

Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 5) – Wartime in Poland

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We've talked a little bit about the war in your life. Let's go back to that era and talk about how old you were and what life was like for you then.

Well, it didn't start up with a bang, really. It went gradually into it. We left Teplitz in 1940, in September - mid-September - and then we came through Romania, and Yugoslavia, and Austria to Germany. We were settled in a camp where we were waiting to be shipped out to Poland, where we were supposed to be resettled - relocated.

And how old were you at this time?

I was 10 1/2 years old. By the time we were settled in - by the time we got to this place in Poland I was 11. Now the journey over there was very hard to take. There was not always enough to eat. There were interruptions. I didn't go to school -- I lost two years in school.

Going into Poland and seeing how the previous family had been pulled out of their house with a one-hour notice - that was very hard for Christian people to take. So here we came to this place - this farm - and everything was fine. Their animals were looked after. But we saw the way the people had been ripped out of their place. That's something my dad and my mom really had a hard time with. But we didn't last there very long because my dad came down with a serious illness - he had a heart problem from before. The heart problem increased because of the work on the farm. He was not a farmer, but he did his best. We had a Polish couple to work along with him - but he worked very hard. My dad always was a hard worker. He had a heart attack one night, and then we called the doctor who came a couple of days later, and so on, and then he signed a paper to have us moved into the city of Bromberg.

Bromberg was a rail station, and also a garrison where there were a lot of soldiers - army people - in it. A nice town - a very nice town. After my dad recovered he got a job working in a rail yard, in the wood-working department. At that time the boxcars of the trains that carried the freight - the sides were all built with boards. When they came back from the war they were all ripped apart, so they were brought into the rail-yard and my dad put new boards on them. Then they went back out again to Russia.

That town was loaded with army people. What was interesting - one army division was Ukrainian volunteers who were on the German side from the beginning of the campaign. They wanted to see that Ukraine was free, because Stalin really did a heck of a massacre in the Ukraine. He wanted to wipe them out. But the Ukrainian people thought that if they fought against the Communists they may have a good chance that Ukraine would be free. So they joined the German Army.

So, in Bromberg my dad went to work and my mom and us kids made adjustments. I joined a musical band that they called Fanfahrenzug - that was a long trumpet without valves. We only did marches on a full tone. We were called on when there was a political rally and for various other occasions, and I had a little uniform that I wore. We only played music. We had absolutely nothing to do with the political things. But there were these political rallies. This activity took us around quite a bit and we met all kinds of people.

I went to school in Bromberg. I was twelve years old and I got into Grade Two because that's the way they judged my school grades. A little bit later I got into Grade Three, but I had trouble with it. But again, the good thing was, my school teacher in Grade Three was an army officer who had lost one arm and two legs - one below the knee and one above the knee - who walked on prosthesis. He came from Vollhynia or Galitzia which was similar in culture to Bessarabia but on the Polish-Russian border. He was so good to me. He took me under his wing and he taught me. He got something into my head at that time to open up my head, let's put it that way. To get out from a stupid head into an open head kid. He came and let me read "The Nordic Saga" which was something the Norwegian and Swedish people believed, which was their gods - same as the Greeks had gods - it was their way of worship. And that fascinated me. Because this teacher was so good to me, I worked literally hard to do my homework. From Grade Three he put me to Grade Five. And From Grade Five I had learned so much that he put me into the school office. Because we had not enough teachers, the director, the school principal, was teaching school. So the office was empty. So he told me to answer the phone. My God! I had never answered the phone in my life! So I told this teacher, "Well, I don't know what to do with it." He told me, "You cannot ruin it - when it rings, you pick it up and say Hello." And that's the way he pushed me. He pushed every button on me that you could possibly think of. And I was so determined to not make him feel bad! That is sometimes how we kids needed it. Rather that, than back in Bessarabia where we would get whipped over some small thing, or they slapped you over the hand - he did it by pushing the right button to get me going, by conscience. He knew what I could do if he pushed the right button. I'm very grateful for that guy.

So I went into that office when the phone rang I said, "H..H..H..Hello. Hello?" And when the person said something I would hang up! So I went to the teacher and said, "The phone rang, but I didn't hear anything." He then said, "Go right back again." And I would go back, and the next time it got better. And I would write the messages down. And that's the way you start, you know. When you come out from nowhere, with no such background, and all of a sudden you come out from the dark and now you're in the lime-light! Like you're standing in front of a TV camera! With a 12-year old kid! You can imagine! But this guy knew how to push the buttons. Boy! And that one was the stepping stone that got me to where I am today, to learn, and that got me into a lot of things. From his actions I learned and survived the war.

Now coming back to the war. The Russians moved in, and there were loads of refugees coming. They came by horse and wagon. They came by anything that had wheels! I saw a lady with a baby carriage - a baby in it, and bags hanging out all around. She was walking because there was no train going, no bus, nothing. They had to travel on foot. Those refugees moved into town because the Communists, the Russians, were moving so fast - faster than the horses went with the refugees. So the people didn't feel safe out in the countryside because the Freedom Fighters - the Polish Partisans - were robbing the people and beating the people up. Now the Polish people were very religious people. But the Partisans were also rude to their own Catholic people, but to a different degree. But I don't want to blame everything on the Poles. They did over-react sometimes. But that's what Hitler did to them, pulling them out of their own homes and so on. You have to understand their situation.

But they overdid it. And all of a sudden we came in - innocent people - into their life. And what did they do? They took their revenge out on us - innocent people.

But anyway, those people on the run all moved into Bromberg because they felt safer there with all the people around rather than being out there on a country road somewhere. Stories have been written about massacres, people beaten up. And you know, people defended themselves. "Oh, don't take my stuff - that's mine." And the other one said, "To hell," and he beat him up over it. I mean, some of them went a little bit too far, but most of the Polish people were OK. In a war, you have to learn how to make adjustments regardless how bad it is. You've got to make adjustment. You have no way to survive if you don't make the adjustment. In other words, there is a feeling that comes over you - I don't know how to describe it. You begin to think like an animal. If you swat an animal on the left side, he moves to the right. And if you swat him on the right side, he moves to the left. And that's the way you are in a war zone. There's another sense moving into your system. You're eyesight is reacting more as you walk around, trying to see everything. You don't know where the next knife or the next bullet is coming from. You don't know! So that's the way you function. But after a while, believe it or not, you get used to it.

So, thinking about the siege. The reason we didn't get out in time was that Dad was not a member of the Nazi party. All the people that belonged to the Nazi party got a notice. My dad didn't belong to the party. He did belong to the labor union, yes. But even though he worked for the government, for the railway, that didn't count. He didn't get a notice, or maybe the notice never got to him. Anyway, by the time that he realized it's getting late, it was too late. We went to the railway station to get away, where we were barely able to get on a train. The stationmaster put his hand up to go, then he got a signal - No go. Then all of a sudden he got a phone call that said, "The town is under siege - nothing goes out." So we had to go back to our apartment. Now what?

So, we went into the apartment. We sat around, and three days later the Russian army moved in close and we all went down to the cellar. Now a tunnel connected all the cellars. We lived in an apartment complex that was for the workers - a worker's apartment. There were five apartments in it that were all Polish. We were the only Germans. The one apartment that we moved into, that Polish family got kicked out. You can imagine moving into a unit where a Polish family had been kicked out. It's like walking into a lion's cage. But soon our Polish neighbors learned that we, too, are innocent humans, that we didn't come with a straight-jacket on - we didn't want to convert them into Nazi's or anything like that. We were just ordinary people. So they accepted that. A lot of that had to do with my mom, because she was friendly, smiling, always said "Hi" - they couldn't avoid her! She didn't walk around looking different or suspicious - she made friends.

So anyway, we all went down to the cellar. We packed some essentials that we needed while we were down there. We figured, well we may be there one or two nights. But it wasn't - it took a few nights, then the first Soviets moved in.

Now we had a tunnel from one cellar to the next. They had cut a hole between the cellars so that in an air-raid, if one apartment was hit the people could move into the cellar for the next apartment and save their lives. That was the reason for the tunnel. So, one day, we heard noises above us - slamming doors and shouting Njemzi Germanski and all kinds of other things. And then they came down to the cellar with a flashlight because we had no light down there - we only had one light up in the staircase to come down by. Every family was in their own stall, where we had our storage. So, the soldiers came around. There were four or five of them that came down, and they looked into everybody's face. Njemzi Germanski? - that means German soldier. They had a machine

gun loaded. They found we were just women, children and old men - my dad was not actually old, just 43 - so they disappeared shouting Njemzi Germanski as they went out through the tunnel to the next cellar. So we were down there for another day and a half, and then another group of soldiers came through. We heard the noises - slamming doors and shouting. Those guys came down and they were drunk. They called them the Sweepers - they picked through all the pockets. Everywhere around they raided the houses, and anytime they found a Schnapps or alcohol they would drink it, and believe me they were loaded! To say anything to those guys - and they were all young fellows - 18 and 21 - anything you said to them was asking for trouble. So you stayed there, frozen. They felt you all up. I mean, they didn't stop at nothing. They went through everything - machine gun ready. Now if you can imagine! One of the tenants in our building - a Polish woman, Mrs. Piek that helped us later - she had a teenage daughter about 16 or 17 who was hiding underneath some rubble. If she had been found she would have for sure been raped.

Anyway, the soldiers went through and a couple or three others went through, and we survived all of that. We had a Polish man and woman who had a son that was very strong on his stand for Poland - and that was his right - he wanted to see Poland free. The old man came over and told my dad, "I'm not going to report you, because you are good people." We felt relieved - "Thank God" - because they could have easily done that.

So eventually we went up to our own apartment. Now mind you, no one had locked their apartment doors while we were in the cellar for those eight days. We had a pail for our toilet. We didn't cook any food - we just ate whatever we had. When the pail was full we took it up to the closest apartment to empty it. We also got our water from the closest apartment.

So then afterwards we went up to our own apartment and it had been ransacked, but not bad. And we couldn't care less! We were alive! And so we cleaned up, and while my folks were cleaning up, I went outside. I was five months shy of 15, and I thought there would be no harm. So I looked around outside. And I tell you! What I saw - so help me God - I cannot forget. The streets were packed with refugees when the tanks rolled through, and they used no horns and no brakes - they just rolled through. I saw wagons flattened. I saw wagons half-flattened. I saw animals - one horse run over dead, and the other one wasn't. People were crying, wounded, dying. Babies, children - it was so bad you would not be allowed to put that into a movie! Nobody came and helped those poor people - nobody - because they were Germans - they were nothing. And we had to live with that. We didn't put this on ourselves, but Hitler came along and put it on us. But we had to carry that load, innocently.

We who came through that went back to our apartments. Some time later they came and picked up my dad first. But before he left, my mother had to sew a Swastika on his coat to mark him, "You're a criminal." The guy came with a rifle across his back - a civilian Polish policeman. He was nice - he was doing his job. My dad's bags were light. I looked out the window seeing my dad escorted away as a criminal. That changed my life, folks. That changed it, you know?

Two or three days later a guy came around and said to my mom, "You have to report to the police" - because she was German she was to report to the police daily. She went there once and came back. The second day she went and took my little sister with her. That day, she didn't feel very good, so she figured, "I'll take my 2 1/2 year-old daughter to the station. They have a heart - they'll let me go again." And she told them she has two boys in the apartment. It didn't work. They put her in a camp for German outcasts. By then my mom was

pregnant - I didn't know that. She looked a little big, but I didn't know she was pregnant. So there she was in the camp.

My brother and I were on our own in the apartment for just about a month - all by ourselves. My brother was 8 and I was five months away from 15. Now how do we survive? We had potatoes left, we had a little flour left, and quite a bit of preserves and compote.