even joked saying that the "Wilnaers are now ruling Poland". We stayed there for a few days. We not only met Zygmunt's friends, but also Poles from Lithuania. I was so happy to see Czeslaw who had also survived. He was even married and had a whole flat in Gdynia just for the two of them, and invited us to come and stay with them, but only I went as Zygmunt was already working. Stefan had asked him to start work in the Ministry as soon as he could.

One day Zygmunt told me that Stefan had asked him to take a job as a "Conseiller Commercial" in Switzerland and, in addition, to be the chief of the trading commission. I was aghast. We had just come to Poland, and to leave it now? No, definitely NO! I was not going. I wanted to stay here, in Poland! Zygmunt started to explain: "Darling, cool down. My reaction was exactly the same as yours but think, just think, the Government needs reliable men, men who can be trusted in their honesty and politically. This position is important for Poland. And just think about Switzerland. Do you remember how you used to look at Switzerland from the Bodensee? A country without war, without ruined houses, without death sentences, without bombing, a country with a normal life."

"I am not going anywhere; you can do what you want. I am staying until I have my parents and children, then we might consider it."

Zygmunt told me that Stefan was reasonable and agreed to wait until Zygmunt had found accommodation for the two families and, until they were settled in, Zygmunt could stay in Poland. Later on the parents might visit us or I could stay in Poland as long as I wanted. I did not argue. I was determined not to leave Poland before I had my children. Everything else did not matter to me.

I wanted my children.

Minister Wolski and Guga were to go in a few days' time to Wilna in order to

supervise the repatriation of Poles. Guga wanted Zygmunt's help and Minister Wolski thought it a good idea. He arranged with Stefan that Zygmunt would be on loan for the time being from Stefan's ministry to Wolski and Guga and Zygmunt would fly out to Wilna in a two-seater plane as soon as possible. Stefan agreed. Zygmunt told me to go to Czeslaw and his wife and he flew away, now being an inspector for repatriation. Czeslaw's flat was very nice with nice big "Gdansk" furniture, but I did not take to his wife. She was young and pretty, but she used to talk about herself in the third person, and I did not like the way in which Czeslaw had changed. He would have changed anyway but I thought it was her influence. I became more of a rebel and he became more of a conformist.

The following incident was a fair indication of our disagreements: It was a Saturday evening and I asked Czes and Tonia what time they would be going to church on Sunday. There were a few seconds of silence and then Tonia told me:

"Czesiek is saying his prayers at home, and every evening too."

"What Mass do you attend usually?"

"We don't go to church. I told you, we say our prayers at home."

"Czes does not go to Mass? Not even on Sundays?"

I could not understand it. Czeslaw came from a good Catholic family. He was still a believer and yet he does not go to church. Suddenly I understood. Church was not popular with the new regime and my reaction was spontaneous.

"Is High Mass at 11:00 or later? I will go to church!"

"You will not. You are in my care and Zygmunt would forbid you to go to High Mass."

"Pipe down. You are wrong on both counts. I will go to church and Zygmunt would never forbid me. I can go to any church I want. Zygmunt is not a fanatic, he is just an agnostic. Maybe I am too but I am not selling any god for career or money. I am going and let everyone see me. You are a coward and a cheat."

Next morning I dressed myself conspicuously in bright colours and I remember being disappointed that nobody took any notice of me. There was no riot, not the slightest interest from churchgoers; the church was not full. Although it was a long time since I had attended Mass, I still knew my prayers and did everything as it should be done. I calmed down and started thinking: Why did I go to church, why was I so rude to Czes and Tonia? I was certain that I did not go to church because I was a Catholic. I did not

know who I was by now but I felt very strongly about freedom, especially about freedom to believe. No government should hinder anyone who wants to worship, no believer should hide his feelings for a better meal ticket. I really felt very strongly about it.

When I arrived back we both felt a bit uncomfortable, but our friendship survived. I spent weeks waiting for Zygmunt. He did not even ring or write and then one day he arrived, unannounced. He had seen everyone. The children were beautiful. Jurek was a tall boy for his age and Roman was a very gentle little fellow. Everyone was healthy and well. Both children addressed him as Mr Kruszewski! Jurek was a spoiled brat with bad manners and very rude, and one evening Zygmunt gave him a real hiding. When I heard about this I nearly fainted, thinking that now everything was lost, but not to worry, next morning Jurek called Zygmunt “Daddy” and Roman started to call him “Daddy” too. We should hurry and find them somewhere to live as they would be coming very soon.

We must find two separate houses as the in-laws were not on good terms and there was a lot of friction between them. They would need a fair amount of space so Warsaw would be out. They were coming. Zygmunt’s mother and Aunt Jadzia, with Jurek, my parents with Roman, Pan Wladyslaw, Ksenia and, in addition, a goat, a cow, a pig, my piano and plenty of furniture for both houses. After rushing around like maniacs, we found them all accommodation in a small township, Radosc, near Warsaw. I missed them at the station and met only Jadzia and the cow. All others went by another route and when I arrived home, they were all sitting around a table, smiling happily. For the first few minutes there was total confusion. Everyone talked without saying anything; the children were not there, they were playing in the yard.

Jurek, I recognized immediately. He was just as beautiful as before only much taller. I wanted to grab him and hug him but knew that I should not to this so I just patted his head and felt like choking. I could not even speak. I started looking for Roman but could not find him. All the children were much too big. One boy look up, stared at my mother and I knew that he was Roman. The same eyes, the same look, but what a big boy. Mother called him and he came running.

I just looked at my children. I did not touch Roman. I was afraid of losing my self-control, was afraid that I might grab the children and hug them and

start crying. I was glad when the landlady called me and I ran away from the children. I was a lot calmer when I came back to them and Roman told Mother that it was good that the “nice lady” had come back.

I took each by the hand and we went home. We decided that the children would be with us right from this moment on. I bathed them, put them to bed, each in his cot/bed in the room with us. They did not protest; they were laughing and telling stories. It was the best night since we had parted.

The relationship between my parents and Zygmunt’s mother was bad. They were barely polite. There were petty grievances to start with but they grew out of all proportion. Later on there was also some trouble about a pig, some moonshine and money. I was very cross with my parents, especially with my father. He should have paid not once or twice but as many times if Hela wanted, indefinitely, if need be. Now life would be so much harder for Zygmunt and me. I was rather rude to my parents and Mother began to cry openly. It was late at night when I ran out of abusive words and Father told me to shut up and to listen to him. He would try to be brief. He admitted that he did not like Hela or her sister. He would have paid indefinitely if it would achieve peace for them and us, but he was certain that it was impossible.

The last few days were the worst as Hela was abusing Mother, calling her really bad names in public. Should I doubt Father? Pan Wladyslaw would confirm it as he was there. I interrupted Father. I did not want to listen but he told me that he had listened to me and now I had to listen to him. What he had to say was important for all of us.

“Our relationship with her will never be either sincere or pleasant. I don’t understand how Zygmunt became the man he is. She is not clever, but cunning. Try at all costs not to live together permanently as you would be sorry and maybe even unable to cope. She told us many times that Zygmunt would do anything for her, anything she asks of him, and she intends to live always with Zygmunt. Be warned. She told us laughingly that she will get her revenge as she does not mind waiting. She waited for her revenge with her elder sister for thirty years and also with some high dignitary. She told us that she will be in Switzerland with you – even if she has to become ill – she will be with Zygmunt and Jurek. Try to avoid it. How you can do it, I don’t know. Keep also in mind that she loves Jurek and does not like Roman, and they are both your children. Try to avoid an open quarrel. She is the mother

of your Zygmunt. Remember what I told you. Now go; I will never speak about it again.”

I was very distressed but unable to repeat this conversation to Zygmunt. I only told him that he was right, the atmosphere between the in-laws was tense. He only laughed and told me that he had already paid his mother some money and would pay as often as she demanded as we now had money, and not to worry. We should find them separate flats. We found a flat not far away and I made it a point to visit her and Jadzia every day and was a lot nicer to them than I was to my parents. I was mainly with the children and did not see much of Zygmunt during the next few weeks. He was in Warsaw till late attending various conferences and at home he read late at night about the new commercial laws, to be ready when in Switzerland.

The Government issued him fabrics for shirts and suits and he received two ties, gloves and an attaché case. When he left from the airport he did not look like a diplomat, rather like a poor tourist going on a cheap holiday. The children and I stayed behind until he was ready to get us over, until he found some rooms for us. We did not mind; it was good to be in Poland with the family.

The ensuing months I did not go anywhere and spent all my time with the boys. Roman was kind and gentle. He would not let me out of his sight; he would sit on the steps of the toilet and wait for me. Even Mother became jealous. Jurek was a problem. He was rude and bad-mannered and disliked Roman. If Roman touched Jurek, Jurek would try to clean this place. He could not stand being touched by Roman. I asked Jurek why he was doing it and the reply was:

“Roman is Adolf’s.”

This reply staggered me. Father treated both boys in the same way.

“Jurek, don’t you like Adolf?”

“Roman is Adolf’s. I don’t want to be touched by him.”

“I am also Adolf’s and you and Roman are both a bit of Adolf. Don’t you want to be touched by me?”

“You are all right but Roman is not.”

I was upset and thought that it would be good for the children if they would be without all grandparents for a while, just with Zygmunt and me. We all knew that Hela (whom we called Bama) loved Jurek and did not like Roman although Roman looked more like Zygmunt than did Jurek. During the last

two years my parents had looked after Roman and Bama after Jurek, and all grandparents preferred the grandson in their charge to the other one. It was very pronounced. I remember another conversation with Jurek which upset me too. We were expecting Czeslaw and I was very happy that he was coming. When we were away, the grandparents had baptized the children and Czeslaw was now the godfather of Jurek.

“Mummy, has Czeslaw a lot of money?”

“I don’t think he has much.”

“Is he a very important person?”

“No, he is not, not really.”

“Do we need him?”

“Yes, because we love him.”

“Mother, your logic is no good! You did say he had no money, you did say he is not important, so why the hell do we need him?”

Another conversation:

“Mummy, will we go soon to Switzerland?”

“Yes, very soon.”

“Can we leave Romek behind? It would be good – we don’t need him.”

“Jurek, Zygmunt and I love you both, we need you both.”

“Couldn’t you kill him now? I could have all his toys and he would not be with us in Switzerland. I really think we don’t need him.”

Those and similar talks we had often and I was getting really worried as to whether Jurek could still be straightened out. What caused his attitude, I could not understand. One day I became really frightened. It was a hot summer day with thunder in the air. Jurek went alone to Bama and her sister. Just as I was ready to leave, the thunderstorm broke. Lightning and thunder were non-stop and it was still oppressive. Ten or more minutes passed when I saw, in the lightning, little Jurek running towards our house. He was crying and stammering and was quite beside himself. I could understand that something had happened. He was speaking about Bama and Jadzia killing each other, but he was stammering so badly that I could hardly understand him. I left the children with my parents and ran to Bama’s place. I found them both in vile tempers, accusing each other of something or other, dishevelled, screaming, threatening. It took me a while to calm them down and it was more than an hour before I went home.

Jurek was still very edgy and still stammering. His stammering was for life. That evening I spoke again with my parents. I did not want vague gossip, I wanted facts. What made Bama behave as she did, what happened during the

years when we were away? Father was reluctant to talk and he said little. In Father's opinion, Bama was unreasonable and hard to live with. It started with only petty things, then it was the killing of a pig, then it was some moonshine, some bribes, etc. There were unpleasant scenes.

Father was certain on only one point – I should never live with Bama. They, my parents, also would never live with us; they wanted to be fair. We were lucky; we had all survived and now Father was giving me this advice: If I wanted to bring the children up the way I felt they should be brought up, if I wanted our marriage to survive, I should never live with Bama. I should be polite and nice, but firm. Now, thirty years later, I know that I could have avoided a lot of heartache if I would have had more commonsense.

Now I know that Bama was a sick woman that her menopause came together with the war, with the death of her husband, and other hardships which caused her nervous and mental breakdown. I was too stupid to realize that Father was telling the truth as he knew it (which was part-truth only). I was too brainwashed not to show respect to and honour the mother of my husband. I was plain stupid. I paid the price for that and so did Zygmunt, and even so the children. Our ignorance cost us a heavy price in tears and sleepless nights. I thought that I was doing my duty. I did not recognize mental ill-health and blamed it only on a difficult character.

Switzerland

I was happy to receive Zygmunt's letter telling us that everything was ready and that we should come. Now we could start a normal life in a normal country which had not been touched by war. The flight was uneventful although Jurek managed to sneak into the cockpit twice. From Zurich we had to take a train to Bern. Both boys fell asleep in the train and I had trouble waking them. It was very late when we arrived and the platform was empty except for the three of us waiting for Zygmunt who was late.

Zygmunt had found us a nice flat on the second storey of an old house and we had two balconies. The flat was not big but I liked it. It had three bedrooms and a very large kitchen. Our landlady, Mrs Wileszek, was a friendly person who liked children and called Roman "male mushka" (small fry). There was also a student, Mr Giesler, who left shortly after and the flat was all our own. Zygmunt looked us up and down and decided that we all needed other clothing before being presented at the Legation and the Swiss offices. We went shopping but he did all the shopping as I had no idea what was fashionable. I was amazed on seeing all the stocks in the shops, the friendly service, and the homely, lovely city with flowers on the lawns, the windowsills and balconies. The trams and buses were running according to timetables and the conductors wore clean white collars.

I thought I was in a dreamland and was just gaping. Zygmunt laughed and said that it also took him a while to get accustomed to living in a neutral country. Next day we went to the Legation where we were presented to Mr Putrament and his second wife. I liked her but I did not like him and I never trusted him although I liked to play bridge with him as he was an interesting player. He was also one of Zygmunt's pre-war friends. Within a very short time we got used to the easy and interesting life.

The boys learned German and the Swiss dialect very easily and Zygmunt was even a bit envious as he had trouble with the German language. I was listed officially in the Corps Diplomatique list as Zygmunt's wife and therefore we often had to go to parties and also to entertain. I was advised where to get reliable baby-sitters and, although they were extremely expensive, it did not worry us at all as Zygmunt was receiving a very good salary which was not only enough for us four but was also sufficient to help his mother, my parents

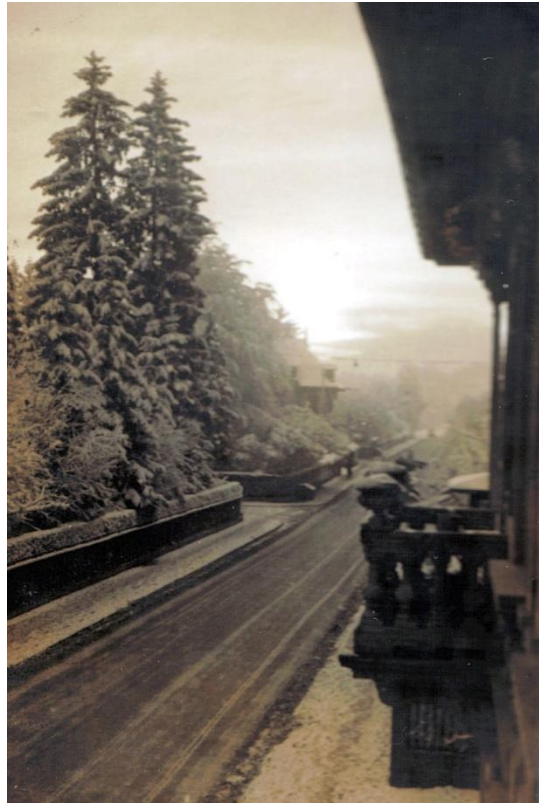
and other relatives in Poland. Zygmunt worked long hours and, even in the evening when we were at home, he would bring work home and would work on his reports or catch up on reading.

I spent the mornings with the children at home or we went swimming in the clean, swift Aar River, or we would go window-shopping – which I loved. The children did not look well. They were pale compared with the healthy Swiss children and, in some shops, they were even offered free food. Zygmunt loved his boys and liked to be with them as often as he could (which was not often enough). Each evening he would tell them stories – one night was for Jurek, the other for Roman. On the evenings when we had to go out, the bedside story was told during the children's evening meal. Best of all, Zygmunt liked to take the boys for walks, either along the Aar or the park with a zoo which was not far from our house.

One Sunday when Zygmunt and the boys returned from one of these walks, he told me that he had explained to them all the basic facts about sex and that both boys understood him. I asked him if he spoke about the birds and bees and the stork who brings little children, and he told me that he did not believe in this kind of nonsense and had explained the real facts and they had understood.

Next day a Swiss lady called; she was oldish and unmarried. We had the usual afternoon coffee and I asked the boys to play in their room or in the passage. Suddenly Jurek came in, asked to

be excused and, turning towards the lady, asked her if she was married. She replied that she was not. Jurek left and I felt a bit



View from 63 BrunaderStrasse in
Bern where Maria and Zygmunt lived
from 1946 to 1949

apprehensive as it was very quiet in the passage. Later, in came Roman and, again politely, asked the lady if she had some children of her own. The lady, astonished at the question, replied that she did not have any children. We continued with our small talk. Once more Jurek came but this time he left the door partly open and I could see that Roman was watching and listening. Again, quite politely, Jurek asked her: “You did say that you are not married, that you have no mate and that you had no children as yet. Will you have some children later?” The lady became red in the face and, sitting very straight and prim, told Jurek “Of course not!” She felt embarrassed and I could not laugh it off, not even when I heard Jurek (luckily speaking in Polish) say: “I told you she is a male.” The lady left very soon, telling me that in Poland the children were brought up in a very odd way. I never saw her again. When I told Zygmunt about it, he could not stop laughing and then agreed that sex education would have to wait for a few more years.

I loved the life we were now leading with all the parties (with no restriction on money), the concerts, shows, etc. However, there were a few worries. The children were not very well. Jurek, although a lot better with Roman, was still unbearable and tried to hurt Roman quite often. When I belted Jurek, Roman screamed even more, trying to pull me away from Jurek. It was no good punishing Jurek in front of Roman as he became very upset about it. I went to a psychiatrist. He examined Jurek a few times and told me that nothing was wrong with him. It was only the after-effects of abnormal war conditions and that he would grow out of it. I should continue what I was doing.

He also told me that Jurek had an above-average IQ and should do well in school and later on. Roman was an ideal child – gentle, kind and obedient. He would share his toys with anyone, and not only his toys. When left alone in the front yard, he would come back without his jacket or his shirt as he gave them away also, telling me that the other boys needed them. He knew all the shopkeepers by name and all the drivers in the neighbourhood were his friends. One day after playing in the sandpit with other children, he told me that he would not be home for tea. He was going to a nice lady whose boy was now in Heaven and that the boy’s mother was lonely and he, Roman, would go to this nice lady and play with the toys of the boy who went to Heaven and eat tea with the lady. This lady came to me also and asked me if she could have Roman sometimes in the evenings as she still felt very depressed as her little boy had died of leukaemia not long ago and, if I did not mind, she would like to have Roman stay with her for a few hours in the

evenings. Roman went to her quite often.

One day Roman came to me asking to quickly give him a packet of cigarettes for his friend. I should hurry as his friend had not much time. (Roman was then four years old). When I asked him where his friend was waiting, he took my hand and dragged me to the balcony – from there I saw a cart loaded with hay and the driver was waving towards us. Roman was not a healthy child. He was anaemic, had asthma, rickets and liver trouble and was often in great pain. When he had to stay in bed because of the great pain, he would say to me: “Mamusi, I am so sorry that I am causing you so much trouble.” I could have cried and I did after leaving his room. He was on a very strict diet but the doctor assured me that, if I stuck to the diet for a few years, Roman would be a normal, healthy child. Zygmunt and I did what we could for the children, including doctors, diets and baby-sitters. I remember the first time I left the boys with a baby-sitter. There was something special on at the ice rink – national competition skating. The baby-sitter and I put the children to bed. I liked her and so did both boys.

We went to the performance on the ice rink. It was beautiful but at about 8:00 pm I started to think about the boys; by about 9:00 I was very nervous and about 10:00 I could not stand it any longer. I left, and Zygmunt was furious, especially when we arrived home and both boys were sound asleep and the baby-sitter told us that everything went without a hitch. This kind of thing happened a few times but later on I became accustomed to being out and only rang home a few times during our evenings out. I was coughing badly and Zygmunt sent me to a specialist. The X-rays showed that I had TB in both lungs. One lung was not badly affected – just the size of a pea – but the other one was not good. The doctor advised that I should go to a sanatorium up in the hills and have proper treatment. No more smoking, no more dancing until late at night, I should have a regular diet, sleeping time, etc. I knew about these famous sanatoriums in Switzerland but I would not go. I had had enough of regimes of regulated hours, I had enough of it during the war. I would not go to any camps, even the most glamorous ones. I wanted to stay where I was, to be happy and to enjoy life without any restrictions imposed by any authority. Zygmunt understood how I felt and let me stay – with all the parties, dancing, balls and smoking.

How I loved Zygmunt for his understanding; he knew that I hated to be put away, even in a glamorous place. I hated to be parted from him and the children. I was certain that it would have killed me. Zygmunt took the risk,

against the advice of the doctors, and let me live. Thank you, Zygmunt. I began to improve very quickly. It cost Zygmunt a lot of money as every month I needed new clothing because I was putting on weight. The doctors, after taking X-rays every month, were amazed as I was greatly improving. The doctors even quoted me in a medical paper, calling me Mrs K and stressing how important it was to create a suitable atmosphere for a TB patient, how important it was to keep the will for life going. In my favour was my age – I was about thirty – and my will to enjoy life. I enjoyed life, every moment of it.

Jurek and Roman improved very slowly and their doctors advised us to send them to a sanatorium up in the hills for a few months. To keep them there would cost more than an average citizen of Switzerland earned, but that was not our problem as we had plenty of money. It was a hard decision to make. It would mean once again separation from the children. Zygmunt convinced me that I should stop being egotistic, that the health of the children should come first. We took them to a “Kinderheim” in Thun, the one recommended by our doctors.

It did the boys a lot of good. The first two weeks were tragic for them and for me because parents were not allowed to visit them during that time but we were allowed to speak to them on the phone. We spoke to them every day – or rather, we did not “speak” as the boys and I cried but, after ten days they seemed to settle down and we all cried a lot less. After a few weeks we were permitted to visit them. The first visit was not a great success. We were all tense and when we were leaving, Jurek tried to follow us and when picked up by the sister, he tried to get away, kicking and biting her. After a few months I could see a great improvement. Roman could even climb uphill without choking and Jurek looked healthy and very beautiful.

He was even looking after Roman, really looking after him in a rough and strange way, but he was holding his hand, helping him uphill, waiting for him; he was now the protector, being the elder. Darling boys. When they were pronounced healthy and allowed to go home, Jurek was still the protector and was not cruel to Roman at all, only a bit rough.

That year to me was a whirlwind of activities. It seemed as though we were trying to make up for the years lost during the war. There were concerts and shows. Switzerland, being in Central Europe and being a neutral country, was able to invite the stars from all over the world. If some performances

were not in Bern but in Zurich, we went to Zurich for the night. There were parties, dinner dances, official parties and very formal parties.

Weekends we spent with the children either at home or at the zoo, Luna Park or just swimming in the Aar. We also spent every lunch time together as the break was long enough for Zygmunt and the children to come home for lunch. I went every day to the city either to shop or just window-shop, or to sit in my favourite restaurant with a view of the hills. After dinner we usually went out. There were a lot of official parties; for instance, the national day of each country which had its embassy or legation in Bern. Some were very formal with printed seating arrangements mailed to us beforehand, such as the ones given by the Swiss Government. It was fun to meet different races, different people, people from countries which had now become independent. The Swiss were unsurpassed in their flower arrangements, the varieties of food and drinks, including many different national dishes which I had never tasted before. There were so many parties in so many different places that only some stay clear in my mind. There was our Polish party called the "Independence Day". I played the Revolutionary Etude by Chopin before Putrament made his speech. He glorified the Soviet Army which, according to him, gave us our new freedom.

I felt out of place. Had they forgotten the most critical moment during the Warsaw uprising when the Russians not only stopped firing but even retreated? Had they forgotten that Stalin would not let the Western Allies land in Poland or Russia and therefore we were not getting any help? Had they forgotten that their main army forces were barely 100 km away from Warsaw and that they would not drop us medicine or ammunition although their planes did not need any refuelling as those of the Western Allies did? According to my way of thinking, it was only thanks to the "glorious Red Army" that so many people were slaughtered in Warsaw. I felt sick about all the hypocrisy of Putrament's speech. When I decently could, I rang home and asked to be excused, saying that one of the boys was not well and that the baby-sitter had asked me to come home. I left, fuming inside, eyes stinging with unshed tears. I did not tell Zygmunt how I felt. It would have upset him and anyway, it was my own personal reaction to Putrament's speech.

I remember the National Swiss Day for quite another reason. It was a very elaborate reception but for me, the main attraction was the display of fireworks. Fires were lit on all the hills, fireworks reaching the sky, crackers in the streets (which were crowded with happy, smiling people). The display

far surpassed anything I had seen before or since. For example, Guy Fawkes Night, even in the most extravagant years, could be compared only with a child's firecracker. It was also a double celebration for Zygmunt and me – it was our wedding anniversary. It was a night to remember. Another glamorous party which was given by the Soviets. For many years there were no diplomatic relations between Switzerland and the Soviets but this year the Soviet Union had normal diplomatic relationships with Switzerland and they even had their own embassy in Bern. In the luxurious halls of the Bellevue Hotel, the Soviets gave their banquet, inviting the Swiss Government and all of the Diplomatic Corps. It was very interesting; everyone was there as they were all interested to see the Soviets. They looked super-glamorous, just like in a show. Their uniforms were mainly in green with large golden epaulettes and red lampers – or navy, or sometimes in both colours. They walked in a very dignified manner, very self-conscious, as all were watching them. We, the guests (men in black tails, women predominantly in black, with a touch of white - such as lace or boas) formed the background.

That evening I met a Nobel Prize winner in physics but now I do not even remember his name. He was a small man, slightly greying, short-sighted, unpretentious and shy, but he could talk animatedly if the conversation was to his liking. The tables were loaded with delicacies such as real Russian caviar (which one could eat by the tablespoonful) and still fresh; full plates were brought in and there was plenty of vodka and champagne which I loved drinking. Apart from being greeted, I was unable to speak to anyone apart from the Soviets and this entire affair was rather overwhelming.

Another party to which only Zygmunt and I were invited, was a conducted tour of Ciba. Our host, the Managing Director, was a charming man.



Zygmunt - the Diplomat

We were met at the station and driven in a beautiful car which hardly even purred – it seemed to glide on air – the trimmings were in solid silver and it had a built-in bar with cold drinks, etc.

It was the first time that I had travelled this way. After visiting the factory, we were invited to a “Schloss” which was a privately owned property. It was beautifully furnished but not ostentatious. The cook (in a high white hat) and his offsiders arrived in a van with partly-prepared food.

The conversation was pleasant, non-political, non-commercial, simply light and pleasant. There were plenty of laughs when they saw

my fascination whilst watching the chief cook prepare sweets. Eggs were broken into a pot which was placed over an open fire, the ingredients added, big imported peaches, and the lot set on fire. It tasted delicious. The chef liked my reaction and told me how I could make this dish at home. I tried it a few times but it was a total fiasco.

Isn't it odd how small, unimportant things stay clear and vivid in my memory even after many years whilst other events – so much more important – have faded, blending in with others and leaving just a hazy memory of faces and snippets of conversation? One more party I do remember well. It was given

for Witold Malczynski, the famous pianist. I remember it for a very simple reason. We were both glad to see each other again and were talking non-stop. Zygmunt (on some pretext) took me to another part of the room where some officials engaged him in some talk but, in a short while, Witold Malczynski and I drifted together again, exchanging addresses of friends and relatives, speaking about his family and mine, about old teachers, and so on.

It was Zygmunt's duty to visit factories, especially the watch-making ones. I happily went with him as I found it very interesting. I remember particularly well the visit to IWC Schaffhausen. There were many elderly people there and the atmosphere was pleasant; the firm never sacked their old employees. I also remember it for another reason: After a sumptuous meal, we were driven to a viewpoint where the River Rhine had it beginning. It was a beautiful view and the IWC representative spoke most enthusiastically and with love about the land around us and the River Rhine.

A year passed and the parties lost their fascination for me and I went to Poland to show off my healthy children. We stayed for a few weeks only as I was worried about Zygmunt who was working too hard. His heart began to play up so he went to a specialist in Zurich and was told that he needed a holiday. But that was impossible because there was always a lot of urgent work for him. He also went to Poland occasionally but it was not on holidays, rather for conferences – and he came back looking tired.

The relationship between the brothers improved. Jurek, although rough, took care of Roman when it suited him. Jurek was a show-off – in sports, at school with his marks etc., but he became friendly and no trouble at all. Putrament was transferred to the Paris Embassy and in his place came Pezybos (who was also a poet). I saw that Zygmunt was very tired and not always quite happy. He was asked to join the Party but refused. Once, when we had a semi-official party at our place, there occurred an incident which made me realize that I really didn't know how to bring up children. At this party I failed completely as a hostess although the atmosphere was fairly relaxed (there were only Poles there) but there were too many people, it was too cramped at the table, there was too much food and the kitchen help did not arrive. Going to the kitchen between courses I had to pass the children's room and heard the voices of Jurek and the Legate.

Jurek said: "They took our Wilno away from us."

Legate: "But they gave us lovely lands in the West, look – here."

Jurek: "But these lands were not theirs. Mummy said that it is wrong to give

away something which does not belong to you. You should give away only what is yours.”

Legate: “You got more lands and better one too.”

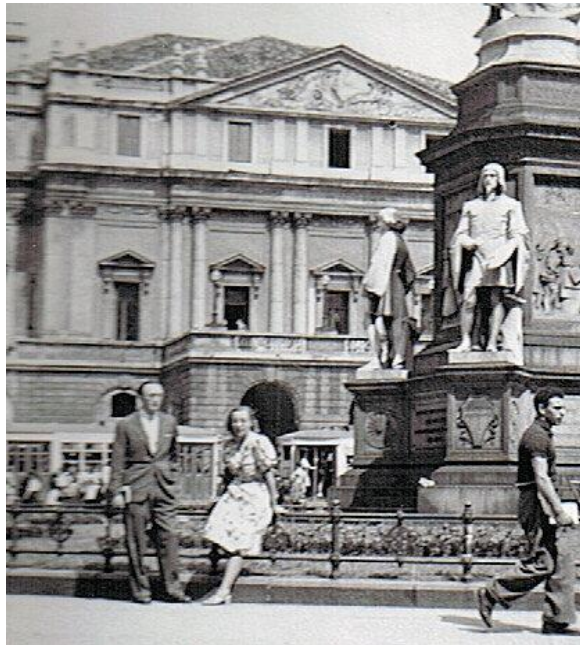
Jurek: “I want my Wilno. It is ours and Daddy’s.”

As I smelled something burning, I rushed into the kitchen and did not hear any more. How should I bring up my children? Should I tell them lies? Truth? Or half-truth, which is near a lie anyway? I did not speak with Zygmunt about it as he had plenty of worries in the office. The influence of some employees was very pronounced as they were Party members and Zygmunt was not. Zygmunt very seldom spoke about it except sometimes when his advice was over-ruled and the consequences were very disadvantageous to Poland’s economy.

After a visit to Poland, I realized that conditions were not what I had hoped to find. I started once again to take more notice of my surroundings. I realized that the atmosphere at home had also changed. We joked less, we laughed less, Zygmunt worked longer hours and very often seemed to be pre-occupied. Luckily, the time came for our holiday which we wanted to spend in the South of Switzerland and Italy. I took the children to Poland. Jurek would be with Bama, and Roman with my parents, and both grandmothers were very happy to have them especially as, by now, they were well-behaved children.

This holiday month was probably the best in the whole of my life. We called it our belated honeymoon as we had to wait eight years for it from the day of our wedding. For a whole month we had no worries, no responsibilities; we could do as we liked. It was just perfect. I always admired Rome but now I fell in love with that city. It cast a spell over me and I could have stayed there for always. I still like Rome more than any other city; to me it is the eternal city. In Southern Italy we became acquainted with a Swiss girl, Lotti, and a Polish doctor, Zdislaw Makomaski, both from Bern. Later on they became our friends, but more about them later. Zygmunt spoiled half a day for me whilst in Capri. He bought a lot of postcards and started writing from this “island of the lovers” to all his ex-girlfriends, and he even expected me to sign some of them. I could have killed him but could not very well create a real row as we were in a restaurant. I only told him what I thought about him and his girlfriends. Otherwise the holiday was perfect.

When the holiday was almost over, we went to Poland to pick up the children. My parents and Bama looked well and they were even talking to each other although only the bare necessities, but that was already better than before. It was good to return to Bern. I liked this town and we had friends there too. The atmosphere in Zygmunt's office had worsened. The Party influence became more pronounced. Zygmunt was again urged to join the Party, this time by Mrs Gomulka from the Central Party Committee. He again refused. I was more disappointed in the new



Maria outside La Scala on her holiday in Italy in 1947

Poland as it was quite different from what I had expected. There was no freedom of speech, no freedom of election. There was distrust, there was corruption, there was a very strong forced influence by the Soviets, there were half-truths and lies.

Zygmunt was brooding a lot and not talking much. We were both disappointed that neither my parents nor his mother were able to receive a visa to visit us as we had agreed that first his mother would come for a month or so and later on my parents, but we still had to wait. Only the children were happy and looking healthy and even often well-behaved. There was a funny incident with Roman, now over four years old, when he eloped with Wanda, the Legate's daughter of the same age. One afternoon when I was told that Roman had left but was not home in ten minutes, I went out to meet him in the street but there was no sign of him. I rang Wanda's mother and she was worried too as Wanda was also missing. After a while we became very worried and a search party was organized. After hours of driving around, we saw in the zoo gardens a drawing of a heart with a spear and the letter "R". Roman loved to draw it, saying that with an arrow his heart would fly as a bird. Hours later we found them both. Roman was carrying her umbrella,

her shoes and her basket. Both children were tired and happily agreed to go home although, only hours earlier, they had wanted to go out into the wide world.

One day we received a cable from Czeslaw advising that Zygmunt's mother was really ill and would Zygmunt come and arrange for her to go either to a hospital for the mentally disturbed, or arrange to bring her to Bern, as she could not stay at home because her sister was unable to cope with her. In less than a month Bama came to Bern. She looked ill and was pale and very thin, but she improved very quickly and once more looked a beautiful woman. It was not easy for me when Bama became well again. When Zygmunt was around she spoke to me pleasantly, but when we were alone she was unpleasant and tried to get Jurek on her side against me. It upset me but I was not too worried as by now my relationship with Jurek was good. We loved each other and he trusted me, although he still tried to play up, especially when encouraged by Bama, but it was just a try. As time went on, Bama became more and more unpleasant to me and started to speak very unpleasantly about my parents. I felt hurt but kept quiet and did not argue with her and of course did not tell Zygmunt about it as this would have gone against everything that I had been taught. It would mean causing trouble between Bama, Zygmunt and me.

The greatest trouble was her attitude towards Roman as, even in Zygmunt's presence, she spoke unfavourably about him, pointing out his weaker condition, his shortcomings at school. I did the only thing open to me – I tried to avoid Bama as much as possible. I took the children straight after school and we would go away and come home only when Zygmunt might be there. As Zygmunt was often very late, we would have a quick meal and go to bed. When Bama was telling Zygmunt something not nice about my parents, he would laugh it off and tell her to forget the old grudges and, when she would tell him what a bad cook I was and how lazy, he would say that now she had a chance to teach me how to cook his favourite meals. At night when we were alone, Zygmunt would never speak about Bama, nor did he speak about the political situation in Poland although I knew that he was very worried about the course that Poland was taking. He would occasionally speak about the difficulties he had as the Chief of the Trade Commission and would explain to me the meaning of the gold parity, the international trading influences.

In some ways neither of us was ready to talk about what really mattered. I

did not want to voice my opinions as I did not want to influence him in any way; it was his decision to make. I would follow him and try to do the best I could with the children, but I began to withdraw more and more from all the official functions. One evening, Zygmunt asked me to go out with him and not to get dressed up as there would be just the two of us in a small place. We went to a small restaurant called “Zum Stern” in a distant suburb of Bern, Muir, where there was hardly any chance of meeting any diplomats and certainly not Polish ones.

That evening decided our future life and that of our children. Zygmunt told me that he was offered a high position in Vienna, with a chauffeur, gardener, cook, etc. The villa was situated in very pleasant surroundings and, should he accept this position, he would be very well-off financially and socially. This position would be a big step towards our future. I kept quiet because I saw that he had more to say and had trouble saying it.



Maria, the diplomat's wife in 1948

Now, for the first time, he told me that he was convinced that the Party was not working for a better Poland, that the last few months were very hard for him, that he was really fed up with the regime as he was certain that the Party was wrong and that he could barely stand it much longer when the Party members were treading on his toes, spoiling Poland's future. Should he sell himself for money and the security of his family? Or maybe he could afford to keep his integrity and be honest and – “Choose Freedom”. At last the words were spoken. To “Choose Freedom” or to “Jump Over the Wall” was by now a common expression which meant that one was prepared to give up one's country, that one was ready to go somewhere – anywhere – that one was not prepared to work any more for the Establishment. He told me that he had been thinking about freedom for quite a while and that it did not amount to much in Poland, but he was also thinking about me and the children, about Bama and my parents. Should he accept the new job we would be even better off financially than now but, should he reject it, there would be no way

back, no way to Poland; my parents would be left behind. He had now reached the stage where he did not want to dodge the issue any longer, he did not want to enter into negotiations which, in his opinion, were harmful to Poland.

He had never voiced his thoughts before because, to him, I seemed indifferent and never expressed my opinions. He explained to me that should I be afraid of the future without security, without prospects, he would accept the offer and would try to do the best he could. Now he expected me to tell him what I thought and did I realize the risk involved, did I realize what we would lose, did I realize that it would also affect my parents?

Quote from the diary: “Zygmunt, thank you for this talk, thank you for being honest. I was ready to forego all the securities, etc. a long time ago but I did not speak with you about it as I did not want to influence you in any way. It is your family, your country and it had to be your decision. I am ready and happy to try anything. I do not want to live a life of pretence and of make-believe. I do want to bring up our children where there is more freedom, more truth than there is in Poland at present. I do not care about the money. We managed before, we will manage again. I will help you to the best of my ability if you show me how. I do want our children to grow up in a country where people are free to think and to decide for themselves. I realize that we might never see my parents again but we and the children come first. I am very happy that you are ready to ‘Choose Freedom’”.

There were no arguments. The decision was made and now we had to work out the details. Zygmunt had to keep pretending until he was due to take up the new post which was to be on 1st September, 1948, as by then he would have to give over his office officially to the new Chief and would have all the signatures, etc. to see to and nobody would be able to accuse him of embezzlement and such which usually happened to those who “Chose Freedom”. It was not a very long time for us to wait but the weeks seemed to pass very slowly. When we were leaving “Zum Stern” I pinched a small cream jug and a serviette – just as a memento. It is still with us.

Political Asylum

At last the day arrived. Zygmunt wanted to be fair and therefore we went together, firstly to the Legation. From now on I was not going to let Zygmunt out of my sight as too many “accidents” happened to those who “Chose Freedom”. The butler, who knew us well, announced us and we were admitted immediately. By the way, the butler and his family are now in Australia where we met them by chance many years ago and they were doing well and living in Oakleigh. We sat down and were served wine and Zygmunt told what he had come to tell. Poor Przybos – he had never expected to hear it from Zygmunt. He tried to talk Zygmunt out of it, never realizing that our decision was made and no talk would change it. I had nothing against him; I even liked him better than I liked Putrament. He was – and still is – a poet and is considered a leading Polish poet. From the Legation Zygmunt went to his Commission and I waited outside near a telephone, just in case. He called all his staff and told them that he was resigning, giving only very briefly the reasons. From there we went to the Swiss officials and Zygmunt asked for asylum which was promptly granted. They knew Zygmunt as an honest person.

The ensuing days, weeks and months were not easy. I was constantly scared; I watched the children, not letting them out of my sight. There were visits from the Polish Government, trying to persuade us to return to Poland, giving us vague promises but, of course we would not fall for those lies and we knew that at best it would mean a long prison sentence.

There was the Press as Zygmunt, being in a high position, was NEWS. There were again Polish officials (poor Andrzej) who tried to talk us into taking a holiday in Italy with all expenses paid (they knew how I was raving about Rome). Zygmunt told them that they should let us alone. He would be discreet but, should an accident happen to any of his family, here or in Poland, they should think about the fact that there were documents which would reveal why he “Chose Freedom” – documents which were quite safe as long as we were safe, and he asked just to be left alone.

At last we were left alone to the extent that Zygmunt’s last wage was not paid, that my bill for the dentist was returned to us and already, by the following month, we were flat broke. What a joke, what a change. For the

next thirty years or so we never had enough money. Sometimes it was even so bad that I had trouble having enough food for the children, and providing shoes became a nightmare. But neither Zygmunt nor I were ever sorry about the decision taken.

We lost our social status, we lost security, we were poor, but we gained something intangible, something so much more important and precious – we were free, free to think, free to voice our opinions, free to bring up our children the way we wanted. I was sorry thinking that I might never see my parents again but I was not worried about them financially as Mother had managed to bring a fair bit out of Lithuania (things which would sell easily) and would keep them for a long time and, who knows, maybe we would be able – sometime, somewhere in a far-away country – even earn enough to help them?

Reluctantly, the Swiss Government gave Zygmunt a work permit and he started looking for work. There was no permit for me. The Swiss policy was quite simple: Only – and really only when there was no Swiss citizen available for a particular job, an “Auslaender” (foreigner) could be engaged. It was odd meeting old acquaintances in the streets. Some of the Poles would pretend not to see us; others (when unobserved) showed sympathy. Those who were not on the Polish payroll greeted us in a very friendly way, like Talunia and Mietek, but even the Kapski (who was still on the payroll) made it a point to greet us.

Later on he also arrived in Australia as did some others but, at that stage they were not yet ready; they also had to be careful and could not draw attention to themselves. Zygmunt was the first. Soon four others followed and later on they migrated to Australia and others followed some time later. Zygmunt found work as a labourer with a firm which imported fruit and vegetables from overseas. There were big storerooms and a special railway line from the station so that the goods could be unloaded and stored immediately. Zygmunt had to carry the boxes from the train to the storeroom, some of them weighing over 50 kg. He received this job, thanks to Lotti and Zdislaw, whom we met in Italy. Zygmunt’s work started at 4:30 am and lasted until late in the evening with only a lunch break, but the pay was not too bad – it was S.Fr.400 although quite a drop from the precious S.Fr.2000. However, we were all happy and at least he was able to find work which was not too easy. He would be able to support his family and, in addition, he was allowed to take home all of the damaged fruit - as much as he wanted. Just

think about all the vitamins! The disadvantage of this work was handling the heavy boxes, the long hours of physical work, the constant rush as the wagons were not allowed to stay too long, and the poor pay.

Zygmunt did not complain even once, not even when, still dark, he would wheel out his bicycle when going to work. He never forgot to give me a kiss when I held the door for him to wheel out the bicycle. He did not even complain when his wrists became swollen and had to be bandaged so that he would not drop the boxes, nor when his fingers became swollen and stiff. Only occasionally would he swear a bit, especially when coming home hungry and tired to find that there was hardly any food. He worked 56 hours a week in a hard and physically demanding job, and prior to that, the heaviest job he had to do was to hold a pen. He was constantly tired but never once complained, and on Sundays he still had time to play with the children and to tell us jokes that he had heard. Jurek was very impressed with Zygmunt's overalls. They seemed to him a lot better than his old tails as they had many pockets. Jurek used to go to visit Zygmunt at work. By now he was a big boy and could go through all of the city; I was not worried as nothing could happen to a child in Bern. I was not a good manager nor was I a good cook, but I kept trying.



Talunia Kulakowska in 1947

We even sub-let a room to Mr & Mrs Malrecki. Talunia and Mietek were having the main meal with us as Talunia was a worse cook even than I. We shared the expenses between the seven of us because it was cheaper that way. Talunia and I would go shopping together and we would shop at the cheapest places but, before going home, we would stop at a café and spend more than we saved on the cheaper food.

I even went to the abattoirs situated on the other side of the city. There was a very long queue and none of us knew what was on offer this day. The queue consisted mainly of women and children, all poorly

dressed and haggard looking. When my turn came I got an udder. It was very cheap and seemed to have plenty of meat. I was quite happy as there was enough meat for everyone. In the fourth week we had no meat as there was no money. Zygmunt's monthly wages barely lasted for three weeks and I did not know how to stretch his pay. I was told to cook the udder slowly and for a long time. I started cooking it after breakfast but by lunchtime it was still very hard, so I continued cooking it until dinner time. When Zygmunt, Mietek and Talunia saw how much meat there was on the table, they went into raptures but not for long as the udder tasted like rubber and even when cut into small pieces, we were unable to chew it. We just swallowed it to fill our empty stomachs. Even now, many years later, when we speak with Talunia or Mietek about a sumptuous meal, we say "Just like the udder."

Although we did not have enough money, although we were worried, although Zygmunt was very tired, we were happy. I played bridge, sometimes all night through; Zygmunt received many pleasant letters from the Polish club of the émigrés, and we even had parties at our place. I provided the water, Talunia and Mietek the bread, someone the butter, someone else something to put on the bread and butter, and one Pole who was married to a very nice Swiss girl (a baroness) provided the drinks. The parties were gay, we would dance in the kitchen and we were all happy. We still had the free tickets to picture theatres and Zygmunt and I would go there quite often after his work. I would buy bread rolls and, if possible, put something on them, and the moment it became dark we would start eating them slowly so that they would last longer. It was annoying that the paper made such a lot of noise.

There were also unpleasant times. When winter came, both boys needed shoes and there was no money with which to buy them, but I remembered that I still had things which could be sold – like my emerald ring for which I got a lot more than needed for shoes and clothing. Both boys got the Krupp disease, or rather, the "false Krupp". I was very worried as I thought that they would choke to death. The doctor told me to get an inhaler and to keep it going in the room at the time. I was able to buy the inhaler for a silver tray and the jars (coffee, tea, sugar, cream). As I needed the money in a hurry, I could not haggle about the price offered, but later I learned that it was sold from the shop for four times the amount paid to me. But it did not matter. Both boys recovered and we had some extra money left over. Once Bama gave us a few gold roubles to sell and once again we had some money to tide

us over until pay day. I could cope with all those things without any real trouble, but I was unable to cope with Bama.

Our relationship became worse. I did not know what to do. As time passed, it became even worse. She blamed me because Zygmunt was now a labourer and in a way, she was right. I think that I could have persuaded him to accept the position in Vienna, but I did not. Her attitude to Roman became a lot worse. I was unable to leave home as often as before as I tried to earn some money on a knitting machine – “Passap” – and spent a lot of time knitting but was barely able to pay for the Passap and I was unable to get a work permit, therefore unable to help Zygmunt financially. Most of us, the Displaced Persons (DP for short) were thinking about immigration as none of us was very welcome by the Swiss Government.

Talunia and Mietek were thinking about Peru as they had some connections there; others wanted to go to America but were unable to be accepted in the yearly quota. Zygmunt and his family could migrate to America because he (being a former diplomat) did not have to wait for the quota. The USA did not appeal to me as I imagined it to be too much of a rat-race and I wanted something quiet, away from politics, somewhere where people had a chance to live freely and not to be too cluttered. Zygmunt had already been working as a transport labourer for over half a year and one thing was certain: that he, as an unqualified labourer, would have great trouble supporting a family of five. He could not use his law degree as the legal system was different in each country, and he had not completed his degree in architecture. The Swiss Government gave a subsidy for those who wanted to learn a trade, but it was given to the head of the family only.

Zygmunt decided to learn a trade and chose welding as we had heard that welders could get work easily and were well paid. Mietek and some other Poles also chose welding. Frau Kurz, a Swiss social worker, helped us a lot and so did Caritas. Thanks to them, we now had S.Fr.600 monthly. At this time, Australia announced that it would accept 500 DP's from the 14,000 living in Switzerland. They had to be white and without criminal records.

Australia? I knew it vaguely geographically. I was certain that the capital city was Sydney. I knew that there were plenty of sheep, that it was vast, undeveloped and that it had plenty of space. It was under-populated compared with Europe. The main attraction was that it was far away, far from all the European political tensions. I did not know much more but

started reading leaflets and statistics and became more and more interested. The schooling was free, there was no unemployment, the sun shone many days of the year, there were hardly any frosts and, therefore, no expensive winter clothing needed; it had big towns with factories, it had huge farms and was short of labour. From the photos I saw beautiful beaches with people lying around with yachts in the background. It had a government and an opposition which could criticize the Establishment; it had freedom of speech, and of religious belief and it was prepared to give work to migrants. It even provided some centres where people could wait (without payment) for work - food being provided.

One had to sign a contract for labour but only for two years after which one could do as one wanted. It all sounded very good but we were all used to various types of propaganda. To learn more, we went to meetings organized by the Australian Government where one could ask questions such as those regarding schooling, wages, weather, discrimination, etc. From the few meetings that we attended, only one made me wary. Zdislaw Makomaski asked if he would be able to practice medicine – either in private practice or in a hospital – and was told “No” but he could work as an orderly. Even after stating his qualifications (and they were quite considerable) still “No”. Another man, an engineer, known internationally as being extremely able in ship-building and with many letters after his name, was given “No” as an answer too. “Why not?” he asked, and the reply given by the representative of the Australian Commission made me wonder. The official told us: In Australia there were enough brains; Australia did not need brainy people, it needed people with calloused hands, people who could work with their hands and not their brains. What an odd statement. A stupid statement and he who had made it definitely did not have enough brains. Were they a race of megalomaniacs?

I had never heard much about Australia’s leading discoverers, perhaps, except for Fleming, and only a few others. I thought that, if a representative of a country could make such a ridiculous statement, I did not want anything to do with them. Zygmunt laughed at my outburst, saying not to judge a country by some of their representatives; those who might be quite stupid; but they did not make the country. We should gather more information, more statistics, etc. There was the problem of the language. What I had learned at school, I could barely remember, and Zygmunt did not know English at all. Zygmunt pointed out that there were free night schools for those who wanted to migrate to a foreign country. Thinking about the children, I started

worrying that they would lose at least a year. Zygmunt did not mind; they could catch up later on and anyway, where should we go if we were looking for a country where only Polish, Russian or German was spoken? He was right. We should forget the language problem; simply, we would have to learn.

Everything we read about Australia appealed to Zygmunt and me, including such things as a lot of public holidays, the 40 hour week, and the free weekends. Altogether, there were approximately 130 days (including holidays) off work. To us (the Europeans) it was an unbelievable amount of days off work. We began to consider Australia seriously, reading a lot and not only leaflets but also books from the library. Our impressions strengthened that Australia had freedom, empty spaces and good prospects for employment of DP's. Talunia and Mietek were still undecided but also started to think about Australia. Those who wanted to go to Australia had to assemble for a few days at Wangen an der Aare for political screening and for a health check. People who had TB would immediately be excluded. That meant that I would be out. Zygmunt, still being an optimist, sent me to Zdislaw and Lotti. Zdislaw was a specialist in lungs and malnutrition. The tests he made were negative but he needed X-rays which we could not afford. However, Lotti had some friends who had some friends, etc., and I had the X-rays without charge. Zdislaw was delighted.

The only thing I needed now was coaching on how to speak during the health screening. He was a good coach. I did not tell a direct lie; I only looked stupid and told part of the truth only and, after a second lot of X-rays and tests, the doctor passed me. It seemed that we had made it when we were advised that Jurek would need a small operation on his penis; something similar to circumcision, but he would also need another lot of tests as his kidneys seemed to be affected. It was hard to believe that something was wrong with Jurek as he looked very healthy and was in very high spirits. Suddenly I remembered that on the day of the first tests Jurek poured a whole bottle of Maggi Aroma Sauce on his porridge (which he still did not like much). For the next few days he was on a strict diet with no spices, no sweets, and he was also passed by the doctor. The operation which he had to have was performed in Bern and he was only a few days in hospital.

In a few weeks' time we were advised by letter that our family, that is Zygmunt, Bama, the children and I, were accepted to migrate to Australia. We were among the 500 who Australia accepted. Another 13,500 still had to

wait to emigrate, sometime, somewhere. It did not take us long, just one evening walking along the Aar River to decide to go to Australia and to try our luck there. The unknown future did not frighten me, nor was I too upset thinking about my parents. They would manage – Mother always was able to manage.

I had only one serious problem – Bama. Our relationship became worse and she even tried criticizing me whilst speaking with Zygmunt, but he told her that he liked me the way I was and that I still had plenty of time to learn all the tricks. Once she overdid it and Zygmunt told her that it was not nice to speak the way she did – she (being the mother of an “honourable welder” and an ex-diplomat) should not speak in a tactless way. There was also the problem with Roman. Bama loved Zygmunt and Jurek but did not like either Roman or me. She often mentioned to Zygmunt that Roman’s legs were still not straight after his rachitis, that he was not doing as well as Jurek at school, that he was a poor swimmer, etc. To a certain degree she was right as Roman was weaker than Jurek but he was also younger and he usually became reserved, and even flustered, when in the presence of Bama and Zygmunt. My comments were wiped off as being those of a doting mother. Jurek never told lies but Roman did. He was full of fantasies, telling completely improbable stories. One day he overdid it with his lies. Zygmunt was looking for his screwdriver and Roman was helping him, suggesting places to look – such as under the bed, behind the wardrobes, etc., and all the time he was clutching the screwdriver in his pocket. This went on for quite a while before Zygmunt caught him once again looking in his pocket. Zygmunt got angry out of all proportion, probably because he was very tired. He started belting Roman, really hard. It was the only time that I openly interfered, covering Roman with my body. Bama, of course, pointed out to Zygmunt how badly I behaved by openly taking Roman’s side. Although Bama told me many times that Zygmunt hated Roman, I could not believe her as Zygmunt was always nice with both boys and they adored their father.

I was thinking constantly about my future with Bama – it became an obsession with me. I wanted to sort out my problem but felt trapped and could not decide what I should do. I tried to pin it down. Our disagreements were spread out in time and space. We did not like each other to start with but by now, I had to admit it, I did dislike Bama. It started in August, 1939, when Zygmunt was called up and Bama was parading with him on the platform and he had no time for me. My feelings intensified after Jurek was born and it became worse after the war when they all arrived in Poland and

worse again after Jurek began to stammer, and even worse again after Bama came to us in Switzerland, and really bad after Zygmunt became a labourer. A few times, even Zygmunt noticed that something was not quite right as once, when Miatek and Talunia were with us, Bama said: "Zygmunt, I can't understand you. How could you have married Maruszka when you knew Talunia? She would have been much better for you." They three tried to laugh it off but looked most uncomfortable. Later on Zygmunt asked me if Bama had said these things to me before and I answered quite truthfully that she never had. I did not add that I had pin-pricks and barbs constantly, that the remark which Zygmunt referred to was quite harmless, that there were many nasty and ugly remarks. I hoped to be tolerated but was not. I was upset about her dislike of my parents and especially towards Roman, a child who did not deserve it. Bama was a very good-looking woman still, full of charm and very feminine and very domineering. I thought that she used her charm and, what I thought was her love for her son, cunningly and cleverly.

Only years later did I realize that I had been brainwashed from early childhood by parents and church: Respect and obey your elders, respect your parents, etc. Long before my marriage I was told that a good wife should never interfere with her mother-in-law. The husband could interfere with his mother-in-law, but not the other way round. I thought that I should never come between my husband and his mother, not even for the sake of the children. I believed her when she told me repeatedly that she knew her Zygmunt; I believed her when she told me that he would always do what she wanted as he adored her, that soon he would snap out of his stupid love for me because I was getting old and did not look pretty anymore. I believed her because Zygmunt was always nice to her and tried to please her and also because a lot of her criticism was quite valid. I thought that I was a bad cook; I thought that I could not manage the money as I should, and I thought that I was a bad mother and a bad wife because I did not help Zygmunt in his career. I thought that I was a hindrance. Even during this hard period I was unable to help him financially. I was, simply, no good. Thinking along these lines for days, I became certain that I would be unable to cope with all the years to come.

I could not stay in Bern without giving Zygmunt a convincing motive and I could not go to Poland. He would never have believed me if I gave as the reason that I was afraid of the unknown future. I could not speak with Zygmunt about my problem as it would be contrary to all that I had been taught and believed in. If I went with Zygmunt to Australia, I would become

a hindrance. I might become a neurotic or something worse.

There was only one way out for me – I had to commit suicide, and I decided to take Roman with me because I thought that without me he would have a bleak future and also because I had promised my parents never to leave him. I felt better after making this decision.

I started planning how and when. I did not want to give Roman strychnine (which I still possessed from the war years) as I had read that death would be painful. Luckily I was able to get plenty of Veronal for Roman which would make him go to sleep peacefully. I told Zygmunt that I would be going to Talunia and I asked her to cover for me should Zygmunt ring. I wrote three letters; one to the police, explaining that I was committing suicide of my own



Maria with Jurek and Roman in Switzerland in 1948

free will, that nobody was to be blamed as I was doing it whilst of unsound mind. The next one was to my parents, asking them for forgiveness and not to blame Zygmunt as he was the best husband I could have wished for, and I still loved him. The letter to Zygmunt was the hardest to write. I was unable to lie and I could not tell him the truth as it would be pointless. I just wrote that I was too weak to face the future that I was taking Roman with me because I had promised my parents never again to part with him. I asked Zygmunt to look after Jurek, thanked him for the happiness he had given me during nearly ten years of marriage, apologized

that I had let him down, and wished him all the happiness and a new wife who would be better than I was. I told Roman that I would take him late in the evening for a long walk, just the two of us. We would listen to the night sounds and count the stars. He was very happy and became excited, but I asked him to keep quiet as it was a “secret” and not to tell anyone. He should go to bed and I would pick him up when the time was right. He trusted me and even went to sleep. When I thought the time was right, I went and got my hidden poisons, went once again for a last look at Jurek, and then to our bedroom to pick up a blanket for Roman and to say a silent goodbye to Zygmunt.

As I was leaving the room, Zygmunt cried out. He had a nightmare, now of all times; he hardly ever had them. When I went to him he clutched my hand and would not let me go. He started to ramble about his nightmare, speaking about Vievie and the disaster of the trains and all the dead ones. This happened a long time ago when he, by chance, alighted from a train and a few minutes later saw the accident where the majority of the dead were from the compartment which he had shared with them a few minutes before. He was saying that he would feel lost without me, that he loved us all so much, that he could not manage without us. He spoke of love and understanding, still holding my hands. He asked me to cancel my visit to Talunia – please, could I stay with him? I stayed and Roman missed his walk at night but I made it up to him the next day. Now I could not go, not after Zygmunt’s rambling talk. I could not go and kill Roman and myself. I simply chickened out. Did I do right or wrong? I would not know.

Decades later I realized that I did only one thing wrong; I did not confide in Zygmunt my problems. If he would have known, he would never have let it go that far. I never repeated this mistake again. I had kept quiet when I should have spoken. Now I believe that the family comes first and the parents second. I hope that I have brought my children up with that belief. Share your problems with your partner if you trust him, and if you don’t, get out, and then it is no true partnership anymore. Now I could cope with Bama. Her remarks stopped hurting me as before; now I knew that Zygmunt and I were a unit and together we would be able to manage, even in very hard circumstances.

I did not tell Zygmunt for many years about my intentions of suicide and it took many more years before Zygmunt realised that the relationship between me and his mother was bad. Does it sound incredible? Or was I so good at

hiding my feelings? We received a letter advising that the departure point for Australia would be a camp in St Antonio near Napoli, and we started packing. All winter clothing went out as we were told that there were no cold seasons, except in the hills, and none of us would be sent there. Most of the books went out too as we were told that books were very cheap in Australia and, in addition, there were many public libraries. The sewing machine, my darling Elna, went out too as we were told that sewing machines were ridiculously cheap and it was not worth taking an old model – we would be able to buy a new one any time we wanted. For the five of us, we took one trunk and three suitcases. Everything else was given away as we would not need anything from here. We were going to the country of plenty where everything would be available to people who were prepared to work the 40 hour week.

On our way to Australia

The camp in St Antonio was a great disappointment. It was very overcrowded; there were not enough beds and hardly any mattresses; the kitchen was too small and there was not enough staff to cope with all the DP's coming from all parts of Europe, speaking different languages. The Italian Government received most of the monies from Caritas and UNRRA. According to calculations, it should have been enough but not enough reached the camp. Some money got lost on its way although we were looked after by the International Refugee Organization which I knew to be a good organization but, probably and as usual, under-staffed and allocating duties to local inhabitants who themselves were poor and short of everything. There were many thousands of DP's but I did not know how many.

When a transport of 1,300 people left, none of us noticed any difference in the cramped conditions, and others were still arriving. Although Zygmunt could not speak either English or Italian – only some Latin – he decided to do something to improve the conditions. In a short time he achieved the following: All mothers with small children received mattresses and blankets, everyone received an empty tin to carry the food from the kitchen to one's bed where one could sit and eat. He organized the kitchen staff, preparing the meals in a staggered order which made it not only easier for us (as now we did not have to stand for hours) but also for the kitchen staff. He did the same with the washing facilities, allocating times to each block. He was unable to do anything about the toilets where one had to wait one's turn (and hope for the best) but he encouraged the digging of trenches near the toilets so that mothers with small children could empty the dirty potties instead of just doing it near the doors. People used to come to our beds asking Zygmunt to give them help and advice. They were not only from Switzerland but from all over Europe, speaking different languages. Somehow he managed to help many, especially the older and the sick ones, and mothers with many children. In the long queues (which lasted for hours) he put those in the front whom he considered unable to wait too long.

He organized hours of singing, dancing and sports to keep the young ones out of mischief and stealing. I did not know how he did it but his energy and goodwill was unlimited. I did not do anything helpful, only calming down the frayed tempers of mothers with children. It was easier for me as I spoke

more languages and already had some standing (being the wife of Mr Kruszewski who was very popular). Sick people were not taken aboard ship, nor were families with sick children such as those with measles (and there were many cases of measles). If a child contacted measles, all the family had to wait for many more weeks. We were all anxious to go as soon as possible as the conditions were really not good. Either Zygmunt did not forget us or the administration wanted to get rid of such a demanding and interfering person who threatened to write to the head offices of UNRRA, IRO, etc., because we were allocated to a ship which was to berth soon.

On 28th October, 1949, we received the valued piece of paper issued by the Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Migration Officer – Naples, Italy. It read:

“Kruszewski, Zygmunt and children George and Roman, seen at the Australian Office at Naples. Valid for single journey to Australia within a period of six months. Grantee will be admitted to Australia on the exemption from the provision of the Immigration Act 1901-1940 for a period of two years.”

The next day Bama and I received ours also. We were advised that we would be sailing on the SS “ML HERSEY” – her master was William Jarvis. To us (the DP’s), the ship, its conditions and capacities, were very important; most of us had never sailed at all – or only for short distances. We were told that the sailing would last between 23-30 days. We all wanted to know what the ship was like and how safe she would be. We were 1,319 people of whom 618 were male, 391 female and the rest children from the ages of one to twelve. There were many nationalities but only nine were listed, the rest were “Others”. The biggest group was the Poles – 539 including children; only 88 Lithuanians and the smallest group was the Russians of whom there were only 34. The remaining 70 people were the “Others”.

The ship was 120 metres in length, the speed was 16 knots which meant 16 miles per hour in normal conditions, etc. etc. All this information, and much more, we learned from the ship’s newsletter where Zygmunt was once again listed – this time under the heading: “Editorial, print and drawings”. We were told that she was built in the USA before the invasion to carry troops to Europe and she was sailing under the American flag. Our thoughts were: “If she was good enough for the American troops, she would be good enough for us”. She was equipped to carry 2,000 men and we thought that was very good as we were only 1,319 but we forgot to take into account the crew, nor

did we take into consideration that she was built to carry army men and not families with children and also that she was now many years older. We thought only that at last we were sailing to a country willing to accept us, that very soon we might start a normal life away from all the camps, away from the political tensions, etc.

My first impression was – just a grey, drab ship. The room, to which I was allocated, together with Bama, Jurek and Roman, had space for 60 people, not counting the children under ten (or was it under eight?) It was cramped but bearable and had only two-storey bunks. Zygmunt's quarters were worse as in his room there were over 200 men (but no children) and three-storey bunks. It was a lot better than travelling in cattle trucks as here we had beds, for most of us at least; food was provided, there were showers, there were toilets, and space to walk on deck. It seemed all right and anyway, we would be there in a short time only, not even a month. I took the lower berth because Roman shared my bed and thought that I was lucky in my choice but did not take into account that others above me might be seasick and vomit on the floor near my head and that we had to clean the floors ourselves and those who were sick could not do it. There were not enough toilets; they became blocked and overflowed after a week or so; the air-conditioning and the exhaust fans broke down and the stench became unbearable.

There were many children sick with measles and whooping cough. It became most unpleasant during a two-day storm when the majority was sick. Jurek and Bama looked a bit green and would not eat, but Zygmunt and I felt fine and enjoyed walking on deck, holding onto ropes provided. All those unpleasant things were just small details, we realized, but just imagine what it was like to travel in such conditions for 26 days with no privacy whatsoever, not even in the toilets and showers. The food was good. We even had fresh fruit sometimes. We had lessons in English and lessons on how to write the numbers 7 and 1, also the letters Q, J and T which were written differently from those we were used to writing. I felt as though I was back in primary school but we had to learn. We were also told about poisonous snakes, spiders, sharks, etc., and much other animal life that we did not have in Europe.

We were also given advice about alcohol, especially wines as only some were good. I forget which ones were good – Penfolds? Orlando? – but all of the others were straight poison. It all seemed important. All men and single women had to work but as Zygmunt was working on the new issues of the

newspaper and something else, he was seldom called to scrape the paint. As I could understand some English words and knew other languages, I was made an interpreter and a “block elder” of our room and was responsible for hygiene and cleanliness. I was supposed to supervise only, but after a few days there were hardly any women left who were not sick or who had no sick children, so the remaining few had to do the cleaning ourselves. I was really glad when the storm broke whilst crossing the equator as the few of us who were not sick were told to stop trying to clean the room because we were unable to keep up, there were not enough of us healthy ones left.

At last we had some privacy in the showers, in the dining room and on decks between the ropes. It was breathtaking to watch the seas, the vastness of the ocean. Zyg and I stayed for hours on deck “A”, hanging onto the ropes. We enjoyed the sea spray, the storm and the huge waves. I loved the sea. Bama and Jurek were not really sick but looked pale and would not eat, staying in the empty dining room. Roman was not allowed on deck and had to stay with them. The weather changed and the sea was calm again and, although no-one was allowed on deck during the night, Zygmunt and I were able to hide under the stairs for a few nights and see the beautiful sunrise. There were some interesting moments such as the one in Port Said. We were not allowed to go ashore but the natives came by in small boats, swarming around the ship, offering their goods which they hoisted up in baskets for us to look at. Everyone tried to buy something as a memento. Zygmunt bought me a handbag with camels and pyramids on it. It was great fun. The same occurred in Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka). Here we bought only fresh fruit. I was not impressed by the Suez Canal. In theory, I was impressed by the obstacles that the engineers had to overcome when building it, but I read about it before and only admired the achievement of engineering. Both sides looked so very empty, very sandy and just desert.

At last we arrived in Australia in a town called Fremantle (which some called Perth) it being the port of entry to the capital city of Western Australia. We were not permitted to leave the ship and we looked and looked at our future country but there was not much to see. From then on we always saw Australia. At one stage we thought that we were looking at a desert but were told that the yellow landscape was not sand but grass. How very odd. Yellow grass? None of us had heard of yellow grass.

Australia

MELBOURNE ... At least we had arrived at the city of our destination. As we arrived at night, our ship was given a berth only the next morning. Disembarkment started. A lot of noise, hustle, rush, screaming children, everyone was yelling and talking. Some Australian people came to welcome the transport. They brought flowers, books, and sweets for the children. I thought that it was very nice of them to come as they were not officials – just ordinary people who came to welcome the newcomers. I even felt touched although I did not like either of the books which I was unable to read, nor did I like their chocolates as they tasted quite different from the ones in Switzerland or Poland.

We were told to board a train which was waiting for us near the landing docks. In most carriages there were some Australians, just ordinary people, not officials. They told us that they belonged to a club called the “Good Neighbours Club”. It sounded very nice and they seemed friendly people but we had great trouble understanding them as they spoke different English from that which we were taught in Switzerland. My first impression of the Australians was that they were friendly and smiling. They gave children sweets which they called “lollies”. Some of them had flowers in their baskets, flowers which we had never seen before which smelled beautiful but which were not pretty.

As the train went through Melbourne they pointed out buildings and told us that it was such and such, but I was unable to memorise the names. I heard the following conversation between an Australian and one of our immigrants:

“So you come here today?” (It sounded like “to die”)

“Oh no, I came here to live, not to die!”

Although it might sound like a joke, it was true. Some of us could speak some English but our accent was wrong. Zygmunt and I had window seats and we were looking all the time at Australia. We saw masses of small houses, each one having a front yard with green grass and some trees or shrubs. There were masses of those houses, just like a vast sea – they seemed unending whilst looking from the train.

Zygmunt and I looked at each other and, holding hands, we whispered: “In all that sea of houses there surely must be one where we would be able to live, just us, just our family.” These houses looked like doll’s houses but people lived there and Zygmunt and I thought that there must be some place for us too. We would manage, we would be able to live in our own house – just us, just our family. All of a sudden, just as if cut off, the houses disappeared and there were only fields which looked sandy yellow and tired, but by now we knew that it was not sand but grass or something else. Here and there were some green trees and also some dead trees which looked rather frightening and unreal. They were oddly shaped stumps and looked the way one could imagine Goya would paint them in one of his bad moods. These trees reminded one of nightmares. I became frightened but then again came a sea of houses just like before but for a shorter distance. One moment there was nothing, just a vast space and then there was a town. It seemed very strange to us. In Europe the towns petered out gradually. There were some meadows and hillocks in between town, sometimes some villages and then a new town began to emerge.

In Switzerland, one could hardly distinguish the end of one town and the beginning of another. In Poland there were more empty spaces between towns than in Switzerland but they were interspersed with villages and cultivated fields and there were never empty spaces for miles and miles on end. We did not see many sheep either. Only some here and there, but no masses of them as we had expected. I thought that the land was probably too poor to support them. I became frightened of this land that we had come to. The children and Bama were also uneasy but Zygmunt was just all eyes and full of curiosity. When he saw our faces he just laughed as usual and said: “You should have known it. We are in the Antipodes. Just imagine how many new things we will see – it will be fantastic. Just look at those dead trees – one could paint them – they are fantastic! Look at all the empty spaces, just look and think – many people will be able to have their homes somewhere there. All of you, just stop looking like wet blankets. Come on kids, look – this is your country, your new beautiful country, and we will all help to explore it and to develop it. You just watch and listen – we all will put in our twopenny worth and help build it up!” The children stopped being frightened and listened to Zygmunt’s fairy tales about what we would all do.

At last we arrived at our destination – the migrant’s camp at Bonegilla Holding Centre. There were many, many barracks but there was no chaos, not even with all of us new arrivals. We were allocated to barracks, Zygmunt

to a separate one than Bama, myself and the children. In our barrack there were approximately 20 beds, everything looked clean, there were mattresses on every bed and even blankets although it was very hot. It was 9th December, 1949. We, the Kruszewski family, had arrived in Australia. We came to the land of our choice. Two adults, an old woman and two children. We brought with us a wooden crate, two suitcases and five pounds. From now on it would be up to us to learn their way, their language. It was up to Zygmunt and me to start building up a future for the children. We had managed before; we would manage now.

As we had arrived in the dark and had been unable to see much, we therefore all got up early to look at our now countryside. The first impressions - one did not see a green colour anywhere, even the trees, even the young trees were not green but were greyish and further away it seemed if they had a bluish tinge. No green colour at all, but plenty of yellow; also a lot of dust and sand and plenty of flies and it was so hot. One could feel the sun's rays on one's skin, like burning.

The camp was well organized I thought considering the difficulties the management had to face. All these thousands of people had only three things in common – all were D.P.'s (Displaced Persons), all came from Europe and all wanted to start a new life in Australia. We were of different nationalities, we had different religions, we had different likes and dislikes and we spoke different languages. The majority were from Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. The management of the camp provided us with many notice boards in many places and there were also posters. We were told where the classes would be held for English, where the kitchens were and what time the food would be issued, at what time and which block we would have to help with the cooking, cleaning etc. etc. If one could read, one should know where to go, what to do and when to do it. Those who could not read were helped by their countrymen as the announcements were in many languages.

There was plenty of food, including milk and cheese. During the first few days we gulped it all down and even took some back to our barracks because, who knew, their supplies might run out and at least we would have what we had saved. The helpings were unlimited and we were able to take a lot back to our barracks, hiding it under our beds. It may seem funny now but then it was not funny to us. We were even annoyed that in this hot weather the food would not keep and only the bread and cheese could be dried for further use. Officials inspected our barracks and threw the smelly food away, to our great

annoyance.

We were provided with reasonable food, with good shelter, with clean bedding and really, life was not bad but of course we did complain. We complained about the sentries at the gates who would not let anyone out without a special permit. We complained about the fatty food as the mutton was swimming in fat, we complained about the toilets which were too far away and we complained about not having any privacy. Even going to the furthest corner of the camp there still would be no privacy - there were simply too many of us. In the barracks there would be too many people sitting on their beds, there were no walls and all were in the one room – one could not even speak privately. The only privacy one had was in the toilets and the showers.

The men's showers adjoined ours and one could climb over the separating partition but it was not safe as one could be spotted. It was better to climb under the corrugated partitions but it also was not very good as Zygmunt discovered when his behind was deeply cut by the corrugated iron. We complained about the laughing jackasses, about the possums which frightened us either in the morning or at night. We complained about the heat as it was very hot, even during the night. Our main complaint was about the hospital, especially the one for the children as it was very overcrowded. I complained bitterly myself as first Jurek, and later Roman, got the measles. We were not allowed to visit them but could only look through the windows, but there were many of us mothers and we had to wait our turn. The main trouble was that our European doctors were not allowed to work as doctors, only as sisters and orderlies, and our children were treated only by foreign doctors. Zygmunt tried to reassure us mothers saying that we had unreasonable doubts, that the Australian doctors might be just as good as ours. If their doctors (the Australian doctors) were allowed to practise, they must have been qualified.

“Zygmunt, our doctors had to learn for five years and later on to do hospital practice. Maybe their doctors had only a two or three year course. How do you know that they are good doctors?”

“Don't start being stupid now. Australia paid a lot of money to bring us here and our children are important to them as they will be future citizens of Australia. All our children are important to them, they are an investment; the Australians would not neglect them when they are sick. I am certain that

their doctors are well trained.”

“Zygmunt, but some children have died and the Polish woman looks like dying too.”

“Have children not died in European hospitals too?”

“Why are our doctors not allowed to work as doctors? Are their doctors jealous of ours because ours know a lot more?”

“How the hell should I know why? Maybe something to do with formalities – like having to be registered and ours did not have the time. Perhaps the medicine here is different than that in Europe because of the climate, maybe our doctors were out of practice during the war years and camps? I am telling you, I am certain that their doctors are doing the best that can be done. Do believe me; my two sons are there too. I am certain that they are well looked after.”

Both boys recovered but it was a long wait.

I tried not to miss the English lessons – they were really interesting. We were told that during the next few weeks (or maybe months) we should learn as many words as we possibly could so that we would be able to understand basic English. It was not easy. Really interesting was the hour after the English lesson when we were told about Australia, its people, its animals and Australian habits. The stress was put on things which were alien to us, and it was really fascinating. So many things were back to front, so many we could not understand at all, but I tried to memorise as best I could and to pass them on to Zygmunt who, once again, was organizing something or other and was able to attend only some of the classes.

The people, the cars and all the traffic had to keep not to the right but to the left. Although I memorized it, the first time I travelled by bus it was frightening. People did not shake hands as often as we did – only on special occasions. I forget the special occasions quoted. Children started school at the age of 5 and not 7. My thoughts were: Poor kids, that early, and mine would be considered morons. When introduced to people or meeting people, one should say “How do you do?” or “Pleased to meet you.” This was easy to remember but sounded silly as I might not care how they were and I might be indifferent and not pleased, but one could learn to say it easily. If there was a queue, one should stand and wait and not push forward. OK, but I only hoped that the queues were not too long. Australian people were very clean and took a shower every day, and we should also do this. Not on your life! Twice a week was all right; too often might damage the skin. The Australian

people were all very honest ... this might be propaganda talk. I hoped that they would not start speaking about the super-race and they did not.

There was a 40-hour working week and, if the boss required you to work more than this, he would have to pay special, higher rates for these hours. Very good - I hoped that we would get plenty of extra hours' work. Australia had unique birds and animals. We had already seen some like the possum, the kookaburra and the rosella, but the platypus and the kangaroo we had only seen pictures of in books. Australia had many native flowers. When we were shown pictures, I recognized the ones given me on the train in Melbourne – the Boronia. Trees which were not green were different varieties of eucalyptus which I thought were not at all pretty. However, there were also beautiful trees. The wages were not paid monthly but usually weekly or fortnightly – it did not matter as long as there was enough. Australian men shaved every day and even twice a day. How awful for Zygmunt – he never shaved twice daily and during the war years, only every second day. Bad luck, he would have to start shaving more often.

The Australian people were very friendly and helpful. I hoped that they were but, then again, it might just be propaganda. The Good Neighbour Club, IMCA and IWCA were always ready to meet and to assist newcomers. I hoped that it might be true, and time proved it to be so. There were many poisonous snakes, different from the ones we knew in Europe. We should walk carefully through high grass and along rivers and lakes. Will do, and will make sure that the children and Zygmunt know about it. There were many poisonous berries on the shrubs and trees and we should not eat them if we were not certain – certainly. There were poisonous spiders which might even kill. Some of them had a red cross and were easily recognized. They usually hid in dark corners near the walls and toilets, this was awful. We would have to watch carefully. As a result of this lecture, the toilets were much longer “engaged” as others did probably the same as I; before sitting down on the wooden seat, I would examine every nook and crack, and at night I took a torch with me. I went with the children to the toilet and looked carefully to make sure that there were no spiders.

This December, when it should be snowing and cold, Australia was very hot and very dry. No wonder Australians had to have a bath or shower every day. Now we had showers also every day and sometimes a few times a day – and blast the skin! One day while standing in the queue for a meal, a neighbour from my barrack called me, asking me to go back quickly as

Roman was crying and having tantrums. I grabbed the children's milk, cheese and bread and ran back. Roman was lying on the ground, hugging a small tree and sobbing. Sobbing, he told me that the tree was very thirsty and needed a drink but there was no water. I tried calming him down but to no avail, and with each minute he became more hysterical. In desperation, I brought his milk (which he loved, very much) and asked him if I should give his milk to the tree.

"Yes Mummy, quickly, please."

"Roman, if I give all your milk to the tree you will have no milk at all today. Should I give all your milk to the tree?"

"Yes please, quickly."

I poured Roman's milk around the tree. He watched how the milk was absorbed by the dry cracked soil, and stopped crying.

"Thank you Mummy. Good, now come. I am hot."

I did not ask Jurek to share his milk with Roman and only after a few hours did I give Roman water, all the time waiting to see if he would ask for his milk. He never did ask for it. My darling Roman, how I loved you for your compassion for that tree. I also remember the time when you cried uncontrollably whilst in Bern because "a baby ant lost her mother" when you found a dead ant whilst playing. I was only able to calm you down by explaining that the dead ant was not the mother but a very old auntie who had died because she was very, very old. I kept hoping that you, my little darling, would keep your compassion for all and everyone. I realized that it would make your life harder but I thought that it would also make your life richer and deeper, and I hoped that you would be able to stay (at least a bit) like you were then.

Before coming to Australia, people were asked to sign an agreement specifying that they would go to work anywhere the Government would send them. Old people like Bama, and mothers with children (like myself) were exempt. People who were able to work were constantly allocated for work in different parts of Victoria. Zygmunt was allocated to Melbourne. We were happy about it although it meant a separation, but we were certain that it would be for a short time only and Zygmunt would be able to find us accommodation. After a few weeks Zygmunt arranged for me to come to Melbourne. I had to go alone as there was no accommodation for the children, and I went happily as it was only for a few days any my barrack

neighbours and Bama would look after the children. Zygmunt was working in the Ordinance Factory near his hostel at Maribyrnong. He was a helper to the junior gardener. It was good to see him; good to be together. His mate (with whom he shared a room in the Nissan hut) moved out for a few days and Zygmunt and I were together, just us. It was very good, just us, after more than two months of constantly being separated, with no privacy.

I did not like the holding centre at Maribyrnong as there was barbed wire – also gates – but Zygmunt told me that it only looked like a concentration camp but it was all right and not to worry. He looked happy and told me that he hoped that, in a short time, he would be able to bring us all to Maribyrnong. Zygmunt took me on a sight-seeing tour of Melbourne. Melbourne was much better than I expected. I had expected Melbourne to be smaller than Albury which I saw for a few hours. Melbourne had not only one but many “main” streets. There was also a lot of traffic; there were buses, trams, many cars and many people in the streets and there were many big buildings, churches and banks. It was not just a town, it was a city and to me it seemed a beautiful city with parks. Zygmunt brought me to a garden which he told me was called “Treasury Gardens” and he went for food. He brought the food in bags, not on plates, and told me that it was called “Fish and Chips”. I thought it tasted nice although, as a rule, I do not like fish. Zygmunt explained to me that it was cheaper to eat from a paper bag, sitting for free in the gardens, than it was to eat under a roof, sitting at a table. It was a pleasure to eat sitting in the gardens, and the lawns were green and again Zygmunt explained that the lawns were green because they were watered when needed before they became too dry. We went along a wide street which started near a quaint, lovely station, and later on became a wide avenue going over a dirty-looking river. Again there was a beautiful park with many beautiful trees and shrubs, and a shrine, but Zygmunt did not know what the shrine was for. Going back we became tired and thirsty from all the walking. Zygmunt wanted to have a beer and I a cup of coffee, so we went to a hotel near the station which Zygmunt called a “pub”. It was an odd-looking place.

There were hardly any seats, only a few couches along the wall and men were standing along some high tables or along the bar. It did not look nice; it did not smell nice; and it looked dirty. As I was waiting for Zygmunt (who was amongst the crowd of men around the bar) a man started talking to me. I could not understand him and went for Zygmunt. Now something happened which neither Zygmunt nor I could not understand. Zygmunt was allowed to

be there but I, his wife, was not – and only because I was a female. “No women”. All right, we would go away, but we still could not understand why a woman couldn’t have a cup of coffee with her man. No coffee ... something about ladies ... did they expect me to have coffee in a toilet? Something was wrong; we could not understand them and went away, just a few doors farther on where Zygmunt had seen women and where they served food and coffee but no beer. Here Zygmunt ordered what he called a “shake milk” with a taste of coffee. It tasted nice and there was a lot of it.

Once again we realized that we would have to learn and try to understand this country, its habits, and its food. We decided that we would try hard and maybe would be able to learn, although many things seemed very odd indeed. Zygmunt asked me to go the manager of the hostel and tell him that I would like to come as soon as possible, together with Bama and the boys. Zygmunt thought that the earlier we started living amongst the Australians, the sooner we would be able to understand their odd habits. I went the next morning. The manager was a nice man – I think he came from England – he finished his schooling in Switzerland and spoke some Swiss dialects. The interview seemed very informal to me. He asked casual questions about our background, later on he called a Lithuanian woman who was working in the hostel, and we started chatting away in Lithuanian. She, poor woman, lost her husband just before sailing to Australia, and now she had to take care of her daughters and her young son. Later on, the manager called in a German girl who was married to a Czech and we spoke in German, and then he called in a Russian girl but we did not have much to talk about as she was deported to Germany at the age of 14 and was liberated by the Americans, unlike us by the French. He also called some other nationalities and we talked in a sign language, interspersed with words from different languages. It was rather fun.

Afterwards, he told me that he would like to employ me in my spare time as an interpreter and would assign me other duties but it would be nothing hard, probably some supervision work. I should come as soon as I was ready, that is as soon as the Bonagilla Holding Centre would release the necessary documents; he would write to them immediately. I asked the manager if he could, please, find us a room – or rather, two rooms – which would have some kind of walls, even very thin ones would do but not paper walls. He started to laugh and said that he kept a whole house for me, a house which had two rooms and brick walls and was even near the toilets. I would even be paid as I would be working because my children would be going to school.

I was so happy, unbelievably happy. Soon, very soon, we would be together again and I would even be able to help Zygmunt financially.

What else could one ask for? We were given a start without even trying. Australia was beautiful, its people were good, we would be happy here. I loved it here. A few weeks later Zygmunt met us at Spencer Street and brought us to our first home in Australia.

Maribyrnong

The manager had told me the truth; we had a brick house. Small, but it had two rooms and a ceiling and two doors. The windows were in the roof and the floors looked odd – they were neither tar nor cement. The toilets were not far, not more than two minutes' walk, but the showers were rather far away – at least 7-8 minutes' normal walk. The wash-house was near the toilets and had a few troughs although no plugs but Zygmunt promised to make some and we could have a quick wash there. The dining room also was not very far away. Each room in the house had two beds, a table, two chairs and a tiny wardrobe. We put one of the single beds into Bama's room for the boys as she insisted that both boys should sleep with her, and our room we made into something like a sitting room. It was not bad, just strange, but in such conditions one could live and wait until something suitable could be found, somewhere, anywhere.

This house which was allocated to us had been a laboratory house for the explosives factory during the war. The manager called me to his office and explained what my job would be. I would have to supervise the cleaning staff of all the toilets, showers, etc., to distribute the mail and to interpret when required. I would have fifteen people under me (of different nationalities) – men and women. I would be responsible for any complaints if the facilities were not properly cleaned, if the dining room and kitchen were not just perfect; he would deal only with me. In addition, I should give a hand (as often as possible) with the linen stores. Should I want to sack anyone, I would only have to tell him and he would do it. I would be paid so much ... and, being on the staff, our accommodation would cost us less. It sounded exceptionally good to me, except that I would have men working under me.

I came to Zygmunt for advice: How could I give orders to men, how could I, a woman, tell men to work better? I could not do it, I simply could not accept this work. After a long talk, Zygmunt convinced me that I should give it a try. He told me that men also had to do their work properly, that it was my responsibility. I would be paid for it; I should give the men the harder work as they were stronger; I should give them the work of cleaning toilets as that was not work for women and anyway, it would be quite fair as men were being paid more than women for the same hours worked. I gave it a try and it

did work out well. Children from our camp, including our two, were enrolled at the Footscray school but none of them could speak a word of English. I was working with the manager in the storeroom when the children came back home after their first day at school. The manager stopped Jurek and Roman and asked them in Swiss how it went during their first day at school. Both kept quiet and did not look happy.

“Have you learned some English words?” he asked.

Jurek: “Not much, only two. It was the first day.”

“What have you learned? Tell me.”

Jurek stood to attention and said: “Bloody teacher.”

The manager started to laugh but I did not as I did not know what “bloody” meant. I asked Jurek and he explained that it was the way to address the Lehrer (teacher). In Switzerland they had to say: “Herr Lehrer” (Mister Teacher) and here they say “Bloody Teacher.”

One day I received a letter which was forwarded to me from Bonegilla. It was addressed to Mrs M Kruszewski and came from Canberra – the sender was a Mrs M Volkas. Instead of opening the letter, I looked at it as I did not know anyone in Canberra and certainly no M Volkas. Zygmunt, looking at me, grinned and said: “I can see that your ESP does not work. Wouldn’t it be better if you opened the letter?” The letter read like this: “I, Maria Volkas, nee Marusia Kruck, am working in Canberra as a stenographer and sometimes as an interpreter. During my work I meet newcomers to Australia. I heard about a Zygmunt Kruszewski from many people. As I knew a Zygmunt Kruszewski and, as his wife was my friend, I wonder if you are the one I would like to get in touch with. I had heard the following: A ZK was in Germany in 1945/46 touring with a group in Wuertenburg; he was then a director, author, conductor. I heard from other sources that there was a ZK in Switzerland but he was neither an artist nor an author – he was a diplomat. Once again ZK was mentioned by people of different nationalities, this time from Italy, from the camp at St Antonio.

They did not know who he was before but they said that he had a family, that he would be sailing on the SS “Hersey” and that this shipment was allocated to Bonegilla. Should you be the wife of one of the abovementioned Zygmunt’s, should you be Maruszka from Kaunas, and Jurek my godson, cable me immediately, otherwise please disregard this letter.” I was overjoyed; my friend from early school years was alive and in Australia. We had thought her dead as she was married to a German boy, also our

schoolmate, and went to live in Germany in 1941. During the last two years of war we had no letters from her. Now she must be married to another husband, a Mr Volkas. She must have come much earlier than we did as she heard about Zygmunt when he was in Switzerland.

I was so very happy – I was dancing with the letter in my hand and singing, stupid, funny school songs. She came the same week. We both got three days off work and spent days and nights talking. Her first husband died during the war – he was shot down. A few days later her baby was born in a bunker during an air raid and died too. Her new husband was also from Kaunas, he even lived in the same street but she never met him as he left before the war and went to South America. When they met in Australia, it was love at first sight. They were happy and were saving for their own house, both were working and were on the Federal payroll. She thought my children were beautiful, especially Roman, but she thought that I looked old and we both laughed as she seemed old to me too. Her visit was like a boost of optimism. She also liked Australia and its people. She had gotten used to their odd ways and she was happy here and very soon they would even have their own house.

Zygmunt's work as helper to the junior gardener did not last long. One day the manager called him, asking him if he understood German writing and if he could draw plans. Zygmunt said that he could. For the next few weeks Zygmunt worked in an office. The firm had received machinery from Germany but all the instructions were in German. He had to do some translating but mainly drawings. He must have been good as when his work was finished, the manager asked Zygmunt what he could do for him to show his appreciation. Zygmunt asked: "Please, could you sack me?" – and explained that he was under a two-year contract and working here he was earning a lot less than working as a welder in the Ferguson factory. The manager understood and said that it could be arranged.

Now Zygmunt became a welder and his pay was much better. The work was hard – heavy wheels had to be shifted and sometimes he had to be at the ovens where it was extremely hot. His work as a welder did not last long either as one day a wheel fell on his toe and broke it. However, having been released from the first job, he was now allowed to look around for himself for a new job. I liked my work in the beginning but after a few months I liked it less and when winter came I did not like it at all. It was not a 40-hour week as I was often woken at night or during the early morning hours with

complaints – that the toilets became blocked during the night, that the showers had no hot water, etc. etc. I did not like the representatives from the Immigration Department. They conveyed the impression that they, the Australians, were superior to us. Maybe they were but they should not have shown it so obviously.

One day one of the representatives who I was taking around told me that we, the Europeans, were dirty people as we did not take showers as often as we should. I asked him politely to come to the house I occupied and from there, I took him to the showers, not omitting to point out how far it was. He was an elderly man and walked slowly. When we arrived at the showers I asked him to try to adjust any one shower so that the water would be pleasant. He was unable to do it; it was either very hot or plain cold, and the weather was cold and windy and there were many broken windows. He got my point and at last the showers were repaired. However, he was right. We did not take showers as often as the Australians did, especially not in winter.

I did not like the weather; it was cold and wet and we had no way of heating our rooms as there were no power points for a heater. It was even worse in the Nissan huts. For the first time in our lives we had chilblains which were itchy and unpleasant. By now the hostel had a lot more people as another camp was flooded (was it Newport or Williamstown?). I had to find accommodation, beds, blankets, chairs, etc. Our reserve stocks were not large enough and I had not enough of anything, and only pregnant women were given chairs by me, the others could sit on the floor on their mattresses. I was blamed, and rightly so, but I was too ignorant to expect flooding in Melbourne. Jurek became very sick, had an extremely high temperature, but the doctor was unable to say what was wrong with him. It took weeks before he came good again. Our food became worse but I could not blame the Australians for it. Our milk was a blue-ish colour as it was diluted with water. Our cook showed me how one could get extra money by accepting bad meat – she opened the oven which was set on low temperature and from the meat large maggots were crawling out. Later on I was unable to eat the meat although I knew that all the maggots were out, but I could not eat the meat. I did not tell anyone about it as what good would it have done?

Otherwise the food was good and there was plenty of it; the children were given fresh fruit every day and they started to like bananas very much (which would have been a luxury in Poland). I did not like our evening meals. By now we all had spare money and we had a canteen next door and some shops

not far away. Men were buying plenty of vodka, especially after pay day, and drinking it during the evening meal. There were many unpleasant scenes, fights, abuse. We had in our camp so many nationalities and each one of them had some grudge against one another, like the Lithuanians against the Poles, but many – or rather, most were against the Germans. Some of the men were married to German girls and these German women had a hard time as most of the people tried to blame them for the situation we were all in now, accusing them of being responsible for the war because they were German. How silly people could get!

There were many ugly fights during the evening meals. People were restless, especially during the weekends as there was nothing to do on a Sunday. Melbourne seemed a dead city – there were no picture theatres open, no shows, the shops (and even the libraries) were closed – only the churches were open. What should the people do? They played cards, drank vodka and complained. It was not a good atmosphere in which to bring up children. The atmosphere became even worse when a Ukrainian man committed suicide because he could not stand it any longer. Zygmunt tried hard to calm down the frayed tempers but he did not succeed as he was very seldom around, working overtime whenever it was available. Singly, people came to him for advice but he could do nothing with the lot and I think that by then he had stopped trying. He told me once that now when we had arrived in our new country everyone should try to do something constructive; he did not think that he was able to influence the majority to stop drinking or to put an end to old national grudges, etc.

He was asked to represent the Polish group but he declined, saying that he would gladly help anyone who came to him personally, should he know how to help, but he thought now was the time that everyone should try to adjust to the new way of life. I was inadequate to help people. I could only reassure some mothers with small children or the poor German wives or the wives of men who were very often drunk. There were so many unhappy women. Suddenly I realized that I was snapping at all and everyone, especially at Zygmunt, and I realized that I was not doing any good and that I could not bear to be 24 hours a day in the hostel so, without even telling Zygmunt, I went to the manager (the new manager was also a very nice man) and told him that I would like to finish my work in the hostel as soon as possible in order to work outside. He asked a few questions and, seeing my distress, he agreed and I went the same day looking for work.

I found work in the factory of the Olympic Tyre Company as a typist and interpreter. The factory was near the hostel and the children would not be too long without me after returning from school. My English had improved and now I could make myself understood. I could also understand the Australians if they spoke slowly and in short sentences. My job was to type envelopes, all day long. I had trouble with the names but the main problem was the names of streets and suburbs as they were abbreviated and I knew hardly any of the Melbourne suburbs. I was very slow but no-one minded. It was very nice to be in normal surroundings from 9 to 5 but the evenings were still the same, the weekends were still the same.

We played cards, bridge mainly, gossiped – and complained. I had had it. I wanted to move out and find a flat of our own. Danka and Jurek and their little girl had already left but it was easier for them as their parents were able to help them financially. I missed them. Some other families were also able to move out, living now in different suburbs. We had not achieved much. We bought a radio and we put a deposit on a block of land in Sunshine. It was not a nice block – it was full of large stones, without any trees and there was no made road nearby. When we felt depressed we would dream about our own house which we might be able to build sometime. Zygmunt even drew plans, even of the furniture which we would have liked to have. However, so far it was only a dream in a far-away future. We began to look in earnest for private accommodation but were unable to find any. Some people wanted key money which we were unable to pay; some just slammed the door in my face and some were just rude, saying that they would not let their nice home to some bloody New Australians and their bastard children. I did not feel hurt, just annoyed that I was unable to find accommodation for us.

At last I found a place where we could have had two rooms over a dry-cleaning shop as long as I would work in the shop. Mrs Greenwell, a lady from the Good Neighbour Council, advised me not to take it as, according to her, the district would not be right for our boys. The people from the GNC were nice and friendly and tried to help as much as they could. Thanks to them we were invited to some Australian homes and some parties. During that time two incidents occurred. One concerned Zygmunt and happened during a dance. After dancing with a young and pretty woman, Zygmunt, when bringing her back to the table, and being a well-behaved man, kissed her hand. Her husband was ready to punch him on the nose for this hand kiss. Someone from the GNC intervened, explaining that in many European

countries a hand kiss was the proper thing to do after a dance. “He’s bloody well had time to learn and to forget his bloody silly habits” and, turning to his wife: “Come, we are not going to sit at the same table as this bloody lot.”

Zygmunt learned his lesson and did not kiss hands again after a dance. The other incident occurred at Christmas, 1950. It was the first time that we had been invited to a nice home. He was an engineer, she a social worker, their house was in Toorak and very nicely furnished. It was here that, for the first time, we had a Christmas dinner. It was a very hot day and I found the meal too filling but very nice. Here we tried a Christmas cake and Christmas pudding, here we observed the custom of putting sixpences in the pudding and here we received our first Christmas presents. What a misunderstanding on our part and on the part of our hosts. We received soap, talcum powder and face-washers. Firstly, I felt embarrassed as we had not brought any presents to the hosts as in Poland we exchanged presents only amongst family and friends and secondly, we would not give anyone soap, face-washes, etc. as a present.

I thought that the hosts implied that we were dirty and needed a wash that we were below the Australians. I did not consider myself inferior to Australians; they were just people like anyone else; that they were born in Australia and we were not did not make them any better. I felt hurt as they seemed such a nice couple. However, it was through them that we heard about three rooms available in Mt Evelyn and that the landlord did not mind having New Australians. They warned us that Mt Evelyn was far from Footscray which, by now, we considered the centre of Melbourne. We measured all distances in relation to Footscray as here were many Europeans, here were the only shops which sold Continental food such a rye bread, sausages and unsalted butter. Zygmunt also had to take into account the distance from his work.

He was working as a wood carver for the Myer Emporium. He liked his work and he very much liked his foreman, old Archie, who was kind and understanding and whose work Zygmunt admired. The place where Zygmunt worked was in West Footscray. Looking at the map, we realized that Mt Evelyn was indeed far but, as our main objective was to get out of the hostel, we decided to go and have a look.

Mt Evelyn

We liked our future landlords, Mr & Mrs Jarmyn, and from the first moment we fell in love with their property. It was situated in a very large garden with many trees, mostly camellias, but there were also fruit trees and even fir trees and it was surrounded by green grass. The house was on top of a hillock and as the windows reached right to the floor, we had a view from each one. The rent was six pounds which we could just afford as we were still paying off our debts to the hostel for the time when Zygmunt was earning alone. At last we had our home. We needed furniture and went to Myers as Zygmunt could get a discount of 20% there. We did not buy what we would have liked but we asked the assistant to give us the cheapest possible beds, mattresses, blankets, chairs, a table and an ice-chest. No wardrobes and only four chairs as we had some packing cases which would do. We bought one luxury – one comfortable deep chair which Bama had sometimes to share with others. There were of course no curtains, no floor coverings, no extras.

We had a stove in the kitchen but had to buy a pot and pan, also cups, plates, cutlery and a broom and a rubbish bin. That was the lot. We bought in on so-called “Easy Payments”. How hard they were at times, the “Easy Payments”. The school was not far from home and it was also surrounded by trees. Only now did we realize how we have missed the trees, the grass and the quiet and the clean fresh air. We had our own toilet which we did not have to share with anyone, our own bath which looked like a Roman bath as it was so big and deep; it even had steps to get into it, and above it was a shower.

It was good to be in Mt Evelyn and Lorna and her husband were the best landlords one could have wished for. Theirs was a big, old house where Lorna’s sister lived with her husband and a boy, and also a Dutch family with many children. However, it was not easy for Zygmunt. He had to get up at 4:00 am and walk down to Lilydale for the first train which left before the first bus from Mt Evelyn arrived. Even taking the first train he was still half an hour late at work in West Footscray. Later on he changed work and once again became a welder, this time at K & M Steel in Richmond. He did not like his new work nor did he like his workmates and he missed old Archie, his boss from the wood carving department. I was unable to find work near Mt Evelyn. After many attempts I found work as a machinist in Mooroolbark

at Jeldi's factory which made bedspreads. I did not like this work. All of us were covered in dust. I became tired after a few hours although it was not heavy work; we just had to sit and hold the bedspreads straight. We did not have to know about sewing, we had only to follow the lines marked on the fabric. My back was aching and there was nowhere to relax. I sneaked out to the toilets and lay down on the concrete floor but the toilet was too small for my full length and I had to put my feet on the toilet seat, but I could not stay there for long as others were waiting to do the same.

I quit after two weeks and was annoyed with myself for being a weakling. I was too weak to put up with constant backache, the running and smarting eyes, the running nose and constant sneezing. I knew that Zygmunt had it hard too but he managed whereas I quit. Zygmunt was not angry with me – he even urged me in the first week to give it up and to look for something else. I applied for many jobs such as at the Lilydale shoe factory but was not accepted as I had not had previous experience in leather work; the same happened at other factories and the local pub. I was unable to find work as I had no experience whatsoever because I had not worked in a factory before. I was ready to learn and try but no-one was prepared to give me a try. Lorna suggested that I should look for clerical work in the city – that was Melbourne. I had never given a thought to clerical jobs as my English was very poor but I started looking at advertisements as my earnings were needed. The Bonegilla Holding Centre wrote us a polite letter reminding us that we were still in arrears.

I applied for a position doing general clerical work in the accounts department of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) Housing Society in Queen Street, Melbourne. I had an interview with a very nice man, a Mr O'Mullane. I answered all his questions truthfully. I was a Pole, I was a Catholic, I had my matriculation certificate, I loved juggling figures and maths was my favourite subject. I could type but was slow and not a good typist. He gave me the job and for a start he would pay ten pounds a week. I was very happy. At last I would be earning too and would receive a lot of money (it was then 1950) and the travelling, including bus and train, would cost me approximately 2 pounds which would leave about 8 pounds clear. It sounded like a lot of money.

Our life now settled into a routine. Zygmunt and I got up before 5:00 am and had a quick breakfast. He caught the first bus at 5:30. I started to pre-cook the evening meal and left before 7:00 am to be on time at 9:00 am in Queen

Street. It was dark when we got up and dark when we got home after 7 pm especially during the winter months when we were working back. I even lost my way home from the bus, although it was not far but there were so many trees. On getting home I finished cooking the evening meal, bathed the boys, did some urgent darning or ironing and was ready to drop dead by midnight.

On weekends we firstly played with the boys, asked about the school and their friends, then we three went to light the copper and started washing. The copper was an ancient thing. It was so deep that Roman could stand in it and only the top of his head would show. After the washing I would put some Band-aids on my hands as they always bled after the washing, pegged the things out and we three would go to do some shopping. Later on there would be the cleaning to do and the darning. Bama did not feel well and could not help. If possible, I tried to do some ironing which was better to be done then than during the week. Zygmunt tried to make some furniture from the material which he had from Myers.

The afternoon was left for the boys and we would walk along the channel or, when the season was right, we picked mushrooms. Mushrooms! Lorna, our landlady, was horrified when she saw us gathering what she called toadstools and which I called "Rydzys". She urged us not to eat them as she was certain that they were poisonous. However, I considered myself to be an expert on mushrooms as I had gathered them since the age of four. These mushrooms looked exactly as our "Rydzys" did, including the saffron-coloured juice and there were masses of them. When we had our first meal Lorna watched us, sitting near the telephone with the numbers of emergency services and doctor before her. When, after eating the mushrooms, we still did not show any symptoms of poisoning, she came every few minutes to check up on us. Next morning (when we were still alive and healthy) she stopped worrying and the next weekend when we again had "Rydzys" she tried some and even liked them. Until now, I still do not know what these mushrooms are called in Australia; their botanic name is *Lactarius Deliciosus*.

We made friends not only with Lorna but also with an architect and his wife who lived not far from us, along the channel where we gathered the mushrooms. He was a real English gentleman, a race which has now died out. I also liked his wife. At work I had made some friends, especially Estelle who was to become my friend for years and who helped me through the hard times which were just coming.

Travelling by bus to Lilydale, I became interested in two children whom a woman brought to the bus stop. She was tall and wore slacks which, at that time, were not popular. Zygmunt and I both commented on how nice and pleasant she looked when escorting the children. Sometimes we saw them in the street. The girls did not look alike; one was shy and tiny and used to sit quietly and just smile occasionally whilst the other one did not stop talking. She always sat next to the driver (called Chappy), dangled her long legs and talked and laughed non-stop. Both girls looked very different and both looked lovely. Each morning I looked forward to seeing them. I spoke with Zygmunt about them, wondering if they could be sisters. We wondered who the woman in slacks was – could she be the mother of both girls? In the evenings a man got out at the same stop and went towards the house where the girls came from in the morning. His name was Tom and usually he was not sober. Was he the father of the girls? One day the lady in slacks boarded the bus and sat next to me.

I made what the Australians would call a “faux pas” and started to talk with her about the children. They were her daughters and the man, Tom, was her brother. After a few more bus trips I gathered that the father of the girls was not living with them but I did not know if she was a widow or divorcee. I had the feeling that she loved her children just the same way I did mine. One day she invited me, half-heatedly, to see her at the cottage. I was not certain whether she had invited me to “do her duty” to the New Australian or if she really wanted to see me. I decided to go anyway as I liked the children and she seemed to be all right. I went the next Saturday but with mixed feelings as I was worried that once again I would be given to understand that we were not as good as the Australians. The cottage was not much to look at from outside but inside it was very nice and had a very friendly atmosphere. We sat in the kitchen sipping tea which I did not like as I preferred coffee. The girls were even nicer at home and were constantly popping in and out. The brother Tom came and said “Hello” in quite a friendly way. Even the dog (called Freddy), was friendly.

From that day on she became Elizabeth and I Marushka, and the girls were Diane and Helen. How odd that through a bus ride and my “faux pas” I received the gift of a friend and a friendship which survived many ordeals and will, I hope, last until death. I decided to learn English during my travelling time which lasted for three hours each day. I did not like the boys’ school readers and decided to learn in an unconventional way. I armed myself with a Polish-English dictionary, an exercise book, a pencil and a

light novel or crime story. I noted down each unknown word in the exercise book and, whilst on the bus, I tried to memorise them. I preferred the crime stories as there was a lot of conversation which made it easier to learn. The atmosphere at work was very pleasant. Estelle and I became friends. I was given more accounts work, calculations of part-payments to members after receipt of valuation reports. It became interesting. I tried to talk Elizabeth into applying for a job there too as we had a vacancy. I had quite a bit of trouble with her as she was sure that she could not do it, but I explained that she did not need any knowledge, only commonsense, and had to do some thinking – nothing more. When later on she accepted, I was very happy as the pay was better than that which she received in her previous work.

Everything was going fine and we were even able to reduce our debt at the hostel when there came, what I called, the “Difficult Time”. There were two reasons. Firstly, Zygmunt’s health started to deteriorate rapidly and secondly, Bama became unreasonable and difficult, in fact very difficult. Zygmunt changed. There were no more



Elizabeth Griffith, Maria's close friend

jokes, no more playing with the children. He even said that he was tired. So what? Who was not? One day (it was a Saturday) I suddenly saw him – really saw him – and realized that he had lost a lot of weight and had sunken eyes. I could not understand it as he was eating more than before. I gave him more food for lunch and began to observe him.

He was losing weight; his clothes were hanging on him and he ceased being interested in anything. I talked him into going to the local GP. He was examined, various samples for tests were taken and he was told to report in a few days’ time. When I came back alone, the doctor looked grave and explained to me that Zygmunt had cancer, incurable cancer of the brain – or did he say spine? I heard the words “cancer” and “incurable”. The doctor also told me that he might have made a wrong diagnosis and advised that Zygmunt should go to St Vincent’s Hospital for more tests. He had already

written to them and I should contact the hospital in a few days' time. The doctor was sorry, but there was nothing he could do to help. I felt stunned. I had only one thought – Zygmunt was not going to die now, he would not, not NOW.

Nobody could be that unfair – neither God nor fate – not after letting him live through all the years of the war holocaust, not now when we had started to make a new life, NOT NOW. When I calmed down, I went home and told Zygmunt that he needed more tests which would be carried out at the hospital. Zygmunt became weaker each day. We had to wait for weeks for the appointment and he was deteriorating rapidly. Luckily, he broke his wrist which was just a clean break, and was not able to go to work and was still receiving some money. I hoped he would improve staying home and resting but he did not; he became weaker and weaker, his hands started to shake and he had trouble walking as he became tired very quickly.

Bama also worried about Zygmunt and became worse and worse and, in a very short time, I found her really unreasonable. She always wanted us to try either building a house or buying one. It was impossible as we had no money. She became worse each day too. She had ten pounds saved and wanted to buy a house at all costs. Jurek could speak English quite fluently by now and was a bright boy for his age, and Bama's favourite. She took him with her as an interpreter when visiting different agents, looking at houses and flats. Sometimes they came home after midnight when they missed the last bus and had to wait for someone to give them a lift.

I became worried about Jurek too. He was not happy, he stopped talking to Zygmunt and me, he seemed somehow always on guard whilst talking with us. Bama used to talk to Jurek in front of us like this: "My darling Jurek, your father is a weakling, he is even unable to control his shaking hands although he is not an old man. He complains and says that he is tired even when sitting at home and not working. Your father is no good, he can't even give us a house. Do not blame your father too much, he is only a weakling, he is influenced by your mother who has no sense, who is frightened of everything. Your mother does not want us to have our own house such as all the other people have. Do not be upset, Jurek darling. You have me, I will look after you until you are a really big boy, then you can look after me and your parents. You should never forget to show respect and love to your parents. Don't forget that God expects you to show respect and love to your parents even when they are no good, even when they are bad and weak."

When I wanted to hug Jurek he would push me away, not roughly but he would not allow being hugged either by me or Zygmunt. Roman started to cry a lot, especially in the evenings, but he would let me hug him. He told me that nobody loved him – neither Bama, nor Jurek, nor Daddy nor even I, his mother, because I was bad and worried only about Daddy who was also no good and weak. It was a hard time for me and I did not know what to do. I tried speaking with Bama but got nowhere.

It was no good speaking with Zygmunt for he did not care about anything, he barely listened. I do not remember what I really felt, I do not even remember how I felt about Zygmunt's imminent death, nor about the unhappiness of the children. I remember only a terrible struggle to keep them all fed. How very prosaic. Zygmunt's sick pay stopped and we did not know about unemployment benefits or about the help of social workers. My pay (which was now over ten pounds) had to cover my fares (approx. 2 pounds), the rent (six pounds), repayments to the hostel and repayments of the "Easy Payments" and also it had to feed us.

I explained my situation to Lorna and she suggested that we should all move into one large room which would cost only four pounds. I agreed gladly and we moved into this one large room. Bama was in one corner, the boys were in the middle of the room and we were divided from the family by a wardrobe which we had bought not long ago. Now we had no stove and the cooking had to be done on a portable cooker, the washing up in the bathroom where I had to bend nearly to floor level, but that did not matter as we would have two pounds more to live on; however, it was still not enough. The tests in the hospital (some of which were very painful for Zygmunt) took nearly a week.

I was called to the doctor in charge and told that the first diagnosis was wrong – it was not cancer of the brain (or spine?), it was cancer of the spine (or brain?), his life expectancy was not three months but probably six months or maybe even longer. Zygmunt was told the same. It was a hard time. Zygmunt walked along the channel for hours with long stops and thought about a quick death. I wrote letters to Zygmunt's cousin in London, explaining about Zygmunt and asking him to take care of Jurek in case we should both die. He had no children, was very understanding and very kind; he promised to look after Jurek as if he were his own son.

I wrote to Talunia and Mietek who could not have children of their own, leaving Roman in their care. They loved Roman. They came over, tried to cheer us up and, although themselves not well-off, left us ten pounds which was a fortune to us. I thought that Jurek would be better off with Stach in London and Jurek would fit in better with Stach Kruszewski who was a chemical engineer of very good standing. He had been offered a job in America at a much higher salary, but he refused, explaining that England had accepted him when other countries would not and his loyalty was with England where his work might be useful. All these arrangements I made quietly and quite deliberately as I knew that I would be no good without Zygmunt, I knew that I would be unable to cope with Bama and I knew that I would be just a shell, somehow earning enough money to support the children, but I would be unable to give them all that they needed; a shell is not a person.

One weekend a strange thing happened to me. I took my darning and sat under the big tree. I know that I was not thinking about anything in particular; I was not seeing anything; but all of a sudden I “woke up”. I don’t know whether minutes or hours had passed. All of a sudden I felt strong, healthy and full of hope and I knew – KNEW for certain that Dr Hurley (who assisted Mr Carlton) would cure Zygmunt. I felt very happy because I KNEW. I was unable to explain my state to anyone, I did not even try. I just knew that everything would be all right, I would only have to wait ... Let others try to explain it. It was not the first time that something similar had happened to me in critical times. I rushed to Zygmunt and told him that I was going to make an appointment for him to see Dr Hurley, not to worry, everything would be all right. Zygmunt barely listened – he said that he was resigned and would not see any doctors as it was pointless; he was only waiting to have it all finished.

I told him that, should he refuse to go to see the doctor in the city, I would ask the doctor to come to Mt Evelyn and that the bill would simply kill us. I blackmailed him and at last he agreed, but I had to promise that this would be the last appointment with any doctor. I promised readily as I was certain that we would not need another doctor. When we went to see the doctor, Zygmunt was staggering and I had to help him walk. His eyes were protruding from a haggard and greyish face. It was a long journey, changing from bus to train and then to a tram, but we managed.

Dr Hurley was a nice old gentleman. He was really gentle and very kind. He

listened attentively about the diagnosis of the local GP and the results from St Vincent's Hospital, he listened when Zygmunt told him how he felt. He asked for a short test and came back with a wide smile. He told us that he was unable to understand how people could speak about cancer, etc., Zygmunt just had an over-active thyroid gland and one should recognize it simply by looking at the patient and could confirm it by touching the skin. He saw it the moment Zygmunt came in. It was not fatal but he thought that he would be unable to cure it with tablets as it had progressed too far. Zygmunt might need an operation, but much later. First he would make Zygmunt feel better in a very short time and he would even be able to work and to lead a normal life. We were both speechless.

We both thought that it was incredible – no cancer, none at all, only an over-active gland. Could the doctor be right? Zygmunt had to take some tablets and go for examinations of his blood to check his white blood corpuscles. Zygmunt's recovery was dramatic; his health improved from day to day and, in a very short time he started to look for work – preferably with plenty of overtime so that we could pay off all the debts which had accumulated during the time he was not working. We would again be able to buy a lot of wood and leave the children lunches as, during all this time, Lorna had given them something to eat when they came home at lunch time as there was simply no food at home. We would have meat and butter again for everyone, not only the children. We were all rather tired of the macaroni with onions (from Lorna's garden), and boiled barley (which was cheap).

Zygmunt heard that there was work available at the Eildon Weir where welders were required and well paid and where there would be plenty of overtime. He was told also that in some cases accommodation was provided for families at a very cheap rate. We went to have a look as the bus ride was free for those who sought an interview. My first impression of Eildon was – dust and noise. Somewhere far in the bush were barracks and tents; the shopping centre consisted of one general store which was not far from a rickety bridge which led over a murky creek. On the unpaved roads huge, odd-looking vehicles were rambling along making a lot of noise and dust. Zygmunt was interviewed in an office which was situated in one of the barracks. The pay was very good and there was plenty of overtime available.

Accommodation was only for single men and in tents only. Some houses were in the process of being built and some old farmhouses were being relocated – accommodation for families would be available later on. How

much later on was hard to say – maybe in a few months’ time. There and then Zygmunt accepted the job as a welder as we liked the promise of very good pay and the possibility of accommodation later. Zygmunt left Mt Evelyn a few days later with a few shillings in his pocket as he would not need money – his room was provided, including bedding; food was served in a canteen and later deducted from his pay. He promised to come and visit us every fortnight as they had a 12-day working week and two days off.

Elizabeth was sorry to see us go but she agreed that it would make a lot of difference to us if Zygmunt was able to manage the work and get us some cheap accommodation. We would both miss the Sundays as it was the day when our children had their “Sunday Treat”. We both (somehow) managed to save up for a small bottle of Coke for each of them and sometimes, even extra coppers to spend as they liked. We loved watching their happy faces and to hear their laughter after such a “treat”. Both boys had religious instruction although neither Zygmunt nor I were Catholics in the true sense, but I wanted the boys to have a religion. We continued to let them be taught until we came to Melbourne.

We had an offer from the priest who could arrange for the boys to be boarders in a good Catholic school – St Xavier’s – free. Most of the people we knew encouraged us to accept this offer as the school had a very good name and was usually available only to people who could afford high fees and, in addition, we would have had less expenses at home. After giving it a lot of thought, we thanked the priest and declined the offer – but not for religious reasons. Our boys would be amongst the children of well-to-do parents; they might be invited to their homes which would be spacious and well-furnished as those of professional people or high white collar workers were. Should our boys invite their new friends to their parents’ home that consisted of, maybe, two or three rooms, unfurnished, where the parents could hardly speak English, where the food was poor, their friends would feel out of place. Presuming that in Australia – like in other countries – many people were snobbish because of money or social status, our boys would be either unhappy or would become snobs, trying to hide the fact that their parents were poor labourers. We did not want that to happen to them.

Time would show if we made the right decision. I was glad that the boys had their priest to answer their questions as I was unable to do so satisfactorily. Like once when Roman came home and looked upset. He asked me if God really could hear the children, and when I answered “yes” he asked if God

could hear all the children, from all schools, even at playtime. When I again said “yes” he became very upset. He was so very sorry for God as God must have had a had headache as children were very loud. The same day Jurek asked me if God created man: “Yes”. If God created animals: “Yes”. Did God make the animals the way they are now? “Yes”. Why then did God make the cat a cruel and bad animal which was playing with a mouse and hurting it and the cat was not hungry; when the cat killed the mouse (after the mouse cried a lot) the cat would not even eat the mouse?

I had a toothache very often and, as there was no dentist at Eildon, I decided to have all my upper teeth out. The extractions were performed at the Bush Nursing Hospital, under full anaesthetic, as my teeth had long and twisted roots and crumbled easily. I did not feel well the next day – and even worse the day after. I felt giddy and my temperature was rising. Early one morning I thought that I was imagining things when I heard someone shouting “Fire”. The shout was repeated and there was banging on doors.



Mt Evelyn house before the fire

The house was on fire. Bama and I somehow managed to bring our things out, including the furniture. We were lucky that the windows reached right to the floor. The boys helped as much as they could. When I remembered that we still had things in the bathroom cupboard, it was too late to bring them out as the whole house was burning rapidly. It was an old timber house and

burned quickly. I never saw a house go up in flames so easily. Lorna and the others managed to save most of their belongings; the only casualty was a Labrador puppy, badly burned, as she would not come out from under the house.

There we were, about a dozen people, sitting on the front lawn – surrounded by our possessions. We were all stunned, looking at the cinders. This was the time when my feeling towards the Australian people became quite definite; now I started to love them. Within a very short time people from the neighbourhood came - helping us all, making cups of tea, trying to comfort us; even us, the newcomers. There was not only Elizabeth (who heard it on the news and who took time off from work to come to help) there were also complete strangers who brought food and clothing for us, who offered to take us in for the time being.

Us – the “Bloody New Australians” – us, with our bad English, with our odd habits, with our strange food (such as garlic sausage, black rye bread, etc.). Here were the Australian people; sympathetic, ready to help to the best of their ability. We had offers to spend the night, or many nights if need be. We – two strange women and two children. Some had room for only two of us, others thought that they could manage to have us all.

I will never forget the spontaneous goodwill and compassion the Australians showed us all, including the newcomers to their country. From that day on my love for them never wavered. They might be rude and abusive sometimes, but when they saw people in need, they went out of their way to bring help, irrespective of language, creed or otherwise. Some officials organized that the guest house be re-opened and we could stay there without paying, someone organized the wood for the stove, someone organized the food, someone took care of our possessions, someone brought us clothing. We all went there. I rang Zygmunt and told him about the fire. He promised to come by the first available bus.

Zygmunt came the same evening and I stopped struggling against the temperature and the pain in my gums. I was worried that our ice-chest had been burnt, but Zygmunt said not to worry – he could buy us a fridge – he was earning enough and he had accommodation for all of us. We would go the next morning. Mrs Carlton called the doctor and Elizabeth held me when the doctor examined me. The doctor told me that I had blood poisoning which was well advanced, that I could not go to Eildon, that I would need

injections and constant attention.

Zygmunt, the boys and Bama left and I (supported by Elizabeth) looked at an old truck on which were our belongings with the boys and Zygmunt sitting on top of the mattresses. In her gentle and quiet way, Elizabeth took care of me. I let myself go and was either unconscious or raving with temperature. It was many days, even weeks. Then came a day when I heard the girls whispering, felt the cup that Elizabeth was holding to my lips and it smelled lovely. It was soup and I was hungry. Only then did I realize that all the time I had been in Elizabeth's house. Zygmunt came a few days later and he looked healthy and happy. Elizabeth and I met him at the local pub. After hugging and kissing, he told me that I looked awful, like a chewed and spat-out lemon, but not to worry as everything was very good.

We had a house in Eildon, the old "Mess House" which had three rooms and a kitchen, although without a stove. However, there was one in a house next to us although that house was not completed as yet. I told Zygmunt about my illness and how Elizabeth had nursed me back to life, how she shared her food (which was barely enough for them) with me. Zygmunt was speechless as he had not realized that I was really ill. He just kissed Elizabeth's hand and told her that he was unable to express his gratitude, that he would never be able to repay her for her kindness and friendship. He could barely speak; he was too deeply moved. Next day we went to Eildon. I had no packing to do as everything I wore was clean. Elizabeth had washed it all the previous day and I stayed in bed until the things had dried. She even shared her underwear with me as mine was beyond repair.

Eildon

It was good to see the boys looking well. They told me about their new school which was not nice; it was just a barrack-like place built on sand. There were no trees, not even grass, just sand and dust. They thought that the teachers weren't bad. Bama looked well too but she said that she had pain near her liver.

The house which was allocated to us had three bedrooms with no passage, doors leading from room to room. It had no living room, a large kitchen but no stove - only a great gaping hole. The toilet was somewhere far away. Zygmunt did not show me where it was and that evening we went outside near some shrubs. The house next door to us was not finished and had no stove as yet, but Zygmunt brought some bricks and we could cook our meals outdoors. Zygmunt said that there should be no rain during the next few weeks and by then the stove next door would be installed.

Zygmunt worked shift work and quite often two shifts in a row which gave him 8 hours' free time of which one hour was used up in going and coming from work, half an hour for washing and scrubbing himself and his hands, one hour for eating and talking, which left him 5-1/2 hrs for sleep. It was bearable. The pay was really very good and the house rent was only one pound per week. The school was near enough for the children to come home for lunch. I should look for work, somewhere.

It seemed not bad and there was a lot of hope for improvement. There were only two places to look for work: State Rivers & Water Supply Commission and Utah Construction Ltd. They were building a new dam, the Eildon Weir. They were demolishing hills and building new ones, building intake towers, power stations. On the first morning at Eildon there happened a funny incident which had a follow-up later on. Zygmunt left for the morning shift, the children went to school and Bama went for a walk.

I took a toilet roll and went to look for a toilet. There was none in the unfinished house nor could I see one anywhere. It was broad daylight and I had to find one in a hurry. A woman came out from No 1 (we lived in No 5) and greeted me in a friendly way. I asked her where the WC was (I did not know the word "toilet"). She looked blankly at me. I said "Water Closet"

but she still looked blank and repeated “water closet”? Then she said that there sure was plenty of water but what did I mean by closet? I hitched up my skirt and pointed to the toilet roll in my hand. She just grinned and said: “Why didn’t you say so? Oh, you New Australians. Yours is far away; come to mine, you are welcome to use my shithouse any time.”



Maria and Zygmunt with Jurek & Roman at Eildon

She was a friendly woman with ten children and another soon to come. When I came home I entered in my exercise book a new word: Shithouse – “ustep”. I did not know what the word “shit” meant but the word “house” made sense to me as in Lithuania, an outside toilet was quite often referred to as “little house of retreat”. I was happy as already, the first morning, I had learned a new word. Zygmunt worked different shifts so if he had to sleep during the day, the children had to be kept quiet and had their lunch on the front porch.

Very soon I got used to constant noise and the dust and even (after a while) to the flies. Bama was very pleasant and nice but she was not feeling well and

often in pain. She had to have her gallstones removed and the operation was performed at St Vincent's Hospital.

There occurred another funny incident which showed how hard it was for us to say what we wanted to say, when we had to look up dictionaries to find the proper word. Bama, pointing to her stomach, asked the doctor: "Crayfish in here?" The doctor thought that Bama had eaten crayfish but Bama told him: "I not eat crayfish, crayfish eat me." The doctor looked puzzled and Bama explained: "My mother had crayfish and died. I have also crayfish? I will die?" The explanation was simple. In the dictionary there are often a few English words for the one Polish one.

In Polish, the word "rak" had two words – crayfish and cancer. We did not know the word "cancer" but knew the word "crayfish". Simple from our point of view but quite confusing for the doctor who tried to understand our problem. I had a similar problem a few years later when I could already speak better English. I went with Jurek to a doctor near Huntingdale and told him that Jurek had "almonds". The doctor thought that Jurek had eaten almonds and maybe some had got stuck, but I explained: "Not stuck almonds, almonds grow bigger and bigger and Jurek often had pains." The doctor stopped asking questions and had a look at Jurek's throat and beaming, said: "You mean tonsils." I checked up in the dictionary and there again were two words for the Polish "migdalek" – almond and tonsil (anat.). As I had never heard the word "tonsil", I chose "almond".

Our first year at Eildon was not exciting but I was never bored. Each morning after the children had left for school, I had to do some shopping as we still could not afford to buy a fridge, and an ice-chest was no good as no ice was delivered. When I came home, I had to prepare lunch for the boys and Bama, and later on do some housework. As I was unable to get employment, I started to make "faworki" – something like little cakes which I could sell at the general store but, after working for many hours a day, I barely cleared a few shillings a week as I had an initial outlay for packaging. When I had spare time, I went for long walks which I enjoyed as there was always something new to see.

Many days a week I had to do the washing as we did not have many spare clothes. It was a hard job. The sheets had to be washed and scrubbed in the bath and that made me tired as I had to bend all the time. All other things I washed in the kitchen sink and the water had to be heated in pots on a

wooden stove. Zygmunt or the boys helped to do the wringing as my hands were still bleeding after every wash. I taught the boys how to cook and they became quite good; each of them could cook seven different meals – one for each day of the week. When Zygmunt worked during the evenings, I wrote up my diary.

We acquired a stray dog – a beautiful red setter – a kitten and, later on, Jurek brought home a small rabbit which, within a few days, learned to behave nicely and which ate with us at the table, nibbling daintily from each plate. Darning had to be done every day as our clothes were very worn and we could not afford to buy new ones. We were paying off our hostel bill and were saving each week, at least something, towards our future home. I attended mothers' meetings at the school and found it very interesting as we had nothing like it in Lithuania.



Eildon 1953 - Maria and Zygmunt's house is second from the left.

Here occurred another funny incident. At the first meeting I sat next to a Mrs Speedie who seemed friendly and pleasant and rather a shy person. I did not know at that time that her husband was a high-ranking engineer employed by the SR & WSC on the Eildon project. After the meeting we left together and she asked me to go to her place for a cup of coffee. It was nice of her to invite the “bloody New Australian” and I accepted happily, especially as this was my first invitation in Eildon. When we entered her house I asked her: “Please, where is your shithouse?” She blinked her eyes, her face was pink,

but she showed me the place.

When I came back she told me that in Australia one did not use these words, one called it “toilet” or “WC” – or something else which I forget, but I told her: “Oh no, one does not call it WC., I know one does not call it that, but what did you say about toil...?”

“Toilet.”

“Are you sure it is “toilet” and not “shithouse?”

“Quite sure. Please use only the word ‘toilet’.”

When I came home I crossed out the word “shithouse” and entered, with a question mark beside it, “toilet”. From that day Ruth and I became friends; first as bridge partners and later on as real friends. It must have been the year 1952 and there were not many New Australians around. Ruth was an exception. She put up with our poor vocabulary, our wrongly used words.

She was one of the minority who was not stand-offish, nor did she try to show her superiority for having been born here. Elizabeth and the girls came a few times to visit us which was such a pleasure for me as I missed Elizabeth very much. On Helen’s birthday, they came and we all celebrated it together. Estelle also came to visit us, so did Marusia Volka, Talunia and Mietek. During all this time Bama was depressed, very quiet and kind and no bother to anyone. One pay day when Zygmunt came home, he told me that he had seen on the blackboard near the Pay Office, an advertisement by Utah Construction, stating that they required a typist for their typing pool. He advised me to apply.

I applied, and was accepted – at a fantastic salary; I think it was 12 pounds weekly, not including overtime. I was beside myself. All that money! I was accepted as a “temporary” for the summer season only when most of the married women with children wanted their holidays. Zygmunt was due for his annual leave, and he certainly needed it. He looked very tired although he never once complained. I knew only that he did not like the work in the field as often he was welding whilst being suspended by a crane lift, and he never felt comfortable being high up.

After many nights of arguments I got my way and Zygmunt agreed to have a holiday and to go to Sydney to visit Talunia and Mietek. He went by coach, as it was cheaper, and it would not matter that he had to sit up all night as he was able to sleep anywhere.

My work at Utah consisted mainly of typing figures and I liked it as numbers were the same anywhere and always held some kind of fascination for me. The work had to be perfect – 100% accurate – and rubbing out was considered poor work. I had a huge typewriter with a supporting leg for the carriage as the sheets of paper were very big and all covered with figures, columns and columns of them. I (poor clot) had to use the eraser a few times on each page.

When Zygmunt came back from Sydney, happy and relaxed, I told him that I would quit as I did not want to wait until I was sacked.



Maria in Eildon

After many heated arguments, he persuaded me to wait until I would be sacked as each week meant those extra pounds and shillings.

I agreed to stay and stayed for the next three years until Utah

Construction completed their job. I was proud to work for Utah. We were building “The Dam”, a weir which would hold more water than all of Sydney Harbour. Victoria would have water where it would be needed and I, a typist in the typing pool, was also helping to build the dam. I

loved it all. I was the only New Australian in the office. Everyone was nice to me; the girls in the typing pool were very pleasant and we became friends, especially Marie who was nicknamed “Feather” and her husband, Nick, and also Pat J. Later on Connie came to our typing pool. I liked her from the

first day. She must have been about 21, a lot younger than I, but somehow it did not matter. She loved music, she loved books. She was shy and nervous as she had recently come from Fiji where there had been an earthquake and tidal wave.

It must have been horrible to feel that the ground you stood on was not safe. It was something that I simply could not imagine as the only solid and stable thing, to me, was the ground that I walked on.

All of the girls often had a good laugh when I used the wrong word or mispronounced it, but they were never rude; their laughter was constructive criticism and I liked it. As an example, one day I rang Dr Hurley in Melbourne and asked to speak to Dr Hurley but his secretary told me:

“I don’t think he is available.”

“It is urgent, I would like to speak to Dr Hurley.”

“I don’t think he is in.”

“I will wait.”

“Madam, I don’t think Dr Hurley will be available today.”

“Please don’t think, just go and have a look if Dr Hurley is in or not!”

“But I told you madam, Dr Hurley is not available.”

I banged the phone down and started to complain that the secretary was thinking that the doctor was not available but would not even move her behind to go and have a look to see if he was in or not.

The girls could not stop laughing and it took a while until they were able to explain the meaning of “I don’t think...” - My God, English sure is an odd language; never would I be able to understand it. Should somebody say “I don’t think” it would not mean that they do not think, it meant that they knew without thinking. Why didn’t they say so? Another burst of laughter from the girls.

Marie and Nick taught Zyg a lesson too, quite unintentionally. One evening when we finished work at 10:00 pm, Zyg was free and came to pick me up. On our way home, Marie asked Nick if he had cleaned the entire house properly. He replied that he had; only the kitchen floor needed a bit more polishing. He had also ironed everything and he had scrubbed the back porch. Zyg listened without saying a word. When we came home I started, as usual, to wash up the dishes and I also wanted to wash out a few things. Zygmunt told me: “Leave it. I will do it tomorrow as I will work only 10 hours and not 16. I can do it. Nick was doing it, I can do it too.” Zygmunt

went even further. After thinking for a while, he said that the washing was too much for me and that I should send the laundry out.

We were earning enough now and could afford it. There were a few New Australian women who did it and, from now on I should send my laundry out. I agreed happily. I hated the washing and especially the sheets which had to be washed in the bath. I did not like the wringing or the pegging out on the sagging rope either. Already the next day I asked a Russian woman to do it for me. I was really happy; no more bleeding hands, no backache. I felt like a queen. Zygmunt's and my education into the Australian way of life started in Eildon.

Although there was a majority of New Australians, there were also many Australians, Canadians and Americans. It was here that Zygmunt became Zyg for short which made it a lot easier and I became Maria instead of Marushka. Here began my "Liberation" movement, my emancipation. In Eastern Europe, the wife was always treated very courteously, especially in public; in literature she was put on a pedestal as the mother of the future citizens, as the one who kept the hearth of house, etc. etc., but in all classes of society she had a greater burden to carry than that of the man, especially in the country and amongst the factory and labouring class.

The farmer and his wife worked shoulder to shoulder all day in the field but, and this was a very big BUT, she had to get up earlier and milk the cows, feed the pigs, prepare the breakfast and get the children organized. Coming back from the work in the fields, he would drop onto his hay mattress while she would rush to milk the cows again, feed the animals, start cooking, sweep the floors, prepare the evening meal and, when everything was ready, she would call her man to come for the meal. He always got the best bits and the biggest portions. Admittedly, the man did the harder physical work such as chopping down trees, carrying heavy bags, but this extra work was not done every day – only occasionally – whilst she had to do her work every day, all her life. I grew up in this kind of atmosphere; it was the normal way of life.

Before the war, I did only what I wanted to do and, during the war we all had to do a lot more than we wanted to. That was normal during abnormal times. However, a man was a man – a lot more valuable than a woman. On him depended the future independence of our country. He was the one who wanted to kill or to be killed, he was the provider – either through the game in the forests and fields or through the pay envelope from the office. Zyg and

I grew up in this kind of atmosphere.

Although neither of us could cook when we got married, I learned to cook when there was no cook. Never would it have entered either Zyg's or my head that Zyg should start to learn cooking. Until the war I never did any washing or ironing but when, all of a sudden, there was no laundry woman or maid, it was I who had to learn how to do it. We were both brought up under the assumption that all the work connected with house, garden and children was entirely the wife's responsibility. We, the females, could go out and earn the money but he, the man, could not share the housework. One night when we were speaking about the Australian way of life, Zyg told me that as from now he would share with me the work involved in doing household chores.

"Zyg, you can't. You very often work 16 hours!"

"You work 10 and often 12 and even sometimes 14 hours."

"But I am sitting and you are standing and your work is hard."

"I am strong, I can do it."

"You don't know a thing about the work around the house. You could not even sweep the floor properly."

"I can learn. You could and so could I!"

I appreciated his goodwill but thought it was not "proper" for a man to do a "woman's job". His arguments sounded right but felt wrong. When the woman who did my laundry left Eildon, Zyg bought me a washing machine with a hand wringer. Both boys liked to use the wringer and all three "men" did the pegging out.

I felt very happy about it as it left me more time to do the mending and darning. Bama started to get difficult and unpleasant but not too bad as yet. I remember with pleasure the time we lived in Eildon. Although we were tired working long hours, we also had fun. During summer, if Zyg was available during lunch time, we all went swimming, including the boys. In the evening we often listened to records, either at our place or at the hostel. Connie, Merton and others used to exchange records; Merton would pretend to be the conductor, someone else would hum and so on. Afterwards there were heated debates about the music, the composer, conductor, etc. Sometimes we played bridge, mostly with Ruth and Milton. On our fortnightly weekends off, we sometimes went to Melbourne, leaving the boys with Bama, and I asked Marie to keep an eye on them. In Melbourne we did window shopping and occasionally went to concerts or shows. Once we had a mannequin parade in Eildon showing beautiful, exclusive gowns. Olga, a really glamorous girl, the wife of one of the engineers, even took part in the parade.

It was all fun.

Slowly we began to get used to Australian food but it took a long time. Most of all we missed our bread and unsalted butter. I would wash the butter in many waters before we were able to eat it. In the years 1951-1953 the food that we liked was available in Footscray only. Things like kabana, salami, eels, buckwheat, fresh ham (not pressed), herrings, lax schinken, kaiserfleisch, yoghurt, sour cream, buttermilk, etc. Even fruit and vegetables – although we had a greater variety in Australia than we did in Poland – but still there were no radishes, beetroots with leaves attached, no dill for our cucumbers. It took years until we got used to and liked Australian food. Zyg and I were very lucky to have met some people at Eildon who became our friends.

There was Connie (who, even after 25 years, was still our friend) and Ian (whom she married) became our friend too. There were Ruth and Milton, Marie and Nick and, later on, Mary and John, and there were Woodie and Peter. Peter was a lot younger than I but we had two things in common; we loved talking about philosophy and we loved to listen to classical music. We would sit on the floor in the living room and listen to music, and later argue about life in general, reincarnation, modern philosophers. We talked until Zyg came back from his afternoon shift and sometimes through most of the night.

At Eildon I had access to a piano for a few hours each day. I tried for a few weeks to play but felt frustrated as the broken finger would not do as told and even all the other fingers were stiff. I was unable to play the way I could years before and decided never to play again. Playing the piano was not a hobby with me; I had been trained to become a professional and, because I was unable to play well, I decided to listen to good records and not to my bad playing.

The children were doing quite well at school, especially Jurek. Roman was lagging behind with reading. Both boys liked to read comics although Roman asked me to read them to him. My friends advised me to forbid the children from reading this trash, but I disagreed. I argued that the main thing would be to teach the child to read and then let the child read for fun – anything, any rubbish, as long as he got pleasure from reading. Only later on one could try to interest the child in reading something considered “suitable or educational”. In a short while Roman became good at reading (comics

mainly) but later on both boys read just for fun – books about Biggles, “Black Beauty”, etc.

My education at Eildon was more or less completed when I learned the game called “Two-up”. Only men were allowed to play but, because I knew most of them, I was allowed to watch – although it was an illegal game. It was fascinating to watch the men who, quite often, would lose all they had earned during 160 hours of hard work. Those who won would lose it again very soon, and I was unable to find out who it was who really had won.

Bama became more difficult and more unreasonable. Marie used to tell me that Bama was mad, but I took it simply as a manner of speech, but within a short time she became worse. She accused me of poisoning her as the porridge which I had cooked tasted bitter. She even refused to take sugar from the sugar bowl, etc. etc.

Once, after Bama tried to kill me (and Roman saved my life) I went to the local doctor for advice and was told to be careful, never to sit with my back to a door, and always have easy access to a door or window. My nerves started to play up and I could not pretend the way I had done when we lived in Bern. I tried, but I could not. I thought that it was because I was feeling old. I was already 38/39 and I was constantly tired as, in addition to all the housework (including darning and mending) I worked for 12 days straight, between 10 and 14 hours each day. Zyg and the boys saw that the relationship was not good between Bama and me.

Once Zyg came in when Bama (with a whip in her hand) was hitting me. The same day Zyg went with Bama to the local doctor and was advised to go with her to Melbourne to some specialists, one of whom was Dr Kiel who (I think) could speak Polish. Zygmunt was told that Bama would have to live in an institution and not with the family as it might be dangerous and definitely bad for the boys.

When Zygmunt and Bama came back from Melbourne they walked for hours along the creek, Zyg trying to convince Bama that she had to go to a hospital where she would be looked after. It was unbearably hard for Zygmunt and there was nothing I could do to help him. It was his decision to make. Should he sacrifice one for the good of the others? It was very hard for him as he loved his mother but he had made up his mind – he would listen to the advice of the doctors. He convinced her; she went willingly with Zyg to

Melbourne and he left her at the mental hospital in Larundel. For months he would not talk about Bama. Every fortnight off he would go to Larundel to visit Bama and he would come home looking old, tired, and would not speak. It was like living in a nightmare. I was unable to help him; I did not know how to explain to the boys that Bama had to go away; I felt a failure, inadequate, because I was unable to cope with Bama, Zygmunt's mother.

It was a long time before we could speak about Bama. We did not blame anyone but we both tried to think about small things which would make Bama a bit happier in hospital. We did not speak about the one topic which was uppermost in our minds – was Bama's illness hereditary or not? We were both too frightened to put this into words.

One day when I came home I found a few men (Zyg's mates) undressing him, the doctor supervising and Zyg moaning. The doctor explained that the X-rays did not show any broken bones, that Zyg had injured his spine and should stay in bed for a few weeks without any movement whatsoever and later on try, slowly, to take a few steps at a time. He would call to see Zyg a few times a week. After a few weeks (when Zyg was able to sit up) we played chess, and Jurek would watch and ask questions.

In no time Jurek mastered the moves and before Zyg returned to work, Jurek could play chess – and later on became a lot better than us. During Zyg's illness when I had the days off, I asked my friends to look after Zyg and, with Roman and Jurek, I went to see Bama in Bundoora. She looked well although she complained about the shock treatments and was happy to see Jurek. She was rational most of the time – odd only occasionally. After visiting Bama, I went to see the doctor in charge and asked the question which bothered us: whether Bama's mental illness was hereditary or not, explaining that I was worried thinking about our sons. He was quite certain that it was not hereditary. To reassure me he explained the causes which brought her to a mental home. Firstly, she had had a very abnormal sex life as, from the moment she knew that she was pregnant, she would have no sex, calling it dirty and degrading.

Her attitude persisted after Zygmunt was born. Secondly, her menopause came at a critical time – her husband died, the war was in progress, her only child was taken away by a strange woman and even got married; she felt that she had lost her son. The first wrinkles and the first grey hairs drove her to despair; she could not cope with life. She had always been admired for her

good looks, for her feminine charm, her lovely complexion, and she suffered – really suffered – when she realized that she was getting old, or rather older. The doctor was quite certain that I should stop worrying about my sons. But what would happen if my sons had daughters? The doctor was again quite certain that there was no cause for worry – it was not hereditary; there might have been a weakness but the main cause was the holocaust of war. He told me that he was one hundred per cent certain that I had no cause to worry, either about my sons or my future grandchildren.

One autumn (was it 1953?) there came a depression. Many people were dismissed and most of the work suspended. We were worried that Zyg might be retrenched. We still did not have enough money for a house because in the meantime we had bought a block of land in Clayton. I was still working but a female was not entitled to a house and if Zyg was retrenched, we would have to move out. I liked my work as now I was sometimes even allowed to



Zyg working as a welder about 1953
in Eildon

help in the pay office and I could ask questions when typing and about different aspects of accounts. I would have been sorry to lose the job as, in addition to liking the work, I was earning good money with all the overtime.

We were lucky and were able to stay on as Zyg was given a job as a greaser in the maintenance shop – mainly to grease the huge earthmoving equipment, the Euclids. His pay was to be a lot less, and the shifts were not good, as the Euclids would be working during the day, but Zyg happily accepted so that we could stay in the house where we had cheap rent (and my earnings were really good). From the first day Zyg did not like his new work. His mates were unpleasant chaps and they also did not like Zyg. One was a

pimp and the others were of the criminal class – they called Zyg a prude

Catholic. What a joke! Zyg a prude and a Catholic. He also did not like the constant dirty work and, on returning home, he would scrub his hands for at least half an hour.

During one night there happened a tragic accident. His mate, a Ukrainian, was killed – squashed to death by a Euclid. The hydraulic pin did not work properly and the man was killed whilst greasing a DKD. Zyg saw the last moments but was unable to help. A human life expired, a man was dead.

Next spring, once again Utah was working full time. Zyg again became a welder, assigned to the intake tower. He did not like this job as he was always afraid of heights which made him dizzy. Heights were always a problem with Zyg and – to a lesser extent – with Roman, but Jurek and I did not mind heights at all. We even felt good being high up; the higher the better. Zyg (when working high up) felt very uncomfortable but tried to stick it out because the money was very good as, in addition to the normal pay, there was also “height money”, “danger money”, “dirt money”, etc., but he became nervous and hated himself for it although he was unable to control his feelings.

That summer both Jurek and Roman got their first jobs. Mr Moore engaged them to deliver newspapers to homes. Both were happy in the beginning but, one day when it was raining, Roman told me that he was quitting the work. When I asked him why he told me:

“It is raining and I don’t like the rain.”

“But Roman, you promised Mr Moore that you would give a week’s notice before quitting.”

“I don’t care; I have enough marbles and comics. I do not want to go today.” Persuasion, arguments about a promise given did not help – he still refused to go. Luckily it was a day when I had two hours off for tea time. I offered to go with Roman and to help him deliver the newspapers. We both put on our macs and went.

Roman was generous and let me go home after only a couple of blocks. He got his pushbike and continued his round. I did not mind him quitting but only after giving a week’s notice. I thought that it was time he learned responsibilities. Because the next day it stopped raining, Roman did not quit. That summer Jurek got his first real work; it was from the Post Office. He was hired to deliver parcels. There were a lot of parcels before Xmas and he sublet part of his work to Roman and paid him out of his earnings.

It was not a good summer for Jurek as one of his big toes started to fester and, although I applied different things, still it would not heal, becoming worse, and he was in pain. During my lunch time he came to the office and I changed his bandages and one day, there on his big toe, were living maggots, crawling along, eating him alive! I was scared but the doctor told me that it was nothing serious. It would take a few days only to clean up and that those maggots, those little white wriggling things, were really good as they ate only the dead and bad flesh, so really were protecting Jurek. During these days Roman earned a lot of money as Jurek gave him more work.

It was autumn when Jurek went into business – collecting bottles which he sold. Zyg made him a small cart and, as the men were drinking heavily, Jurek's business prospered. He even hired sub-contractors and paid them half of what he would get himself. Roman was one of the sub-contractors. In the beginning, the money went for marbles and comics, later for matchbox cards and then for air pistols and towards chemicals for home explosives.



Jurek (George) with snake

The children became a handful, Jurek being worse than Roman. They were running wild and exploring – except during school and meal times. To have more time for them I pre-cooked our evening meal in the morning and, during lunchtime, having chips and apples, we went swimming. Jurek had heard at school that the venom from snakes was required by doctors for serums. He decided to go and catch snakes.

I was always afraid of snakes and all crawling things but Jurek showed us how to make a fork from a suitable branch, how to hold the snake down, etc., and Zyg advised me to let him try. We bought them rubber boots and they went into the bush – snake hunting – usually in a group with other boys. One day when I was painting the bed that Zyg had made for us, Jurek came home with a snake in

his hand and the snake was as long as Jurek. I thought it was a dead one and gave it a push when the tail started to move in all directions, the mouth opened and the snake even hissed. I had trouble controlling myself and not have a fit.

“Jurek, are you holding strongly? Can you manage? How can I help you?”

“Mother, calm down, can’t you see that I am not likely to let it go?”

“What will we do now? How can one kill such a big one?”

“Mother! We are not going to kill such a big snake. We will take it to the doctor for his serum, of course.”

Paint and brush went to the floor and stayed there while we went to the doctor. He was out and his wife just gave one look at the snake and told us to go away quickly. In our woodshed we found a large tin where Jurek insisted I put a saucer of milk. I did not argue as Jurek looked very tired. After some trouble we managed to put the snake in the tin and quickly locked the door.

After the snakes, came the time which I referred to as “The Bangs” – lasting for more than a year. Jurek proved to us that he knew what he was doing and we let him buy crystals and chemicals. Jurek promised to be careful, especially when other children were around. The kids started to call him “Professor”. I trusted Jurek to keep his promises for he was good at it, or at least he told me beforehand when he was going to break his promise. I realized that all these experiments were good from the educational point of view, but they were certainly a strain on my nerves. I never knew where the next bang might come from. The boys’ room was booby-trapped but the bangs also happened everywhere – in the bathroom, the outside toilet, near doors. At night, when putting down a book on the bedside table, there might be a loud “bang”. When serving soup, one never knew if one would step on another bang or not, and down went the soup on the kitchen floor. I learned to avoid them by just looking at the two innocent faces covered with looks of anticipation, full of expectation. Oh, the little monsters! After a while they calmed down a bit but they became more sensible only after a really “big bang”. With the help of the air gun and chemicals (and surrounded by many other kids), Jurek managed not only to break the back wall of the woodshed but also to damage the neighbour’s fence. He was very apologetic, explaining that it was not his fault, but now he promised – really promised – to stick to smaller bangs.

Later on came the period when Jurek wanted to prove to himself and to us that he was a man, a strong man, self-sufficient and independent. He went swimming much too far out, (over 1 km) and he went for long bushwalks.

Now he wanted to go alone, without his mates, for a few days into the wilderness. He explained that, with the use of his compass, he could go anywhere, that he would be able to catch food, that he was not afraid to be alone at night. He wanted to go into the hills where there were no roads. The hill, although only 6-7 km away, was not attended for foresters. He wanted to leave on Friday evening after school and come back on Sunday. I was afraid to let him go as I was thinking that he might sprain his ankle – even in the first hours; that he might be bitten by a poisonous snake or spider and die in agony; although he might also come back unharmed. Zyg wanted to let him go but told me that he would abide by my decision. How to know where the priorities were; whether risk should be permitted to satisfy this urge of Jurek's?

I let Jurek go, equipped with a few sandwiches, raw potatoes, a groundsheet, a pocket- knife, some crystals to counteract snakebite, matches, flint and the best torch available in the general store. I thought that he might be able to send an SOS at night with this torch. Every night I stayed on our porch, watching the hill. Those few days were not easy but they were worthwhile when I saw Jurek coming back home on Sunday with torn clothing, scratched skin and so very happy and so proud of himself. I thought that I had done the right thing when I let him go but – how would I have felt if the ending had been different?

In 1955 we thought that we had enough money to start building our own house. We contacted a builder in Melbourne and started discussing details of our home. We wanted the following: one bedroom for us, one for the boys, one for Bama so that she could come and stay with us when she was feeling well, and one spare bedroom for later on as I hoped to bring my parents out as their life was getting harder each year. I wanted a small kitchen, a bathroom with a shower, a separate toilet if possible, and a dining/living room. No floor coverings, no curtains, no extras, as those could wait.

We made appointments with master builders and were ready to be away from home during the next few weekends off. I pre-cooked the food and Jurek had to warm it up. Marie and Pat promised to look after them. Peter was a great help too – he liked taking the boys and the dog for long walks. The dog (a mongrel) would follow Roman anywhere and during school hours would wait outside the school doors for playtime. The dog shared Roman's bed with a tiny fluffy white kitten (was beautiful but tiny) and shared Roman's pillow.



Maria, Jurek (George) & Roman at Eildon

Roman very much liked these walks with Peter and Peter would talk to them, listen and answer questions. The builders looked at our block, at Zyg's plans, and promised to draw up specification sheets and to let us know the exact amount required for a deposit. A loan

had been arranged for us from the building society where I had worked before and where Elizabeth was now working – the 16th Building Society of YWCA.

The builder's estimate was just barely acceptable as it would leave us without any spare money, but we could manage and that was all that really mattered. The working hours at Utah became unbearable as Utah was pushing hard to finish the work in the required time. It was normal for us in the typing pool to work until 11:00 pm but we all felt very tired. Zyg was now constantly on 16-hour shifts; he did not talk much and stopped doing our furniture, the record concerts became infrequent, the bridge game was now only once a month. We were all very tired. I was offered a job with Utah Construction at their Melbourne Office but declined as we would have found it hard to pay rent for a house in Melbourne, the children would have had to change schools for a short period again, and I did not want anymore overtime – I wanted a job from 9 till 5 – no more.

I was nearly 40 and tired from all the overtime as well as having the family to look after. Utah left and I got a job with the new firm Masonite, and Zyg became a night-watchman with SR & WSC. He liked his work; he liked feeding the hungry, half-wild abandoned cats – and he could use the

machinery during his night shift.

I worked from 8 till 5 but I did not like my work; it was so utterly boring. Connie had left to go overseas, Marie and Nick left and so did most of the others. Luckily we became friendly with Mary and John whom we both liked very much.

The builder was sending amendments to his estimate, the price was going up and up and, after a while, we realized that it was impossible for us to build the house in Melbourne whilst living at Eildon. Every small detail took weeks to straighten out. Jurek was doing well at school and received a scholarship or (I think) a free place. Roman began to change but was still nice and well-mannered; I could not pin down what made me think that he had become different. We earned a lot less and were unable to save money. Perhaps we also spent too much as we bought a few things for the house from people who were leaving, such as extra chairs, a table, etc. One weekend we went to Melbourne and Zyg bought me (in Coles' basement) three (!!!) new summer frocks as I was unable to decide which one I preferred. He also bought me three pairs of underpants and two brassieres. I was simply overwhelmed. I don't think that anyone who has received the proverbial mink coat and diamonds could have felt as rich as I did that day. We also bought a sewing machine, an Elna, exactly the same as the one I had left in Switzerland, so now I could do all my repairs very quickly; no comparison with the time it took before when I had to do them by hand. Even the boys helped me with the darning and thought it great fun.

We had to decide whether we would settle down in Eildon (and buy one of the houses which were a lot cheaper than those in Melbourne) or move out. We decided to move out. As we were unable to build our house on our building block in Melbourne, we had to buy a house somewhere in Melbourne, somewhere amongst the sea of houses that we had seen nearly six years earlier when we had first arrived in Australia. I was due for my annual leave but Zyg could not take time off. He was told quite plainly that if he wanted time off he could go, and stay off, and not bother to come back. Zyg told me that I would have to go to Melbourne to buy a house. I was aghast. How could I buy a house? I didn't know anything about houses. I could not do it; I could not take on this responsibility – never.

“Marushka, don't be silly. I will tell you what to look for and you will do very well, just as you did in the past. Trust me, don't worry; you can ring me

every night and we can discuss things. You just go and look and find something for us that we can afford, somewhere where there are factories (but not too close) maybe somewhere between Melbourne and Dandenong as then we would have a chance in two places to look for work. You know better than I do what we can afford. You go, and when you think that you have found something suitable, I will come and have a look.”

“Zyg, but I don’t know what to look for nor do I know how to start looking for it.”

“Marushka, kochana, you know more than I do about houses. You have been looking at plans, at advertisements every day for the last two years. You were the one who always spoke about the need for a house. Now go and get it!”

“But

“No buts. You can stay with Ruth, she has told you so many times. She has a car, she likes you, she will help. Go – and when in trouble just give me a ring at night. Do not worry, just go and find a house for us. You know what we can afford as a deposit, you know what we would both like, but think rather about the essentials. Think about transport, about possibilities for work; I still think somewhere between Melbourne and Dandenong.

Neither of us liked Footscray or Sunshine; and Toorak, Camberwell, Caulfield, we could not afford. Ask your previous boss at the Co-op. for advice, ask Elizabeth, ask Ruth. Ask and keep asking and listen and think (as you usually do) and if you can’t make up your mind, ring me and I can come to Melbourne for a day and will still be able to be back on time for my night shift.”

I went. I felt frightened and lost. How could I (a female) decide which house we should live in, but Zygmunt trusted me in this so very important matter and that meant that he thought I could do it. I was rather proud but also afraid of letting Zyg down should I not choose wisely. If we bought a house, we would be unable to buy a car – something that Zyg wanted very much. I had to keep in mind: school – walking distance; public transport (preferably train) also within walking distance; possibilities for work had to be in two directions. I also knew that I could not spend all the money we had on a deposit as we would need money for shifting and for small extras, at least one hundred pounds. We also needed the house as soon as possible so that the boys would not lose time at school in the new year. Elizabeth and Ruth were better than good. They helped all they could.

Each evening I made a list of houses to be inspected and I contacted as many agents as I thought I could cope with. Elizabeth was working and had no car but Ruth drove me all over Melbourne, and in the evening I would ring either Elizabeth or Zyg and report what I had seen. I saw very many houses and fell in love with a modern house in Beaumaris, but there was no public transport within walking distance. Most of the houses for sale require a larger deposit than that which we could afford and some, although cheaper, needed a lot of cash for repairs. Somehow none of the houses seemed quite right; there was something “this” or something “that”.

One morning an agent rang me and said that he had received for listing the previous night a house that he thought might suit me. It was in Huntingdale; a suburb I had never heard of before. Ruth and I found it on the map – it was between Melbourne and Dandenong. We went there immediately. I did not like the suburb, the street was not made, there was no footpath, the front yard was empty, the toilet was in the backyard, it had only two bedrooms, hardly any built-ins in the kitchen and the colour scheme was most unpleasant – grass green and some red and orange. However, the house appeared to be sound, only a few years old, and one could always repaint it. The price was right – three thousand pounds – and it was the best I had seen during those weeks.

I was ready to buy it, provided Zyg approved, and I asked the agent to wait until the following day when Zyg would come over. When Zyg arrived next day, it took him no more than half an hour to agree, so we signed the documents, subject to approval of a loan by the Co-op. We were so excited going back to Eildon; we were holding hands and talking non-stop. We told the boys that we had bought a small house (much smaller than the one in which we lived in Eildon) but it would be all ours, and they began to get excited too.

After a few weeks a letter arrived from the Co-op. The valuation was less than we had expected and we could not buy the house; we were four hundred pounds short. I cried as everything now seemed so hopeless. It would take ages to save the extra amount. Ruth and Milton (who saw how depressed we were) offered to lend us four hundred pounds and, thanks to them, we could buy the house after all. We moved into our house on Roman’s 13th birthday – 27th March, 1956, the year of the Olympic Games in Melbourne.

Huntingdale

It did not take us long to unpack but for days we were arranging and re-arranging the furniture. Every time I came home I patted the house. I thought everything was simply fantastic; even Zyg's home-made couch (made from the ceiling of an old house in Eildon) which had on it an old mattress covered with an old bedspread looked beautiful to me. I loved it all.



Maria's and Zygmunt's house at 8 Greville St, Huntingdale in 1956

It was our home; the backyard was ours, the sun in the backyard was ours too and so was the sky and everything was perfect. Later on when we would have some spare money, a bit of paint would make it even better.

Once again I was touched by the attitude of the Australians. When we arrived, our stove was not yet connected, and one neighbour (a Mrs Hopkins) brought us hot water and some cakes, and another neighbour brought us a stew – and we all felt so happy in our OWN home. ³Within a few days the children were enrolled at school.

I liked Jurek's school but did not like the headmaster of Roman's school who was of German origin although he could speak no German and who made it quite plain that we (being Poles) were inferior to the Germanic race. Zyg and I were working; Zyg as a welder and I in an office, but I did not like my work which was very boring and where only men were allowed to smoke, so I spent a lot of time in the toilet having my smoke.

Zyg's health was not good. He began to show the old thyroid symptoms and Dr Hurley told us that an operation would definitely be needed, the sooner the better, as Zyg might otherwise go downhill rapidly. He consulted a Mr Syme and Zyg would be operated on at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. We both had implicit trust in Mr Hurley who was not only a good doctor but also a compassionate human being. He seemed rough but was extremely kind and understanding. Just to quote one conversation:

"Mr Hurley, has the operation to be? I mean – soon?"

"Yes, next week."

"But ... but we must still owe you a lot of money and we don't have enough - either for the operation or for Mr Syme."

"You don't owe me any money."

"But I do. I know what you charge – Bill and Peg told me."

Dr Hurley explained that he charged others more than he would us as the others could pay more and it covered the payments of those who could not pay (having nothing with which to pay). He told me that we could all come anytime and he was certain that we would be able to pay his fees as it would be less than he charged others. He liked to have patients who really needed help and not just those who wanted to talk and complain. He arranged with

³Editor's Note: When we moved to Huntingdale Zyg decided to change our surname from Kruszewski to Skarbek as Australians had difficulties in spelling Kruszewski. Skarbek was associated with Zyg's aristocratic family dating back to about 1700.

Mr Syme that the operation would not cost much if Zyg would agree to be examined by students who had to learn on someone. Zygmunt agreed and the operation would be the next Thursday.

That Thursday was a long day. I was not allowed to go with Zyg but had to wait for visiting hours and, anyway, it was pay day and the pay had to be done. I remember looking at the big army revolver on my desk and I thought that should robbers come, I would not defend the pay as it was insured, and I had to go to the hospital. The telephone was not much help as I was told that he was not yet in the theatre or that he was still in the theatre. At last when I came to see Zyg he looked very pink and not white as I had expected. He was in a small room next to the sister in charge and in another room was a man – also recovering from the same operation. Zyg was not conscious but seemed thirsty and the sister wetted his lips; then time was up and I had to go home. Zyg recovered but the patient in the next room to Zyg died the next day.

I saw his wife when she came to visit her husband and was told that her husband had “passed away”. Oh, my God. When I was certain that Zyg would survive, the boys and I started to repaint the grass-green woodwork which we changed into a pink to match the remaining colours. We didn’t think that it looked too bad, but when Zyg came home, his first comment was that the colours were very wrong, and his second remark was that the house was very small. I felt disappointed but repainted the woodwork with white paint as I still had a lot of white left. Before Zygmunt was able to start thinking about work, we were once again flat broke.

I went to an agent and asked him to sell our block in Stockdale Avenue as soon as possible – even if the money should be less than what we had paid – as we needed cash desperately. We were behind with the payments to the Co-op., to Milton, to “Easy terms” at Myers. The block was sold the next day and we even made a few pounds profit. After a few weeks, Zyg started to work again as a welder. His pay was good but he looked tired and I thought he was somehow different.

I waited a few weeks but he still remained different and it was not only his eye which was drooping and which gave him double-vision, he was a different person. He was slower; without his previous drive, without jokes, and a lot slower with his replies. After a few months when he was still not my darling Zyg, I became so worried that I rang Dr Hurley for an

appointment. He greeted me in a friendly way and asked what my trouble was.

“Zygmunt has changed although he is strong and healthy, but he is different.”

“What do you mean – different?”

“I can’t explain. I only know that he is different!” – and by then I was almost crying. The doctor told me to calm down and to explain what I thought was wrong.

“Zygmunt is wrong, he is a different man. When we had an argument before his operation, I barely had time to finish a sentence when he would reply. He also laughed and joked more, he played with the children a lot more. Now I think I can hear his brain churning – the brain works but it is sluggish, slow. I don’t know how to explain. I know, I really know that he became different and he is even getting fat.”

The doctor asked me what I knew about the thyroid. I said that I knew only that it is a gland which can be over or under-active, and nothing more. Dr Hurley explained that a surgeon who had to operate can never be one hundred percent certain how much would have to be removed. Zyg’s gland had been neglected for a very long time and had grown out of all proportion. Mr Syme did a marvellous job and Zyg would be able to live a normal life, his double-vision would probably stay for always, but Zyg would be able to live normally. That he was not as spontaneous, that he now had less drive, should not matter as long as he lives and is not a moron. He had the same reactions but slower. Zyg would have gotten slower with age in a few more years’ time – even without the thyroid. Dr Hurley told me to stop complaining as my man and the father of the children had only slowed down and I should be happy that he was alive, could think reasonably, could give advice and could work.

Dr Hurley advised very strongly that Zyg should stop doing hard manual work and should try to obtain work where he could use his brain and that by doing light work or office work, Zyg would be able to work for many years to come. He should stop doing overtime, do no hard work at all and avoid getting tired. I should look after my man and we would both be all right.

“Dr Hurley, but the children?”

He gave me an odd smile and told me that the children would never notice any difference as they had a decent father and probably now they would be too busy with their own problems and would never even notice any

difference.

He gave me what he called his “private advice” – never speak about the different Zyg with the children; try to forget it; don’t think about it. Think that your man is alive and basically is the same man, only slower. Stop complaining, be sensible. A few months later when I became adjusted to the new Zyg, I realized that Dr Hurley had never sent me a bill for the last visit. I rang him but he told me to forget it as he was not going to charge me for giving his private opinion and advice. That was Dr Hurley and I still think that he was one in a million.

We became adjusted; the boys never noticed any difference, and we managed. Zyg had a choice of two jobs – one with the MMBW as a clerk – the other as a draftsman with SR & WSC. Zyg chose the second, maybe because Milton was working there too. We thought it was funny that Zyg qualified for the draftsman’s job. After matriculation (when he ran away from home because he did not want to study law and work for his father) he went to Warsaw to study architecture. By chance he had the necessary papers from the Warsaw University to prove that he had completed the first year of architecture. That he had his law degree did not matter. Now, because of this one year of architecture, he was able to earn money working in pleasant surroundings with nice people.

I worked too but changed my jobs frequently as I got bored easily. Once I got a job as a paymaster for over one hundred people (what a cheek on my part). The day I was due to start work, I had a high temperature and a bad head cold so rang the boss asking to start a few days later but, as it was pay day (and the boss did not know how to do the pay) I had to start work. At the end of the day my head was very sore and so was my earache; next day it was even worse and I went to the doctor who told me that I had permanently lost part of my hearing due to exposure to the piercing noise of cutting metal. I liked this work but the firm was in financial difficulties and unable to pay our wages, so I had to look for a new job. I liked the work with Robert Bosch but also not for long as the transport by bus was unreliable (especially in the evenings) but going to work was all right as the boss picked me up. I liked to hear the German language and furthermore, both boys were able to work there during the Xmas holidays.

My next job I liked really very much as it was something quite new – with a Customs and Shipping Agent and I became fascinated with all the duty tariff

items. But after a few years it became routine again, including the profit and loss accounts. Zyg spent all his free time working in the garden. When we had enough money, we paid off our loan to Milton and decided to build a third bedroom and to convert the garage into a bungalow. It was time that each son had his own bedroom and their characters were very different. I also wanted to bring my parents over from Poland and we needed an additional bedroom. There was no end to improvements. Zyg built a workshop where he could make all the additional furniture; we were able to have an inside toilet although it was very expensive because the road was being made and we had to borrow extra money for the road. Although we were both earning, I remember those years as always being short of money. Maybe we wanted too many improvements in too short a time? Maybe we were spending too much? We had season tickets to the Town Hall concerts, yearly tickets to the Art Gallery; we were spending a lot on the garden and every two weeks we (that is, Zyg and I) went out, even if only somewhere cheap but we liked to go out. We always made it a point to pay the telephone and gas bills on time as otherwise they would be cut off.

I was perpetually tired and feeling that I was too old for everything I wanted to do. My heart (which had not been too good since the rheumatic fever at Modlin) played up constantly. I had pains and would faint without any reason, sometimes when even sitting at the table. The housework seemed too much but, because I really loved our home, I wanted to keep it nice. Each day when I came back from work I had to rush and cook the dinner because afterwards I used to do some homework with the boys, especially with Roman who started to fall back at school. The summer seemed easier as every weekend we went to the beach, but winter got me down and I went once again to Dr Hurley.

After he examined me, he told me that not only would I have to stop earning money but I should also stop doing the housework as my heart was not good and, if I continued to work the way I was, I would be a complete invalid in a very short time. This time Dr Hurley made a mistake. Zyg told me to follow Dr Hurley's advice. Ruth and Milton were quite definite that I should stop work immediately. Elizabeth, however, asked me: "You are tired? And who is not? How will you manage on one small pay envelope? Think about all your debts, your new bedroom. If you are really unable to work you should stop, but are you really unable to work?" Jurek (George) would begin his Matriculation year next year.

One evening I had a talk with him and asked if he would be game to take a gamble. Should I stop earning now, he would have to go and earn money during the next couple of years whilst doing his Matriculation at night school. I would do the housework. Should I continue with earning and housework, he could do his Matriculation year at University High. I might become an invalid, maybe even during the second term when he would have to leave school, start earning money, help around the house and also help Roman. I thought that there was a chance that I might be able to continue working at least until this third term, maybe even until the exams. We could afford extra tuition for his English at Taylors College. I thought I could do it but the doctor thought I could not, therefore it was a gamble. I asked Jurek to think it over and to let me know his decision.

The next day Jurek told me that he was ready to take the gamble if I wanted him to. I certainly wanted it and it worked out all right, and I kept working for many more years and later on my heart started to improve. Love for the children and determination does go a long way. A few years later I had my menopause. My periods stopped and I went to our GP. When I came back home I explained to Zyg and the boys, telling them that the doctor said that I might feel misunderstood and be depressed and everyone should be considerate and nice to me. Jurek looked at Roman, and Roman at Jurek, and



Maria, third from left with Helen, Diane, Elizabeth and Roman. Taken at Eildon in 1954

then one of them said: "Don't you think it sounds very much like blackmail, that we should behave ourselves?" This was the only time when I felt misunderstood during my change of life as I had no symptoms whatsoever. I guess I just had no time to have tantrums and had to keep going which was not much trouble as my heart started to improve and I had pain less often. Life seemed uncomplicated.

We had only to cope with everyday problems such as money matters, bills, etc., when trouble came from the most unexpected direction – Roman. He did not want to learn, not even to finish his Intermediate and, although he was not rude, he was different, not his usual self. Arguments with him got us nowhere. His attitude was simple: He knew everything there was to know and school could not teach him anything – only squares like us thought that learning had some benefits.

I began calling him “Mr Ignoramous”. He explained that if one wanted to become rich, one should not work but one should rob a bank or something.

With the little power of persuasion we had, I made him study every night after tea, sitting with him and coaching him. He did everything he could - not to take in what I was teaching but, not being a stupid boy, some things stayed and he passed his Intermediate. He was determined not to go back to school and to start earning. I tried to reason and I tried to bribe. His pay in an advertising office would leave him (after tax) approx. six pounds, and I told him that I would take one pound from him for his board, but should he stay at school I would pay him five pounds weekly during first term and six pounds the following term. He still decided to go to work and was very cross when he had to pay his board. Of course we could manage very well without his board money but I thought that it was time he learned that parents were not there to be taken advantage of.

He wanted to be a grown-up man, so let him try to be one. Later came the time when he started preparing to run away from home. We talked it over with Zyg and decided that we were unable to hold him; therefore (we told him) he did not have to run away, he could go any time he wanted. We asked him only to let us know when and where he intended to go and we also told him that at any time we would love to have him back if he wanted to come back home. I even helped to pack when (after his pay day) he was going away to Mildura for fruit picking. He went and Zyg and I stood and looked; I howled during the night and Zyg tried to cheer me up but he had tears in his eyes. We both calmed down when his first card arrived and he sounded cheerful. He wrote often and it became easier to bear and Jurek was very kind and seemed to understand how we felt.

But this was only the beginning. Later on came a letter from Adelaide and afterwards there were no letters, none at all. One day two policemen came.

Roman had been arrested in Perth for attempted armed robbery. He would have to appear before the Children's Court (he was not yet 16 yrs old). Through friends, and the Welfare Department, I was able to find out the name of the solicitor and flew to Perth. I saw Roman in jail. At first he was very much on the defensive but after a while he had a lost look – just like a kid in trouble. He told me that he ran out of money and had not even enough to ring us. He explained that he could not steal money from private people on the beach who left money in their pockets whilst swimming, so therefore decided on robbery. He was certain that the picture theatre was insured and would not suffer any loss. He hinted that somebody was helping him but would give no names. I was able to see Roman every day.



Maria & Zygmunt celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary with Talunia and Mietek Kulakowski (nearest the camera)

People were very kind to me – not only Judy and her family but also the solicitor and even policemen. One day when I was walking up and down Perth streets and not realizing that I was crying, a policeman stopped me, addressed me by name, took me to a café for a cup of tea, paid for it and tried to cheer me up. Roman was sentenced to one and a half years in a children's reformatory school. Although Roman was writing regularly and his letters were even cheerful, it was a long year.

Jurek was a very great help. He was kind and understanding, doing well at school and in 1957 he passed his Matriculation with honours and enrolled at the University. He chose electrical engineering although he wanted to become a nuclear physicist he realized that jobs for nuclear physicists would be hard to find so he decided to be an engineer. His scholarship money was not much but he found a weekend job in a petrol station where he worked for the next few years.

Roman came home earlier as he had behaved himself well and seemed to settle down. He started to work and attended night classes at Taylors Coaching College. Life once again gave us a smile. Bama's mental health did not change. She had good and bad periods. Zyg visited her regularly and, during her calm periods, she came to stay with us for a few days at a time. We managed to build a third bedroom which became Roman's, and commenced procedures to bring my parents over but it had to be postponed as Father (then about 87) broke his collarbone and one leg and had to go to hospital. Jurek bought a car – an “old bomb” – for forty pounds and spent every free minute working on it. After a while the car was running, even free of many rattling noises. One day when Jurek came home from a day spent at Eildon, the smoke coming from the car frightened me, I thought the car was on fire. He fixed it again and sold it for forty-five pounds which was really good as he had learned on this car, used it and enjoyed it. Of course he bought another second-hand car immediately.

I tried to think back from the year of 1956 when we bought the house and, say, for the next 15 years or so. What were the really hard times? Roman – which I wrote about. Highlights? - Jurek. What had we done for our children? What was our so-called “style of life”? Jurek also caused me hard times although, probably, I felt too strongly. One day I caught Jurek reading Roman's diary. To me it was Sin Number One as I remembered how I felt when firstly my mother and later, Bama, read some pages of my diary. I started to cry. Jurek, seeing how upset I was, became very upset too. He promised that he would always respect people's privacy, that “never ever” would he read anyone's diary or personal letters.

As far as I know, Jurek kept his promise. I only hope he still does. What was our so-called general “style of life”? We were permanently short of cash. Mismanagement of money? Most likely so as neither Zyg nor I were able to save money. The moment we had spare money, we spent it. We spent it on improvements to the home and garden, we spent it for pleasure as

“one does not live by bread alone”, we spent it quite often so that we had some fun. Every year we went on holiday for two weeks, every pay day of Zyg’s we went out. If no urgent bills were pending, we went to a restaurant and afterwards to a show or concert. If we were short of money I would make some sandwiches, Zyg would buy a bottle of wine, and we would go by bus to the beach, sit on a bench and look out to sea. Sometimes we would do some window shopping and eat our home-made meal on a bench – and we were quite happy, the two of us having an evening out every fortnight. I treasured those outings; they were ours. We kept this habit for years. Often we had friends at our place but no parties, everything was very casual.

There were ordinary, uncomplicated years with small ups and downs. Zyg and I quarrelled very often but there was never a bad quarrel. Elizabeth called them “the Kruszewski’s dramas”. For example, when I wanted the wall in one room off-white and Zyg wanted it light grey - he got his way, but when he wanted the living room wall-papered and I wanted it painted - I got my way. He wanted a motor-bike and I did not want him to have one – he did not buy one. He wanted as many ornaments as possible around the home (which I did not like) - but we had them everywhere. Each of us wanted to show that we had a say.

The only thing we never had a quarrel about was money. Although Zyg always earned more than I did, there was never talk about “his” or “my” money – money was just “ours”. One day I decided to have my own personal savings account and he did not object at all. Elizabeth and I wanted to have one hundred pounds saved for emergency but neither of us was able to attain this dream because, every time we had some money in the account, some urgent bill would come and the money had to go.

In bringing up the children, we did what we thought was right but we certainly made many mistakes and Elizabeth and I agreed that, should we be given another chance, we would not repeat the old mistakes but we certainly would make new ones. I always took great interest in their school work and read all their books and homework so that I could ask intelligent questions. I never pushed them except when I wanted them to read more so I did (what I called) “applied psychology”. They were both in the habit of coming into our bedroom in the evening and sitting on our bed to look at books which were on the bedside table and would ask about the books I read. If I wanted them to read a particular book, I would tell them that it was an interesting book but that they were too young to appreciate it. Maybe in a few years’ time I would

give it to them.

They would read this book on the sly when I was still at work. It always worked! We borrowed Jurek's car and went for a holiday to Wilson's Promontory which I liked very much although there were over 12,000 souls there, including yelling children. I always wanted to go back there after the school holidays but somehow we were never able to do so. Roman smashed up the car but it was not his fault. It just happened, but we were unable to scrape up enough money to buy another one. However, that was not very important.

Through the Polish newspaper and by other means, Zyg found some old friends such as Zosia nee Romer, Gregor, Milosz, Nika, etc. However, our closest friend through all these years was Elizabeth – and her girls and our boys liked each other too. There was only one disappointment – when Jurek failed his first year at the University. Zyg took it more to heart than I because I saw it coming and tried to warn them both. In the third term Jurek had no time to learn, belonging to different clubs (chess) and being out with friends.

However, Jurek made it up the following year at Caulfield Tech., taking more subjects than permitted and passed them all with very good marks. When he got his diploma, he told us that he wanted to take us for a drive but that we should dress up a bit as he intended to take us out. We should have taken him out but we had no money and instead, he took us. After a drive along the beach, he took us to the Troika. It was a lovely evening which will stay in our memory for always. We were so happy with our elder son.

He did even more for us. After working for a while with the SEC, he gave us a tremendous present. He bought out some shares from the Co-op. (6 shares at fifty pounds each) which meant that we had smaller repayments each month. Only parents can understand what that meant to us – not only in a financial sense but also that we were not always taken for granted, that Jurek thought about us and cared. Thank you, Jurek.

Early in 1960 the letters from my parents were frantic as there were many obstacles which had to be overcome before they could come to Australia. It was 1st October, 1960, when at last we went to meet them. There were masses of people on the boat and it took me a while to spot Mother – especially as she had aged very much during the past 12 years.

Father seemed unchanged although he was now 88 years old. When we were allowed on board, Zyg and the boys rushed to Mother and I to Father. After a few hugs and kisses, Father told me to go to Mother and to keep in mind that, without Mother's perseverance, they would never have been allowed to come to Australia. He and I could talk later. Although Mother looked very old, I felt (within a few minutes) that she had not changed. She was still my darling "Little Mum".



Julia & Adolf, Maria's parents. They were the oldest immigrants up to 1960

It was wonderful having them with us. They liked our house very much and called it a mansion as, for the last few years, they had lived in two small rooms in the attic. Mother was astonished that her "manly Juraczek i Romeczek" expected to be treated as grown-up men and not as little children. It was hard for her but she really tried to adjust to the big boys. In one way only could she not adjust – I was still her little "Malunka" and she treated me as her little girl. At the beginning I thought it funny, later on I did not like it and even later still, I started to resent it.

During the next few years Mother helped with the housework, did some of the cooking and even some shopping. She joined the English classes for "New Australians" but her favourite teacher was Diane who had a way with

old people – kind but firm, and her patience seemed never to run out. Elizabeth had it even harder than we did, financially, but somehow (I still don't know how) she bought a building block in Blackburn and built a house there. We were all beside ourselves when she and the girls moved into their own house.

I applied for a position as a shipping clerk with Norma Tullo Pty Ltd. I was very anxious to get this particular job as the office was in the same building as the Athenaeum Library which I had joined many years ago. During lunch time the library had either exhibitions or concerts (records). I wanted this job very much although the pay was five pounds less than what I was earning at the time. However, Zyg thought that we could manage and he hoped I would get it. I had two interviews and when asked at home about my impressions, I was able to say that I liked Mrs Martin (who later on became Beryl) but was unable to explain Miss Tullo (whom I later called Norma). She was a young woman, small and delicately built, looked fragile like the so-called Dresden doll; however, when she looked at one with her large blue eyes there was no porcelain – it was more like steel. When I was hired, I mentioned at home that Norma seemed to be something exceptional, definitely not a standard boss. Time proved me right.

I stayed with the firm for over ten years. Norma was a dedicated woman who was able to get the most out of everyone who stayed with her for a lengthy period. We knew that we were being used but we did not mind. To me it was not “the boss” and “I” as I identified myself with the firm and it was “us”. We were there to help Norma Tullo become the Leading Fashion House of Australia and, despite setbacks, we made it, and I was proud to be one of the cogs who was privileged to help. The pay was not good. Overtime (plenty of it) was not paid and in addition, we were very often told off. I liked those years; I was never bored but Zyg grumbled occasionally saying that I was married to Norma Tullo Pty Ltd and not to him. Of course there were times when I threw my things down and left – intending never to go back – but I let myself be easily persuaded to return.

Although I never understood Norma, although most of the time I was really tired, I was happy there and never bored. It was fun; I loved it. When I joined Norma I was 46. After a few years, Mother became too frail to help around the house but my health improved. I hardly had any heart attacks now and was able to work outside the home for ten hours or more. In addition to this, I would do the cleaning, washing, ironing, darning, etc. on Saturdays,

and would cook on Sundays for most of the week and freeze the food so that should friends of ours (or the boys) turn up unexpectedly, I would always have a meal ready.

I very much liked George's friends from the Youth Club and the Sailing Club. They looked so happy and tired with their noses peeling, their hair full of sand, and they all had healthy appetites. They were nice kids. Zyg could not help much as he could not even do the daily shopping because there were no shops near his office, so I had to cart it home all myself. Every spare moment Zyg worked in the garden, he laid 4,000 bricks and his fingertips were peeling. He built a better workshop, made new furniture for all of us, and helped to wash the windows, walls and ceilings. We both painted the house inside and Zyg did all the outside painting. We were constantly on the go and enjoying it, but we still had time to go to concerts, etc. It was fun.

Father's eyesight became worse and the doctor advised an operation which was performed at the Eye and Ear Hospital. It was not successful and Father lost his sight. Now he was unable to read, unable to play his game of Patience. His hearing worsened. However, he never complained. We tried to help him. We told him about the political news (in which he was still interested); we all tried to help but only now do I realize that our help was not enough. He lived a lonely life with only his thoughts. He was looked after by Mother and that became a full-time job. Zyg helped to bath and dress Father but we realized that something more had to be done. We could not afford a nurse, nor could I stay at home to look after Father as my pay was still badly needed. We started to think about old people's homes but we did not know what they were like, where to look for them, or how expensive they might be. Father was not an Australian citizen and we had signed documents promising that Zyg and I would look after my parents without assistance.

This was the time when I started taking pep pills: menzadrine, benzadrine, drinamyl – I was perpetually tired but had to keep going at full speed. I took them only from Monday to Friday and never during our holidays. At night I started taking sleeping tablets as the pep pills did not let me sleep. Zyg and I were worried about Roman. Although he was not drunk, he didn't appear to be entirely sober. He drove his car recklessly (which worried us) – in the mornings he had a hangover and then, all of a sudden, he would be all right.

Those were the sixties, not the seventies, and we knew nothing about drugs. It took us a while to realize that he was taking drugs. Our GP advised

psychiatric treatment and we followed his advice. The psychiatrist advised that Roman should be admitted to a hospital. We admitted him to the Alfred Hospital. Although we were very depressed, we still did not know what drugs could do to a person. We hoped that, in a short time, Roman would be cured – but he was not.

At the Alfred, Zyg met Vivienne, a friend of Roman's. She was a bit older than Roman, her marriage had broken up and she had suffered a nervous breakdown; her three children were looked after by her mother. When they were both released from the hospital, they still saw each other. They both loved sex and felt good in each other's company. I did not see any improvement in Roman who became more secretive, more cunning, more reserved and, very often, quite unpleasant (although not rude). Zyg's mother, Bama, was allowed to leave Larundel. It was impossible for her to live with us. It was not only the lack of space but Bama and my parents did not get on.

Every time Bama came to stay with us (during her good days) the old arguments and grievances started to flare up. Zyg was unable to control Bama and I was unable to keep my parents quiet – although they knew that Bama was a sick person. Those weekends were unpleasant for Zyg and me. With the help of a social worker, Bama found a place for herself. She loved it and was very happy to be independent – but that was not to last long – and once again she had to be admitted to the hospital. It was hard on Zyg, and I was unable to help him.

Jurek had saved up enough money and wanted to go overseas. The SEC gave him a holiday without pay and Mietek helped him pay his superannuation for the time he would be absent. He left in 1964 going through Japan and Siberia, USSR, Poland and Western Europe to London where he was to stay with our relatives, Wanda and Stach Kruszewski. He stayed with Wanda and her two children only as Stach had died of a heart attack during the time Jurek was travelling.



Jurek (George) preparing to race his Cortina

Father, now 91, became weaker and Mother was unable to look after him. Our friends Jurek and Danka K helped us and arranged for Father to be admitted to the Kingston Centre. It was at the end of 1976. Mother visited him a few times a week and Zyg and I during the weekends – and sometimes after work. He was unhappy there as he was deaf and blind and could not speak English, but he never complained. He did not want to live and told me that he was too old and asked me for some tablets which would kill him but I refused, explaining that I would be put in prison for killing him at a time

when the family, and especially Roman, might need me. Father did understand because he said: "You must love your children and your husband more than your parents, they should always come first, before the parents. Do not worry about me, I am certain I will not last long."

He was not senile, not until his dying day on 31st August, 1964. Father was always important to me and he lived on in my memory and even now in my thoughts I ask his advice. There is a saying that nothing important ever dies. I think that is true.

Roman became progressively worse; there were more hospitals, more psychiatrists, different treatments, but nothing helped. Jurek's letters were, at that stage, the only nice things I could think of. Even our annual holiday was not relaxing as we were both too worried about Roman. It was so good when Jurek came back but the atmosphere at home was not a pleasant one, although we tried not to speak too much about Roman.

Jurek also became a trial with his love of car racing as I was very fearful of him being badly hurt. Mother asked me to plead with Jurek, to explain how hard it was on us when he took part in a race. I could not do it. I asked Jurek if he realized that he might be crippled for life. He did appreciate the possibility but still wanted to go racing. It was his life and, according to my way of thinking, it would just be blackmail if I did what Mother had asked me to do. Zygmunt and Mother began to have misunderstandings. She blamed him for all the bad things which happened to us, and he started to pick at her and I (caught in the middle) told them both off.

I was perpetually tired and there was not much sleep at night, waiting for Roman to come, as sometimes he had to be picked up and carried indoors, being in a stupor. I took more and more pep pills, even about twenty a day, and heavy doses of sleeping tablet at night after Roman came home.

It was a bad time for Zyg and me. We thought it the hardest time we had ever lived through and thought that we could not keep going much longer. Little did we know that we could keep going and that the worst was still to come.



Roman and Viv's wedding 1969

Elizabeth also had a hard time. She made Helen go overseas as it was time she became independent of Elizabeth, but some of her letters were worrying. Diane, although a brilliant student, was not a strong girl and her nerves were playing up as she was working too hard, trying to prove to herself that she could do more than a strong, healthy male could do. In February 1965 Helen was married in London to a New Zealand man and now lived in New Zealand. We all missed her a lot but she seemed to be reasonably happy which was a pleasant thought.

Roman and Viv wanted to get married. We thought they should not and Viv's parents thought the same. Viv, with her three children, needed someone reliable who would help bring up her children – not a drug addict. Roman

always spent too much on himself as he always wanted the best, and was even snobbish. They did not listen and got married. Their marriage was a happy one and survived throughout the hard times which were to come. Humans are unpredictable. After their marriage in 1969, Roman seemed to improve on a new treatment with LSD sessions during weekends.

However, it did not last long. On 9th July, 1969, Roman almost killed Jurek; not in anger, just for nothing – being too drugged to even pretend that he was able to think rationally. It could not get any worse ... or could it?

Diane, who was now a fully qualified doctor, lived with us. She was not healthy; she was thin and looked very frail; her skin appeared to be transparent, but she still did more than others. Elizabeth was very worried and was also not too happy about Helen whom she had visited in New Zealand. Elizabeth and I were so close to each other that what worried one worried the other also. Not long afterwards Diane was to die tragically of pneumonia, as a result of being involved in a car accident in South Australia.

Mother, who had a stroke after Father's death, could not get well and became more difficult, more interfering.

In August (or September) of 1970, the police came to our house and informed us that Roman had attempted an armed robbery and was caught. He was full of drugs and was awaiting trial. We had now reached rock-bottom and it had come unexpectedly as only a few hours earlier I had spoken with Roman over the phone when he sounded not too bad. Viv, Zyg and I visited him in the detention room and we tried to arrange legal advice. We were all frantic as we were told that he could face a long prison sentence. This seemed the end of our endurance. We were ready to collapse but we would not as there were still things to be done and we had to help Roman. I continued working as we were having a very busy time in the office, but I dreaded the phone calls advising about various legal procedures, etc.

One day there was a phone call from our local GP:

"Mrs Skarbek, I am sorry but I have some bad news for you. Your husband has cancer."

"Are you there?"

"Yes, doctor. I am listening. What is to be done?"

"I have made an appointment for Mr Skarbek to see a specialist in two days' time. There is no time to lose."

“Where is his cancer?”

“In the lower abdomen. The specialist will explain it to you.”

“Doctor, will his heart be able to take it? You know that not long ago he had the second attack?”

“Yes, I know, and I spoke with the heart specialist who is not happy about the serious surgery but Mr Skarbek would have no chance without surgery. I would advise him to take the risk. I really would.”

The girls in the office heard me saying “cancer” and thought that I had cancer, smoking constantly as I did, especially lately. When I repeated the conversation they were very nice and brought me the proverbial “cup of tea” which is supposed to calm nerves and cure everything. And it did. I went to Beryl, explained about Zyg and asked for Monday off. She was very good about it all, taking into account that I had already had a lot of time off to visit the welfare officer, police station, prisons, etc.

I did not tell Zyg or anyone at home about Zyg’s cancer. I wanted him to have a carefree weekend without additional worries. On Monday morning I told him and he took it extremely well. There was no fuss, no “my God” – he asked only that I repeat the conversation with the doctor. We were both ignorant about cancer – it only scared the hell out of us. The doctor explained as best he could and stressed the point that, as soon as a bed was available, Zyg had to have the operation. The earliest available bed would be within 10-14 days at the Bethlehem Hospital. Zyg had no chance at all without an operation so really he was not risking anything. Zyg was very controlled during the waiting period. We both went to work and nobody would have guessed what a shock it was for him. Of course I knew how he felt, and he knew that I knew, but that is how it should be. The waiting period was hard on Zyg but we both still cared about Roman and thought about him constantly, and we both went to visit him when permitted.

We spoke about Roman, about our future – if any.

The only sign an outsider could have noticed about Zyg’s tension was that he consumed an enormous quantity of alcohol without getting drunk. Viv took me to the hospital. The operation lasted a long time. One of the doctors came out and wanted to cheer me up, telling me that I should not be too worried as Zyg still had a 20 percent chance of pulling through! It did not cheer me up as 20 percent was not good odds. They wheeled him out and I saw that he was still breathing. He was still unconscious when I had to leave

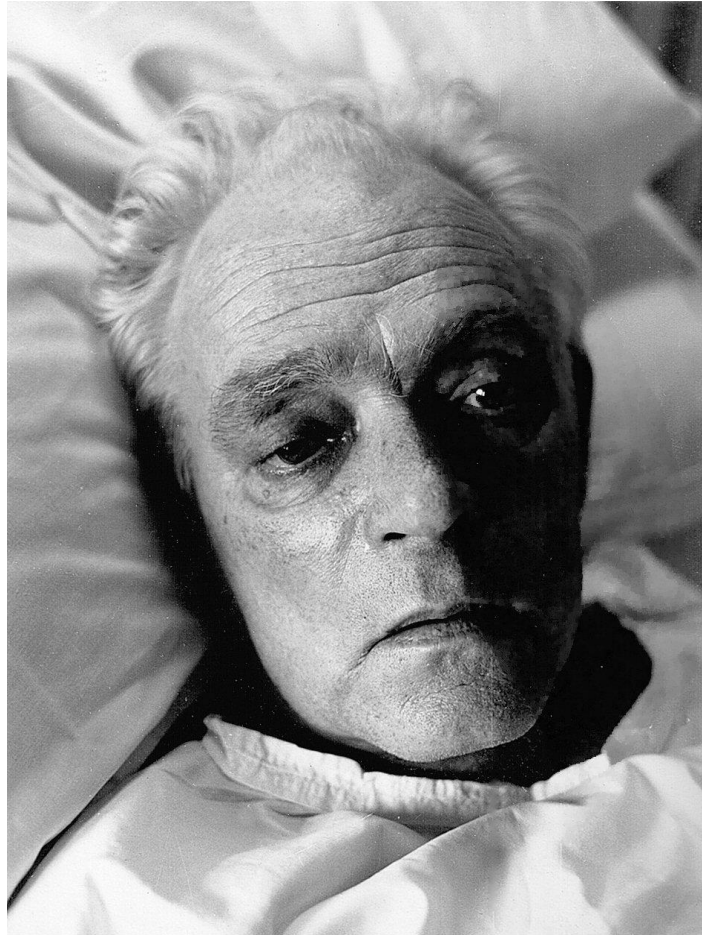
the hospital at midnight to catch the last bus home. The ensuing seven weeks were a nightmare. Zyg was fighting for his life. There was Roman's trial; there was George's tonsillectomy in a nearby hospital and, in addition, it was a very busy time at Norma's.

I lived on pep pills, sleeping tablets, coffee and cigarettes. I got up at five, prepared food for Mother and later on for George, and went to work. After work the chemist next door gave me a lift to Bethlehem Hospital where I stayed until leaving for the last bus at midnight. Elizabeth used to pick me up quite often and take me home. Irene and next door neighbours came during the day and did something around the house, which I appreciated very much when I noticed it, but quite often I did not even notice at all. My thoughts were either with Zyg or with Roman. Work helped as I had to concentrate and was not allowed to make mistakes because we were preparing for the new season.

We arranged for Roman to see Zyg – of course, under escort of a policeman. Roman stayed only a few minutes with Zyg but was able to stay a lot longer with Viv who was waiting to see him. Zyg was on the critical list many times and was a raving man most of the time, and I had to arrange for additional nursing help which had to be paid each week in cash. Mietek came from Sydney to see Zyg and paid for two weeks of nursing as I ran out of money. Should I run out of money, no additional nursing would be given Zyg, even if desperately needed and advised by the doctor.

One bad moment I remember vividly. Whilst visiting Zyg, I was trying to adjust his sheet when suddenly I noticed that blood was spurting from inside his elbow joint. The mattress was covered with blood, the pillow was dripping wet and the needle in the joint was missing. I tried to staunch the flow but it was very slippery. I rang the bell but the sister was a long time in coming and I felt desperate. The sister came eventually, had a look and went out quickly. How should I have known that she went to call the doctor? The doctor came soon, stopped the flow of blood and told me that Zyg would require constant nursing (which I would have to pay for in cash as the hospital did not provide extra nursing).

Most of all I remember the decision I had to make. I am writing about it so that perhaps something could be done in the future to spare others faced with the same dilemma. The surgeon who operated on Zyg, the heart specialist who had treated Zyg previously and the doctor in charge of the hospital called me for a “conference”. The surgeon said that Zyg had to get up and start walking as otherwise he would not be responsible for the outcome of the operation. The heart specialist said that walking at this stage might kill Zyg.



Somebody said that because Zyg was unable to make a decision, I would have to decide what instruction to give to the sister in charge. I felt trapped and furious. How could I (an ignorant woman) decide what should be done, knowing that either decision could endanger Zyg’s life?

Zyg when he appeared to be dying

I felt like hitting both

the specialists on the head – but I did not as it would not have served any purpose. I asked questions:

“You are of the opinion that if my husband stays in bed the operation might be unsuccessful and he might die?”

“Yes.”

“And you think that if he is made to walk now his heart might be unable to stand the strain and he might die?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you agree about the priority?”

“No.”

“Can I give you my decision tomorrow?”

“No. You have to decide now.”

I turned away from them and stood looking from the window into the dark night, not seeing anything. I tried to control myself and to think. I tried to remember about possible complications following a cancer operation but I had only a very vague general knowledge, then decided to stop thinking about it as the two specialists who knew could not agree. To my primitive way of thinking, the heart was the most important organ, therefore it should be as the heart specialist wished. I turned around and gave them my decision:

“My husband will stay in bed as long as the heart specialist thinks it is necessary. I will be advised by him.”

I might have been wrong but I had the feeling that the RMO and our GP (who was also present) approved of my decision. I went back to Zyg as I wanted to be with him as long as I could. For the next few days Zyg was “holding his own” – later on he started to improve and, within a week, was allowed to start walking for short periods. In the meantime, Jurek (George) had his tonsillectomy and had an unpleasant experience when he was served fish and a bone got stuck in his throat.



Adrienne

Once when I visited George, he had a visitor – a tall girl with lovely hair and beautiful eyes – whose name was Adrienne. George came home as soon as he was allowed to and I fed him mainly on ice-cream and pulpy, soft food, and he improved rapidly.

The day of Roman’s trial was coming nearer. Vivienne and I were very depressed as we were told that he might face a long jail sentence. The solicitor who represented Roman (although a very pleasant man) was very over-worked, and not optimistic. None of us told Zyg that the trial was to be held soon. Once again I had to ask Beryl for time off from work and even for

a whole day at the worst possible time as we all worked very hard without tea breaks and hardly any lunch times. However, Beryl knew of my situation – she knew that I would have to quit otherwise – so she gave me the day off. I do not remember much about the trial – I was too upset, too worried after seeing Roman chained to a policeman. I remember Danka who was called as a witness. Danka and her husband, Jurek, had been our friends for many years but after this day, I loved her dearly.

The character reference she gave Roman, her sincerity in giving it, her deep belief in the good which was in Roman touched me very deeply. Through her answers in the witness box, she gave me hope; she somehow communicated to me that not everything was lost with Roman. The sentence was three years at least. It was better than we had anticipated; however, it still seemed dreadful that my Roman, my gentle and basically kind and good Roman, was sentenced to three years at least. I knew that he had done wrong, something hideous, that he had been peddling drugs which could affect many young and innocent children and, through them, their parents. Drugs were something which I abhorred. My thoughts were full of sorrow for Roman but also there was some hope that maybe sometime, maybe years later, he might mature, that he might realize that there are no decent short-cuts to getting things he wanted immediately. I hoped that there might come a time when he would realize that he had responsibilities, that he had to work honestly and had to wait for those things he wanted now. I knew that there were people who never grew up, never matured, but could our child be one of them? I sincerely hoped that there would come a time when Roman would be able to face responsibility and reach maturity.

Zyg had a setback. One day when under the shower, his stitches broke and now he had three colostomies (which are holes in the stomach through which the bowel passes the waste and not through the anus). He smelled badly constantly; he hated it, he got depressed, especially after he had been told by a sister that Mr Menzies had had a colostomy for more than ten years and that it was incurable. On 7th November, 1970, Zyg was discharged from the hospital. It took no more than twenty minutes by taxi to reach home but he was exhausted and had to be helped up the steps. He was grossly underweight; very tired; very depressed and not interested in anything; the spark of the wish to live was gone.

I had to stop worrying about Roman and try to nurse Zyg back to life, back to love of living. It was not too hard as he liked being home; he liked the

backyard which was nice with flowers in blossom. Zyg's co-operation was very good. Although for him it was a great effort to go to the backyard, he went every day to sit in one of the chairs prepared for him either in the sun or in the shade. After a while he tried to go up and down the driveway, even a few times a day and, although still very weak, after a few weeks he even went out into the street, going a few houses up and back. We were both worried about his colostomy. He resented it but felt inclined to put up with it. I did not. The doctor told me that roughage should be avoided in his food. I decided to give it a try. I watched his holes a few times each day when doing the dressing. Sometimes a hole would close and then open up again. When I noticed tomato peels in the newly opened hole, tomatoes were eliminated. The same happened with the skins of apricots and later on, strawberries and rye bread were eliminated. In the end there was not much left with which to make nice meals, but I was determined that he should have tasty meals. After a while two holes closed completely but one refused to close and that was not good enough.

Christmas came and I had a few weeks off work. The doctor told us that Zyg could go swimming if he wanted to and, anyway, he could do anything he felt like doing – there were no restrictions. Zyg wanted to go swimming and chose Black Rock as there were many trees where he could rest in their shade after a swim. This swimming now seems funny but then we felt like crying and cursing. Zyg had to pull his togs well above the waist to hide the bag; I went behind him with two plastic bags – one empty and one with cotton wool. When he was in the water above his waist, his colostomy bag went into my empty bag; when during swimming the dirt was coming out, we cleaned it with the cotton wool which was in my other bag, so as not to pollute the beach; then back to the trees to put on a new colostomy bag, hiding from people and so on. After a few weeks Zyg went to the doctor for a check-up and the doctor was amazed at his improvement.

He told me that when he said that there would be no restrictions for Zyg, he did not expect him to survive Christmas. This was 1970. Zyg had not only survived but his holes had closed up and stayed closed, even when I started introducing different food. At last George fell in love and it was high time too as he was already thirty years old. He was really in love as he even gave up car racing. Zyg and I were both very happy with Jurek's choice as we liked Adrienne from the first time we met her.

Zyg's health improved and he was able to go back to work and we tried to

count our blessings, but – Roman was still in prison and Viv visited him every permissible day, only grudgingly letting us share the visiting time occasionally. Julia became more difficult, frailer, more demanding. Bama was still in hospital and Elizabeth took him there and back by car.



Maria, Zyg, Elizabeth and Diane

On visiting days Zyg was very tense and drank too much. He was not easy to live with, which was understandable, and I also was not easy to live with. The work at Tullo's had increased and, although I now had an offsider to help me, I still had to take work home and sometimes had to work till the early morning hours and occasionally, on weekends too.

Our main worry was Roman and the future for Viv and her three girls. We had a visit from a well-known man who thought first that Roman might be able to help him break the drug ring. Roman was not born a martyr, nor did I think that he would be able to help. My greatest wish was to see Roman out of jail, healthy and normal. I did not want him dead; death is so final.

The few following years were not really bad but I do not remember them much except the summer months when each weekend we spent at Elwood beach which we could reach by public transport.

I remember having most of our meals in the backyard which I loved, and the highlight was George's wedding to Adrienne. I liked her very much although she seemed aloof, but perhaps she was just shy. I liked her parents also and my mother thought that her father was exceptionally nice and very handsome.



George & Adrienne's wedding. From left are Maria, Jim Chalk (Adrienne's father) George, Adrienne, Zygmunt and Norma Chalk

They should have been the good years but – there were so many butts. Bama was allowed to come home. I pleaded with Mother to be tolerant but it did not work. Neither mother-in-law could stand the other and Bama's stay finished in a very unpleasant way as the police had to be called in and Bama had to be re-admitted to hospital. This was not easy for me and very hard on Zyg. Zyg and Mother did not get on. She blamed him for many things which were quite beyond his control, and he picked on her which made her furious. I dreaded coming back home from work to be met by Mother at the front gate when she would tell me what Zyg had done or said or had not done or said. I was getting old and tired, now being over 50, and working more than full-

time, and still keeping house.

In July, 1972, on his 65th birthday, Zyg retired and was quite happy about it. He received some money for long service and could pay most of our outstanding debts, and Zyg started helping me with the housework.

Roman was released from jail and was even accepted back in his old work at the Railways. Viv and Roman were happy and so were George and Adrienne. Zyg even received part of his old age pension which was a very great help.

We would have been happy and content if the atmosphere at home had been a happy one, but it was not. Zyg started to drink too much and, although never quite drunk, he was also never quite sober. I started to drink too, at nights, as it helped to cope with Zyg and Mother and the sleepless nights. I even moved out to the bungalow so that I could have some peace and quiet in the evenings. I decided to drink more on the principle "If you can't lick them, join them". I now know that I was just stupid with my reasoning.



Zyg's retirement taken in the front lawn in Huntingdale. The next three people after Zyg are: Adrienne, Elizabeth and Julia (Maria's mother)

I guess that living for many years on nerves, pep pills and sleeping tablets, and being constantly over-tired, began to show now when I was able to relax a little.

Both my boys were happy; we had no real financial troubles anymore and Mother, although tiresome, was just an old lady – lonely, a stranger in this country, without close friends.

Our GP had advised me during the last year to take it easy but now he told me that I should have a very long holiday or, preferably, to give up work altogether. It was a hard decision to make as the prospect of being home all day did not seem attractive with all the bickering and all the disagreements. It was also very nice to have a second income.

However, I realized that I was not coping well at all, that I was unable to keep going much longer (even small things irritated me out of all proportion) so I decided to take the doctor's advice.

One day, armed with the doctor's certificate, I told the manageress that I was quitting. There were a few unpleasant sessions, feelings were hurt. I promised to stay for another week and to distribute my work to two others, leaving a lot to the general manager. I completed all I intended to do during that week although I had to work till late at night at home.

Our doctor was right when he advised me to stop work earlier. I left it too late. One evening when there were again unpleasant arguments, I lost my temper. I don't even remember what it was all about. Was it about the catacombs? DeGaulle? Or drinking?

I only remember that I called out to Zyg: "Go to hell" and, banging the door, went to my bedside table and took an overdose. Zyg told me later that it was only next afternoon that they called the doctor and, against Mother's wishes, I was taken to the hospital where my stomach was pumped out. After a week I returned home. The only thing I remember about the hospital clearly was the book by Camus *Sisyphus*. I knew that I had made a mess as I should either not take an overdose or else I had to do it properly. I was neither happy nor unhappy to be alive, just ashamed that I had made such a mess in such a stupid way. The atmosphere at home improved; we were all very nice and polite to each other; Bama was still in hospital and still depressed.

After a while I decided to look for some part-time work near home and was lucky to get a job as a “temporary” for a week but stayed there for four years. Although the work was rather boring, I liked it; the girls were nice, especially Yvonne and Elaine, and the boss was very pleasant and a clever man.

It was a good time, without any troubles. Roman and Viv now had a boy, Lucas, and Mother was thrilled at being a great-grandmother. George and Adrienne were also happy and decided to go for a trip overseas. Zyg and I also wanted to go for a holiday somewhere, maybe to Alice Springs which I wanted to see very much. Now would be a good time to go as we still had some money left from Zyg’s and my long service leave.

One day we received a letter from George from Europe. He was offering us money which was due to him from a life insurance which had now matured. We were stunned! Of course we could not accept it as they themselves had not much money and even had to sell their car before going overseas. However, it was fantastic that they were both offering us money so that we also could go overseas, and even to Poland, which we would have liked to have seen once more. Neither Zyg nor I even considered accepting their offer but we felt so grateful for their gesture. We felt extremely happy thinking that we had children who were ready to share their happiness with us.

A few days later there came a phone call from George asking if we had already booked. I thanked him sincerely and explained that we did not intend to go. His reply was: “I will ring you again and again until you both agree to come, and do not forget that phone calls from Europe cost us money, so you had better agree soon.” Friends, Roman and Mother urged us to accept their offer as it was given with an open heart.

What parents could ask for more? This offer was more than enough; we did not have to take their money as well. However, a few days later there was another phone call and we accepted their invitation and went to Europe. With George’s money and ours we could manage easily, especially as we had relatives and friends in a few countries. It was a great pleasure to see old friends, friends from the times when we were young. It was an odd feeling to see faces which were now old but which could still bring back memories from our youth. With some I could talk easily as once before, with some not at all. We had changed and grown apart which was sad. Poland had changed

a lot since 1946 when I was there for the last time. After the Warsaw Uprising, when the town was razed, it had been rebuilt with new streets, new buildings, except the Old Town which was restored to its former self. Many streets were changed so much that I could not recognize them.

I even had trouble finding the place where my old Conservatorium had once been. It was now a modern building with very many facilities which seemed to me extremely luxurious compared with what I had had when studying there. There were many improvements but also many things which I did not like at all and I was not thinking about the political situation. There were the long queues at the food stores where people lined up first and then went to see what the store was selling as one never knew what food might be available. There were always shortages of some goods. The people in the streets were well dressed, there were many cars (many of them Mercedes), the shops were not empty but not well stocked either.

However, the worst was the cramped living conditions. For example, our friend (in a fairly high position and well off) told us that he had a large and nice flat in the Old Town. He mentioned two rooms and a large hall. In this flat he lived with his wife, his teenage daughter and his son of about twenty. They had two rooms, very over-crowded, there was a kitchen and a bathroom, and the hall which served as a sleeping room for the son. There was no privacy for anyone in the family; there was not even enough room for anyone to have their own corner. Single people, if they could afford it, were much better off as their flats consisted of one room plus a hall in which there was a tiny kitchen and bathroom with a toilet. This room was usually a fair size and they were comfortable, but the same room was still used after they got married and had children. I did not like the new houses which looked like Commission houses with many flats, but the people of Warsaw thought that they were beautiful as they provided accommodation for many and even had a small yard with a few benches but, once again, there was no privacy.

I did not like the service in the shops as the salesgirls were really rude. I did not like the service in restaurants where one had to wait for half an hour to give the order and another half an hour or so to get the meal (which quite often was something different from that which one had ordered). One day when we saw a rotisserie shop we decided to have a roast chicken as the queue was not too long. After a while we noticed that the queue was not moving and, as I saw only roast potatoes and raw chicken waiting to be put into the rotisseries, I decided to skip them and went to get some open

sandwiches at the self-service counter. I had to line up to get a docket, then line up to pay (as per docket) which took over half an hour. After eating my sandwich, I went to take Zyg's place in the queue so that he could sit down for a while. When I was near Zyg, a newcomer asked him:

"Is the queue moving? How long are you waiting?"

"The queue is not moving and I don't know how long I have been waiting. I only know that I got old in the meantime!"

The man grinned and the salesgirl (who was chatting and joking nearby) turned to Zyg and told him: "Nobody asked you to come. If you don't like waiting, you can go!" Zyg got his chicken, eventually, but by now the beer was sold out and very soon the chickens were sold out and again the queue stopped moving. The sandwiches were all gone and the fresh ones were not prepared.

Once I went to a shop to buy a pair of sandals. I had forgotten my European size and was not certain if it was 6-1/2 or 7-1/2. The salesgirl was behind the counter and I showed her the shoe I wanted to try on, explaining that I was not certain about the size. She gave me a 6-1/2 which, after trying, I found too small – so I returned it to her asking for a 7-1/2 please. She looked me up and down and said: "Don't waste my time. Next time you will know your size." – and off she went to another salesgirl and chatted with her. All the customers waited patiently but I left.

Here in Australia we are all spoiled with the friendly service, with the self-service. We take it for granted and resent it when somebody speaks to us rudely but, in Poland it was a normal way of life and nobody complained about it. I did not like the Social Services either – not in Poland, Germany or France. They compared poorly with Australia, although Germany was not too bad. The worst was in France.

In Paris I met my ex-fiance, Stach, who (although aged) was basically still unchanged. He had retired at the age of sixty because of poor health. Stach had worked in France for over 25 years as a department head in a government office which imported agricultural machinery from England. Now he lived on his pension. His shirt was frayed, the collar had a hole, the suit was darned. He lived with his young wife, her sister, her mentally-retarded son from the first marriage, and their son, in a small flat in a suburb of Paris. He had not been to Paris since his retirement; he had not been to a concert (although he was once a musician and loved music) as he could not afford the

Metro fare. He said that he was better off than the majority of retired people as his wife was working and supporting him. Stach's pension was so small that it barely covered his keep and there was no money left for luxuries, not even for a tram fare to the park.

Compared with these conditions, Australia was heaven – especially after the Labour Government showed consideration and concern for their old and the under-privileged. Vienna was a disappointment, although still very nice. However, Munich was a pleasant surprise. I liked it very much and once again admired the Alte Pinakothek which, although bombed during the war, had not lost anything, thanks to the curator. I liked London very much which I saw now for the first time, and fell in love with Cambridge. I was sorry that there was not time to see more of England, especially Stonehenge.

The best of all was Rome (which I had always liked) and to me it was and still is the Eternal City despite the dirt, the smell, the pushing crowds. Just as before, we stayed longer than scheduled as I could not leave it. Other cities in Italy are also beautiful but Rome was something special. I think that I could spend years in Rome and there would still be plenty to see, to admire. The charm which Rome had cast over me was still as strong as ever.

It was fun meeting George and Adrienne – first in Warsaw and then in Paris. They both looked happy and were travelling in their home on wheels – a Combi van. Zyg and I enjoyed our trip tremendously but were quite happy and content when the money ran out and we had to go home, skipping Rome. Mother was very happy to see us and the house seemed lovely. It was good to see our friends; it was a good feeling to know that we were home.

Here in Australia, in our small house, I felt that we were really home and I felt happy to be home. Next day I went back to work as the boss had rang Mother asking me to come back to work immediately. The next two years were pleasant ones. The atmosphere at home was nice, there was not much grating, I liked going to work, our sons were happy and Zyg's health was better than expected. The children of our friends were either getting married or having babies and I thought it was very nice to be old and to be able to work part-time. At last I had time to do what I wanted. We could go to the beach (even during week days) as I could start earlier and finish earlier.

We had time and money to go to concerts, shows, exhibitions, and I had time to read books which required time. I was not sufficiently educated to be able

to read them quickly and needed reference books.

I became fascinated by the double Helix and the synthesis, especially with the prospects of DNA or cloning, also computers, reactors and the problems of waste and mainly about astronomy and astrophysics. As I had no background knowledge, it was hard going but great fun (when I could grasp what it was about).



Maria with parents, children & Bama

Bama, although now permanently in hospital, was no trouble and quite often neither too depressed nor too energetic. Mother settled down to a routine and enjoyed herself in the backyard with a book or playing with our dog.



George and Adrienne had a baby girl – Anna, born on Christmas Eve, 1975. These two years, 1974 and 1975, were really a pleasure to live. No dramas, no hardship – simply

Bama in wheelchair with Vivienne, Roman, Luke and Shelly about 1975

pleasure and fun.

Early in 1976 I had a feeling that it was too good to last. I had a feeling that something terrible would happen soon.

After my birthday in April, I thought that Zyg might have another heart attack and asked him to see the doctor, but he was better than before. A few times whilst going to work, and coming back, I had the feeling that an earthquake was imminent – but that was a silly thought as there were no earthquakes in Melbourne, we were not even near the belt.

After Easter 1976 I got very nervous crossing North Road and made quite sure that there was no traffic coming from the station towards Monash. It was silly but I could not help it and Zyg made fun of me when he came to pick me up, saying that I behaved like a country bumpkin.

The Accident

7th May, 1976, was an ordinary day. In the morning Zyg and I did some work in the garden and I went to work after an early lunch. I had no premonition, everything was normal and pleasant. As it was a Friday, we made quite sure to leave the office on the dot of five. There was a bit of drizzle but not much. I crossed the street (as it was empty for a few hundred yards) noticing only a green car waiting to turn from Franklin Street. When I was standing with one foot on the nature-strip which divided the highway, I felt being hit hard. I somersaulted and landed with a bang on the street. My first thought was – that must have been an accident; my next thought – how silly for a granny to do a somersault! The next thought – get up, it is silly to lie on the ground during a drizzle. I tried to get up but could not. I noticed the green car still stationary before the crossing and started wondering what could have hit me; there were no cars nearby.

There were people around me but I could not see them clearly as my vision became blurred and a wave of pain struck me from the waist down. The pain increased very quickly. People wanted to help me but I asked them not to lift me as I was afraid that I might have injured my back. The pain kept increasing but my vision cleared and I could recognize the people around me and saw that my boss, Bob, was holding my hand. I asked him to bring Zyg and he promised to do so. There was also a young dark-haired man who was very kind and seemed concerned for me. He even took off his jacket and put it under my head. When Zyg came he heard me asking: “Where is my husband?” – a question I was asking much too often as it would take about ten minutes to bring Zyg to me. It was such a relief to see Zyg. Now he would look after me; he would know where they would take me, and I could tell him where the presents for our mothers were hidden (waiting for Sunday, Mother’s Day) which I did straight away so as not to forget as the pain seemed to blot out everything. Bob moved away and Zyg was holding my hand. The young dark-haired man was shaking hands with Zyg and saying that it did not seem serious. We did not know that he was the man who had hit me, but I still think that he was a nice, kind person who felt really sorry for me. The intensity of the pain had increased but I could not cry or yell in front of my mates, so kept quiet. I saw the police and the tow truck and we were all waiting for the ambulance. It seemed a long wait but Zyg told me that it was not much more than half an hour.

I was glad to see the ambulance men who lifted me (gently) into the ambulance, but I was very disappointed when they refused to give me an injection for the pain and only gave me a gadget from which I was supposed to sniff – this did no good at all. It seemed impossible, but the pain became worse. I tried not to moan as it would upset Zyg even more, so I held his hand and asked innumerable times if it would take much longer to reach the hospital. Zyg told me that the ambulance men did all they could. They tried the Dandenong Hospital but were told that there were no vacancies available, so they had to turn back and go to Box Hill Hospital. To me, the time we travelled seemed very long, as we arrived about 7:00 pm and I was hit at 5 minutes past 5. My recollections from the hospital are vague. I know that I was moaning although I tried not to, I remember signing my name on a paper cup where somebody had put my diamond ring and my watch, I remember that someone tried to take off my clothing, gently, but it still hurt very much so I asked them to cut it off, which they did. I remember the probing fingers and hands of the surgeon. I knew that he had to do it but I kept pleading with him to hurry up and give me an injection; I felt that I had reached my limit and might start yelling and crying, and hurt their feelings. I knew that they were doing what should be done, what was necessary and good for me. There was a clock on the wall but it seemed to stand still. Zyg told me afterwards that I was taken to the casualty ward, X-rayed, and about midnight Zyg was told to go home as they would operate on me. Zyg asked how badly I was hurt and was told that in three months time I would be home.

The time I spent in the intensive care unit is a void in my memory, only occasionally do I remember Zyg and vaguely, George, Adrienne and (I think) Roman. My first recollection after a week or so was that I was on a bed and someone with beautiful hair was bending over me – and I recognized Adrienne – and then I saw Zyg who was still holding my hand, and I stopped being afraid because if Zyg was there, everything would be all right. Next recollection: I was still in a bed but the room had changed; there were more beds around but Zyg was still there, still holding my hand.

The pain was very strong and a sister came and gave me an injection, and Zyg explained that I was in a hospital, that I was looked after and now I would begin to get better. He told me that both mothers got their presents on Mother's Day and liked their dressing gowns and felt happy about it. Next recollection: (Many days later, but I didn't know it). Zyg was still there, still holding my hand, but the room had changed again. There were more beds and some women were in the beds. I saw some tubes attached to both my

hands, something was attached to my bladder, my leg was hanging – suspended on a queer-looking gadget – and the other leg felt so heavy that I was unable to move it. I wanted to sit up but could not and felt scared.

Zyg explained that one leg was in plaster and the other was hanging on a pin which was pushed through my leg like that through a chicken on a rotisserie; that the bags hanging above attached to my arms were very similar to the ones he had had when he was in Bethlehem Hospital, and we both grinned and it was easier to bear. He also told me that the doctor who operated on me told him that I would be in hospital for three months. It seemed such a long time. We both thought that I had just normal fractures which would take time to heal but that later on I would be all right. I had to put up with it and stay three months in the hospital as here everyone cared for me, giving me the proper attention. Most of the time I was semi-conscious, but every time I could see and feel, Zyg was there, holding my hand. However, one day when I was just dozing, he was not there. I heard the curtains being drawn and more than one or two nurses were around my bed, but I felt too drowsy to open my eyes. I heard a mature male voice and some young voices. I heard the following:

“Left leg – multiple fractures, cut nerves, cut ligaments just where the join, cut and muscles, shattered knee cap on the right leg, pelvis, but the bladder might be all right, squashed (?) stomach, glands Amputation of

both legs above the knee might indicated

but loss of blood can be done later if needed”.



Maria after the accident

There were some questions and some answers which I could not understand except the one statement: “The spine has not been damaged.” Only when I heard the curtains being drawn again and the receding footsteps, did I open my eyes to make sure that I was not dreaming. I was (and still am) very ignorant about the human body but not so ignorant that I did not realize that my injuries were not just simple multiple fractures (which seemed bad enough at the time). I realized that it was really bad and that I would never be the same again. Never, never.

I remember clearly my thoughts and feelings after the group had left me. First thought: Do not let anyone know that I heard how badly I was hurt. I felt trapped and frustrated and later came a sort of apathy which did not last long. Later on came a wave of hatred; if it was destined that I should be hit by a car, why couldn't he hit me properly and kill me instantly instead of turning me into a cripple who depended all the time on sisters and nurses? I hated the thought of being dependent upon the help of others for the rest of my life; why should Zyg be chained to a cripple – probably a double amputee? There would be money trouble as well with the nurses giving me bedpans, injections, etc., and we had no money. The future seemed dreadful. I could not even kill myself here in hospital. I could not even sit up so how could I cut my wrists, and with what? I should have died long ago; Zyg would be free, the boys would not have a crippled mother, my mother also should have died long ago so as not to suffer my sufferings. Thank God – at least Father was dead.

I was certain that Zyg did not know how badly I was hurt. I had to prepare him slowly. I was not certain about George and Adrienne as they both looked too concerned. Roman? I did not know. Maybe he was too detached to show compassion – or he might not have known. My main concern was Zyg. How could I spare him the suffering? Suicide in a hospital was out, and I was not going to mess it up a second time. I decided to prepare them slowly and not to show them how I really felt – and I succeeded. After a few days I came out of the depression. I must thank the staff of the hospital, all of them, for their kindness and understanding, especially Sister Bennett (the sister in charge) who even gave me her shoulder to cry on. The staff did more than their duty; they had time to talk with me or just give a friendly smile, or sneak in and have a cigarette with me which was very pleasant. Friends also helped a lot. Some were praying for me although they knew that I was an agnostic, others just popped in to say “hello” – just to show that they

had not forgotten me. The priest was also a great help as he did not try to bring me back to the fold, he just came for a chat, sometimes about books, and told me that he would pray for me.

The biggest help was George and, of course, Zyg, whom (later on) I called my “Lifeline”. Adrienne and George took Mother to their home as Zyg was unable to look after her. Every day he came to visit me, spending hours travelling by public transport. Mother became ill with pneumonia and was also admitted to the Box Hill Hospital. She never quite recovered and became partly senile, with only occasional clear moments. It was hard to see Mother losing contact with reality – especially because it was caused by my accident. She never returned home and from Box Hill went to a private hospital for old people.

Poor Mother who, all of her life, dreaded hospitalization. I had promised her a long time ago that I would never let her go to a hospital as long as I could look after her. Now I could not look after her and that was that. Altogether I spent eighteen months in hospitals. It was a difficult time. It was not easy to be in constant pain. Sometimes the pain was agonizing, sometimes just severe and, occasionally there were just aches, but never (not even for a second) was I free of pain.

The worst memories are of the nights which seemed very long as I was unable to sleep, even with strong sleeping tablets and alcohol (which the hospital let me have). Some sisters let me keep my bedside light turned on as when the curtains were drawn, it did not disturb the other patients – but other sisters went by the rules and I had to switch it off which meant that I was unable to read, unable to watch TV, unable to play a game of solitaire. I did not complain as it would not help anyway and only cause trouble. I disliked the bedpan which was chucked under one, even when one did not want it, but quite often (when one was really needed) I had to wait quite a while until someone had time to attend to me. I missed having my hair washed as it was full of grit from the street for over five months, I missed having a shower as I could only have a sponge wash which did not do much cleaning, and I developed a rash which I called a dirt rash although it had a long Latin name. I realized fairly early that I could not change anything and that I had to adapt to it, that I should neither complain nor feel too frustrated. Somehow I managed to do it during the eighteen months but only thanks to the family, friends and mainly to Zyg who visited me every day. My general impression of hospitals: Five out of six were good; good medical care, kind nursing staff

(including those on night shift), very efficient and good clean meals. Most of the staff did show a lot of consideration and compassion.

Only one hospital was bad – KINGSTON CENTRE. Already, the first day was very hard to take. After breakfast I was put into a wheelchair and kept there until evening which caused me additional pain as only a week before I had been allowed out of bed for only half an hour to sit on a comfortable chair, and now my back simply could not take the strain. One was addressed as “Duckie” or “Dearie”; on every front one was made conscious that one was not a subject but an object. I saw a lot of crying; not only amongst the patients but also the nurses, sisters, cleaning women and offsidiers of the physiotherapists. Only one doctor was nice and spoke in a friendly manner. The library on wheels was appalling – the books were dirty, smelly, with pages missing – and there was hardly any choice. Many of the patients were stroke cases (I think) and had lost their personality; some were giggling all the time, others were crying and shouting. There were also many cripples, many amputees, many with contorted movements, many with great speech difficulties.

It was a sad lot; humans who did not behave as normal humans but maybe suffered just the same. The food was often cold and unappetizing – the inmates had trouble eating it and often the food fell to the floor without reaching the mouth. I stopped eating and tried to avoid going to the dining room. I was unable to swallow anything except coffee (which Zyg had to provide). Smoking was allowed only in the passage where I sat all day long. The only happy thing that happened to me there was my first shower – after eight months! We were not even looked after properly and here I developed bedsores which troubled me for many months. The worst was that I did not receive physiotherapy although that was the main reason for being in this hospital. During the month I was there, I had only a few hours of exercises because either the physiotherapist was ill or there was not time for newcomers, or they did not know what to do with me.

I was given plenty of tranquillisers and anti-depressants but went down rapidly – my weight dropped to just barely five stone. I became resigned, I did not complain. I was just waiting for death. Even Zyg (who still visited me every day) was unable to lift the depression. I sat quietly all day long in a wheelchair which had a board attached for my leg, and the pain was constant. My family noticed that I was unhappy there and one day our local doctor called to say “hello”, asking me how I felt. My reply was the usual: “I am

fine.” When he asked me again how I really felt, I told him: “Just give me a razor-blade so that I can cut my throat this coming night, otherwise leave me alone, I am fine.” A few days later I was transferred to another hospital and started to improve rapidly, having physiotherapy every day and friendly staff to look after me. I was told that I would have to undergo further surgery as my right knee (which was shattered) would not mend.

I knew that it would be serious surgery and a lengthy operation for the surgeon, but I did not mind as there was hope that sometime I might be able to walk, somehow. Once again I was transferred to another hospital where I spent over five months, again with great pain, again with various bags hanging over my bed, with blood transfusions for a long time. I smelled terrible and everyone who came to visit wrinkled their noses. For a few weeks I was not feeling well at all. George helped me a lot; he kept me going just as much as did Zyg. He came every lunchtime. We did not talk much but I knew that he was there, I knew that I was not forgotten, I knew that he cared. I am unable to explain how much those visits meant to me. I only know that they kept me sane and kept me from sliding into deep depression because of all the pain and discomfort, and the uncertainty of the outcome of the surgery. I was able to hope for some bearable future.

When I started to feel better, George brought me games with which to occupy myself. There was a good library but he and friends also brought me books. I read more than ever, two to three books per day. To start with, only crime stories; but slowly I was able to absorb other writings. Irene and Geordie brought Bronowski’s “Ascent of Man” and Zyg brought me Alex Haley’s “Roots”. Reading these books I was, occasionally, able to forget my own misery. I progressed, but slowly, the reason being my age – I was 61 and at this age bones do not knit easily – my inability to eat properly or to sleep at night, not even with many sleeping tablets. Although I was never keen on TV, now I watched it for hours. Sometimes at night I had interesting talks either with a sister or with the sister in charge (who was a very interesting personality). My other occupation at night was counting my blessings such as: The accident occurred when I was already sixty and not, say, sixteen and therefore I was able to live a full life which was never a boring one. I had Zyg who cared, who came every day through all the year and who would keep coming. I now called him my “Lifeline” although we even quarrelled in the hospitals. I had had a good childhood with loving parents; I was fortunate in having many caring friends who came to see me; I was lucky being in hospitals with so many friendly and compassionate nursing staff; I

was lucky that I always liked reading and that there were so many interesting things to find out; I was exceptionally fortunate in having such sons; I was lucky to be able to occupy myself for hours and not be constantly bored, etc. etc.

I thought a lot about Zyg. He was alone for almost a year until our friend, Irene, came to live with us. He looked after himself and also had to do some washing for me, he came every day by public transport and he never complained, never cursed our fate - although this must have been hard for him especially as his heart often misbehaved and he had trouble breathing. He told me many times that we would manage, crippled or not crippled; for better or for worse, we would manage somehow, just as we had managed during the war, just as we had managed during all these years. He visited my mother sometimes and even, a few times, brought Mother to see me at the hospital; she looked well and cared for.

Whilst at Prince Henry's, I took part (as a patient) in a ceremony when an Opportunity Shop donated a hospital bed. I was amazed at the amount of money that the ladies were able to raise. It was in the thousands – and it was not only the bed as such but also for the upkeep of a patient. The plaque was put over my bed and unveiled during one of the speeches. The voluntary workers at those Op. Shops were doing a marvellous job and at the same time helping the people who could not afford new things. I decided that from then on I would donate my things to them, and I did. At Prince Henry's (as at the other hospitals), I got friendly with some of the nurses and sisters. They were all hard-working girls, most of them having their own problems, and still they were able to give the patients their full attention. Some of them had money troubles, some had love troubles, some who were not Australians had their own personal problems. I was lucky that we could talk and communicate, sometimes I was like "Dorothy Dix", other times I just listened and learned. It was good for us to talk to each other as they could unburden their sorrows, their troubles and, listening to them, I could forget my own troubles. Some of them had really great troubles but still they were able to do their work and not lose patience with some of the patients who were too demanding, who complained constantly. I don't know how they did it; I know that I could not do what they did.

It was a great pleasure for me being able to help the girls solve their problems, in some cases, simply by listening to them. Some of them visited me for the next few years at hospitals, and later on at home. For the little that

I gave them, they repaid me a hundred times more than I deserved. I would like to tell other patients to forget their own problems for a little time and to think about the staff and their problems. Once or twice a week two ladies (who were voluntary workers) came. They had a basketful of flowers which they had grown in their own garden. They came just to cheer us up and left a bunch of flowers. I felt deeply touched by their gesture. When the day came for me to leave Prince Henry's, the staff made a lot of fuss, trying to help me and to reassure me that they cared for me. The girls started to come early in the morning to say "hello", to give me a kiss, or a small present.

When the ambulance men arrived to take me (still a stretcher case) there were many of them around my bed and later on in the passage, even those who were on duty in other wards, even the girls from the kitchen and the cleaning women. The ambulance men were unable to wheel me out as the passage was full of people giving me hugs and kisses, promising to visit me in the new hospital. In the lift there were more hugs and kisses from the orderlies and from the first year nurses, and again on the ground floor where the social worker and some girls wished me all the best. In the ambulance the men and I chatted. They asked what nationality I was and I told them "Bloody New Australia from Poland". One of the men was Australian and the other was from England and I called him a "Bloody Pom"; they were friendly men. When they heard how long I had been in the hospital and that I had not been home for such a long time, they asked where I lived and when I gave them my address, they whispered between themselves, and told me that they also would give me a farewell surprise.

They gave me a fantastic surprise. They pulled up in front of our house and took me down on the stretcher. Zyg was standing near the front gate, Flip went berserk and jumped onto the stretcher, licking me all over and the two men brought me (with Flip) into the house, put the stretcher on the living room floor – and I felt like crying, being so happy. There are many kind and friendly people who are understanding and compassionate. We stayed only for a few minutes but that was the nicest present they could have given me.

Afterwards I was transferred to Hampton Hospital to be taught how to stand and, maybe, even walk – as I was still a stretcher case. I was afraid of the new hospital, dreading that it might be another Kingston Centre. However, it was just one of the nicest hospitals. The atmosphere was a friendly one, we were well looked after, we were treated as people, not as cases. The age group ranged between 16 and 70, all were crippled or at least handicapped;

everyone wanted to get better and we were encouraged to work hard and to try to improve. There were many physiotherapy sessions during the day, the therapists worked really hard with us and everything was well organized. The doctor in charge was friendly and gave each one of us his full attention. He did not mind being asked questions which he answered truthfully and sympathetically and when in doubt, referred us to a specialist. He gave the impression that nothing was too much trouble and, in addition, he spoke such nice English that it was pure pleasure listening to him. In this hospital I met some patients whom I knew from previous hospitals, and we all thought it was the best hospital for us. It did not take very long before I was able to take a few steps whilst supported by a frame.

During this period George and Adrienne had their second child, Michael who was born on 31st July 1977.

I learned to use the wheelchair which could have the board removed for short periods, otherwise it had a small narrow board. Soon afterwards I was told that I could become an outpatient which meant that I would go home for all weekends (sleeping those nights at home) and come to the hospital only from Monday to Friday. A taxi would pick me up from home at 8:30 am and from the hospital at 4:40 pm. It was hard to imagine that at last (after eighteen months in hospital) I could live at home. It seemed unbelievable.

I choked with emotion when I came home for the first time. It was a wonderful homecoming. Zyg wheeled me around the house, showing all the improvements he had done for me. Everything looked beautiful. There were fresh flowers everywhere; new books at my bedside table; and the house was shining like after the best spring cleaning. I was certain that Irene had worked for hours on end. At last I was home. I was deeply touched and very happy. Zyg hired a good wheelchair and as I still could not go to a normal toilet, he hired a commode and I did not have to use the hated bedpan. Zyg adjusted the floor for my legs; most rooms he repainted; he also modernized the kitchen benches, etc. etc. I was home not more than half an hour when kids from next door came to see me and to show me their new puppy and kittens. I was in bed, next to me was our dog Flip, then there were a few puppies and a few kittens and a few kids. It was lovely (although probably unhygienic) but a real homely atmosphere with five animals and four kids sharing my bed – until one of the puppies started to leak on the bed and our Flip lifted his leg against my sticking out cast!

The bed became wet and sheets had to be changed and Zyg told the kids to go home for a while. I felt that at last I was home, at last I was allowed to enjoy even that which was not desirable but very pleasant. My first meal at home was also a pleasure. Not only was I able to swallow it, but I even enjoyed it – although it was not one prescribed by a dietician. I had herring, dark rye bread, caviar, sour cucumbers and other delicatessen foods – and with it came a bottle of champagne. I doubt that even a queen could have had a better welcome. Zyg never once hinted that having me at home would be a great burden to him.

Family and friends treated me with love and tried to make life worthwhile, showing that they still loved me even the way I was. I was extremely fortunate as many of my mates had had bad experiences when coming home. They were told that having a handicapped person around the house was unbearable to them; many marriages broke up; many lost their friends.

It must have been unbearable for them to be constantly reminded that they were now a burden. How did they cope? I do not know. I think that I would have gone to pieces without the love shown me by family and friends. I attended Hampton Hospital for a few months. There were bad days when I thought that I was not making any progress, and there were many good days.

The best day was when I was able to use the toilet by myself, just walking without a frame but with two sticks only, and I was able to use the toilet without help. I promised myself that from now on I would never complain as this was something which I wanted more than anything else.

However, soon there came the time when I took the toilet for granted and now I wanted to be able to get dressed by myself, I wanted to be able to get out of bed by myself, I wanted to be able to go outside to our backyard by myself, etc. etc.

There was some improvement but so gradual that I felt frustrated and, only thanks to Zyg who pushed me to keep trying, did I make progress. I had one aim – to be independent of human help.



At Huntingdale – Adrienne, Zyg, George with Michael, Anna and Maria

I did not mind, at least not much, all the gadgets which I still needed, but I wanted to be independent of people's assistance. I felt frustrated.

One day I was told at Hampton Hospital that I should be discharged as nothing more could be done for me and that I should start a normal life! This was one of the most depressing days – nothing more could be done for me and the irony of it was that I should lead a normal life. Every night I cried myself to sleep and was not good company to family or friends.

Whilst I was still in hospital, Zyg's mother died of pneumonia and a few months later, my mother also died of pneumonia and old age. Roman and I were with her during her dying hours. Occasionally she recognized us and gave us a smile, but most of the time she was semi-conscious wearing an oxygen mask, foam on her lips.

I thought it cruel to keep her alive until the arrival of the doctor, but such are

the rules and regulations: only the doctor is allowed to disconnect the oxygen. I was glad that we were there at the time of her death as I think that our being there made dying a little easier for her.

I was told that I would need another operation to restore part of my circulation as my legs were not good at all. It was nothing serious and I spent only ten days in hospital, but later on I had very great pain for seven weeks, needing morphine injections and many painkillers; it was a bad time.

Epilogue

Maria never finished writing her memoirs.

Following her accident and her very difficult and incomplete road towards recovery, Maria became permanently bedridden and her health and attitude deteriorated slowly. To cope with the permanent pain Maria consumed excessive alcohol, pain killers, ate less, became undernourished, depressed and gradually began to lose contact with life around her including her friends, family and even Zyg. In 1985 she died in bed at her home in Huntingdale at the age of 69. Maria could take no more. She took her own life the day before she would have been transferred to Kingston rehab hospital.

Zyg survived the passing of the woman that loved him but gradually turned to alcohol. His health deteriorated and after a few years he moved into the Kingston retirement hostel in Cheltenham, only a few kilometres from his home in Huntingdale. Here he stopped drinking and his health improved and he lived quite happily for about 7 years, with his two sons, George and Roman, visiting him. Zyg died peacefully in 1996.

George continued in his successful career as an Engineer and computer specialist with the Electricity Commission and he and Adrienne raised two children, Anna and Michael. George left the SEC in 1996 and became a private computer consultant for his own company; Adrienne continued to work as a Cytologist. Their children, Anna and Michael, have travelled the world and settled in Melbourne. George and Adrienne continue to live in Glen Waverley, where they have been since 1982.

For myself, let me say that having never known that Maria had written this book until I read it for the first time recently, has left me deeply moved at her life and sacrifices for her children and her love for her husband, my father, Zyg.

I am now 63 years old and am grateful that my Mother, Maria, lived long enough to see that I, the son who had led a troubled life and for

whom she worried about, finally settled down, became respectable and responsible and has long led a fulfilling life with my wife Vivienne. Our three daughters Vicki, Leeanne and Shelly have long been married and have children of their own and our son Lucas, single at 32 years of age, presently lives in Sydney. Vivienne and I still live in Cranbourne, 45 km SE of Melbourne, where we have been since 1988 and continue to enjoy a comfortable fulfilling lifestyle. We travel a lot.

Thanks Mum!

Thanks Zyg!

Roman Skarbek – 2006

Cranbourne - Victoria