

SCREAM QUIETLY

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A TRUE STORY

SCREAM QUIETLY

A Gripping Account

of a Family

with Children

in World War II



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Dedication



In this life the Lord has blessed me beyond all measure. It is with humbleness and immense gratitude that I dedicate this book to my Lord Jesus Christ.

The precious children and grandchildren that He has given me are gifts that surpass all earthly possessions.

So, to the youngest family members, Brad, Bryan, Ryan, and Evan, and future children, I entrust this story, this heritage. At times this world can be violent. I want them to know that God is still in control and still cares what happens to each of His precious children.

Acknowledgments



The lonely road of writing this account has taken many years. I want to thank my dear friends Martha Darosci and Joyce Summers for joining me these last two years and for standing beside me to see it through to the end. They prayed for me as I wrote and listened to me read as each chapter was written. With their encouragement, and the prayers and encouragement of many others, this account was completed before my time on earth was through.

I also want to thank my dear husband and best friend, Stan, for encouraging me to tell “my story” and for not complaining when dinner was late and when I spent the hours and days secluded at the computer.

Most of all, I’d like to thank my dear mother for finally being able to share her memories and allowing me to tell our account of God’s miraculous care for one ordinary family.

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Before You Begin



Aunt Zosia's ninetieth birthday party was really memorable. She looked so lovely in her new, peach-colored dress, but frail, more reserved, and sadder than I had ever seen her. During the meal, she sat next to her sister Wanda, my mother. I looked at them both and thought, *What an amazing pair!*

During their lifetimes they had experienced incredible contrasts. They were born into a happy Polish family, but at a very young age their father died. Their mother, Anna, struggled to feed and clothe her large family by continuing the watch repair business her husband had started. With hard work and the help of God, the family was able to stay together.

As beautiful young ladies, the daughters procured positions in the households of Polish royalty. Zosia worked as a companion to an elderly countess and Wanda as a nanny to a little girl in an aristocratic household. Both lived in beautiful mansions, wore exquisite clothing, and attended elaborate parties. Maids cared for all their needs. They vacationed by the sea and on expansive equestrian estates. The girls had access to all the best this world had to offer.

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Then came World War II. Everything changed. Fathoms of change occurred between my birth in Poland in 1939 and our arrival here in America in 1951.

It wasn't until I was leaving Aunt Zosia's party that I was told she was saying her last good-byes to everyone. No additional medical treatment, no surgery, no amputations for her. She had decided to just let the Peripheral Artery Disease take its course. A few weeks later, she passed away.

I needed to be with her for her last few days on earth. She had been at my birth, the first person to see my face, hold me, and smile me into this world. So I was there as she lay dying—to sing to her, pray with her, and hold her hand.

After she died, we gathered around her body, held each other, and wept. Then we read the twenty-third Psalm, prayed, and thanked God for her life. I miss her to my very core. She was so precious to me!

Aunt Zosia is just one of the major characters in our family's history. I thank God for the years she was with us, but wish she could have helped me sort out my childhood memories, helped me understand them, and filled in some of the missing details. Whenever I asked her about the war years, she acted as if she hadn't heard me. Instead, she would turn the corner of our conversation and go directly to a new subject. She knew the answers to my questions but could not bring herself to talk about those times. Her memories of the war years went to the grave with her.

Over the years, my mother also ignored my questions. Her memories were too troubling.

My oldest brother, Romek, four years older than I, rarely spoke of our history. He would answer my questions with, "I remember, but I won't say." He is also gone. His lips are silenced forever.

My brother Danek, two years older than me, blocked out all his childhood memories. He does not recollect any of them.

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I was left with horrible nightmares and memories of frightening events. I needed to sort them out, to have someone confirm that they truly happened. But no one was there to help me.

World War II was a terribly traumatic time for millions of people. The suffering was unspeakable. Our family story is just one of millions. Unfortunately, in our household, our story was kept quiet, almost as if we had something to hide, something never to be discussed. The account was to be kept tightly packed away, never brought down from the attic.

It wasn't until my mother was eighty-one years old that she began to share some of her memories. This was brought about by a trip to the emergency room. She was taken there because she had pains in her shoulder. She was admitted for observation. While in her hospital room, with a nurse at her side taking her pulse, her heart stopped. The nurse immediately called, "Code Blue." Doctors and nurses rushed in from all directions. The small room was filled with people and equipment. After several tries, Mother's heart started to beat again. It was a miracle! If this had happened at home, the outcome would have been quite different.

Mother awoke, only aware of faces surrounding her bed, looking down at her. At first she was startled, and then she asked, "What are you all doing here?" They told her what had happened, but she was reluctant to believe them. The possibility that she had just gotten another chance at life was unthinkable. The doctor finally had to show her the red marks on her chest before she would believe. She looked at the marks, realized what happened, and said, "Jesus is my friend. He always takes care of me."

One nurse told us, "She said it in such a matter-of-fact way. It was as if this was an ordinary, everyday, no surprise kind of event."

It was determined that heart bypass surgery was needed. She prayed, "Lord, if you let me live, I promise to share my memories and Your miracles. I will tell about what You did for us during

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World War II. I will tell about how You were there all the time caring for us and protecting us.”

She survived the surgery, and true to her word, she began to share her memories with me. At last she was able to add her factual memories to my tortured ones. At last she was able to affirm what I remembered.

When she first began recounting the stories, the memories that had been held back for so many years poured out in a torrent of words. She spoke fast and furious. We were here and there and this happened and that happened. It was such an outpouring that I would stop her and ask, “Was that in Germany or Poland? Were they Polish soldiers, German soldiers, or Russian soldiers?” Her answers were often rambling and fragmented. I was amazed, however, at the detail she included in her stories.

“There was *so* much!” she would say. “It’s hard for me to put it all in order. I’m not just remembering—I am there again!”

For two years, with difficulty, she shared her memories while I wrote furiously and taped her recollections. Then she had a stroke. Her communication skills were gone. I, the child Ela in this story, was the only one left to tell this true survival story. I was left with a picture puzzle of information, her pieces as well as mine. It was my task to put them all together. I’m sure there were many missing pieces, but I had enough to accomplish our goal: to tell the story of what God had done for our family. I’ve known that I would be the one to record it. I’ve known this was my obligation since I was in high school here in America. Many times I started to write my recollections but could not continue because the memories made me physically ill.

To me, this task seemed overwhelming. I felt like a little bug that had to climb Mt. Everest. Every time I approached it, I would experience terrible aching in the pit of my stomach and feelings of horror, as if something awful would happen again. I’d wake in the night thinking about it. My first thoughts in the morning were of having to write. This went on for many years.

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Once again I attempted this task. But this time was different. Several friends promised to pray for me as I wrote. I relied on our God to help me. Throughout Mother's life, her faith in God was unwavering, and it still is—even to this day. She has proven Him over and over again, and continues to trust Him completely. I can do no less!

For my mother, it was important that I keep the account true. "Don't add anything to the story," she often said. "The way our story unfolds is compelling enough; nothing needs to be added." The one thing she always stressed was that God was always there caring for each need, always protecting us in these incredible circumstances. Nothing else needed to be added.

So, the stories I'm going to tell you are about Aunt Zosia, my mother, and other family members; but more importantly the stories are a witness to God's grace and how He cared for one ordinary family. He gave us exactly what we needed, when we needed it. Because of Him we were able to survive a horrendous war, to survive against incredible odds.

The Journey Begins

“I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:20b



September 1946

“Eat your breakfast. You’ll need lots of energy today,” Wanda told her three young children. “We’ll be walking all day long and you need to be strong.”

“Mama, when we prayed today, why did you cry?” seven-year-old Ela asked as she poked at her plate of eggs.

“It’s because I’m so happy,” Wanda answered, not wanting her children to know the real reason and not wanting them to be anxious. “Soon we will be with your daddy. We will be together again and you will have a much better life.”

“But Mama,” Danek broke in, looking at his mother, “You said it would be a long time before we see our daddy. He lives far away, in England.” His logical, nine-year-old mind wanted to make sure that everything was clear.

The decision to leave Poland had not been easy to make. Through the Underground, Wanda had learned that her husband was alive and living in England. He had been captured as a

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prisoner of war, released through a miracle of God, and eventually joined the British army. She wondered if Józef knew that they were alive or where they had settled.

Passage to England could be arranged in the British Zone of West Germany, but only for immediate family members of British military personnel. In 1946 it was illegal to travel out of Poland without documents. The consequences could be fatal. How could she get through the heavily guarded borders? Then, how could she travel through Germany without documents?

“Will it be long before we cross the ocean on that huge ship?” her older son asked excitedly. Romek, in his ten years, had never seen a real ship, but his Aunt Zosia was a great storyteller. She often entertained the children with vivid descriptions of things she had seen and experienced.

“Sweetheart, only God knows that. We don’t know how He will guide us. When we get to safety, we will write to Daddy. He will come and get us. It may be a very long time or perhaps not.”

Not wanting to believe that it could be a long time, Romek excitedly plunged into his next sentence. “I can’t wait! The ship will be so long that I know I won’t be able to run from one end to the other without getting tired. I know! I’ll be safe on the ship and no one will stop me.”

“I’m going to eat ice cream all day long,” Danek interjected. Such an incredible opportunity had never approached him before. “I know you can ask for more, anytime you want, and it won’t cost anything.”

“We’re going to sleep way up high in the air on a bed that’s on top of another bed.” Romek stopped long enough to take a breath and raise another spoon of eggs to his thin face. “I’ll explore the whole ship and the captain will let me go to the front and steer the ship.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. You’ll choke!” Wanda admonished.

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“He has a white uniform with gold buttons,” Romek continued, ignoring his mother’s advice. “Aunt Zosia told me. She said that she saw a captain once. I can’t wait! We’re going to have so much fun!”

Wanda looked away from the table as tears filled her eyes. Her young son’s excitement pushed reality to the surface. The thought of parting from her precious mother, two sisters, and baby niece descended on her like a dark shroud. A heavy lump formed in her throat.

They had gone through so much together since World War II started. They had crossed war zones and dodged bombs. They hid from the enemy in ditches, in bombed-out buildings, in a cave, and in bomb shelters. They had prayed together and fasted together. After her little niece was born, Wanda and the others packed themselves into a cold cattle car and traveled in the middle of winter without heat, food, or drink. When they ran out of diapers, they all helped dry the diapers on their own bodies. They had suffered hunger together and thanked God for a crust of bread together. They had experienced more war than anyone should, and they were always together. How could they part now? If only they could all leave Poland together.

The days ahead were uncertain. Only God could know if they would survive and escape to freedom.

“Finish your breakfast, children. We need to leave very soon.” Wanda’s heart became unbearably heavy and full.

Quickly, she left the room and went outside behind the house to shed a few private tears and pray for strength and guidance. She lifted her eyes to heaven and said, “Only You know, dear God, if I shall ever see my mother and sisters again on this earth. Lord, I don’t want to leave them, but I feel I must—for my children. I don’t know what’s ahead. I don’t even know which direction to travel if we are able to cross the border. I’m so scared! Please give me courage for whatever is ahead. You have

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preserved us so many times before. I know you will be with us now. You are my God and I trust You.”

Wanda leaned against the stucco wall to compose herself before she returned to her children and gave herself permission to remember.



The summer of 1939 in Lublin, Poland, was ordinary and peaceful. Wanda had her little brood of healthy children; her husband, Józef, was earning a good living at his job. As most young couples, they had dreams, plans, and hopes for a bright future. Life was good.

Wanda’s four-year-old son, Romek, was an appealing little boy with curly dark hair and defined features. With a ready smile, he greeted everyone. Everyone was his friend. He was fun to be with because of his enthusiasm, vivid imagination, and talk of the huge plans he had for what he wanted to be when he grew up.

Two-year-old Danek was a fair-haired, round-cheeked child with large eyes and long, dark eyelashes that all the women in the neighborhood envied. What a plump, round little bundle of joy!

Ela was her youngest—born in March of 1939 with only Wanda’s sister Zosia present. Zosia was the only one there to help with the birth—no hospital, no doctors, no nurses. Everything went well and now Wanda felt that her family was complete.

Their apartment was on the first floor of a three story building on a street called The Third of May. Lublin was a beautiful, bustling city full of churches, cultural centers, and commerce. Miles and miles of fields and forests surrounded the city. It was an exciting place to live.

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Wanda remembered the summer of 1939 as a happy time. Whenever possible, she took her children to the neighborhood park. It was beautiful! The trees and flowers and grassy places were a welcome change from the streets and houses in the neighborhood. She loved to sit on a bench and muse while her boys played in the sandbox and her infant slept in the big wicker buggy with the wicker hood and large wheels. It was hard not to enjoy those moments. She loved the beautiful blue sky, fluffy clouds, and gentle breeze as it touched the cheeks of her precious children. She was content and grateful for all God had given her.

How quickly things changed! Rumors of war started tumbling out of the shadows till they loomed over everyone like a threatening, ugly cloud. First, a notice that her husband had to immediately report to the Polish military disrupted the family.

Then he was gone—gone before arrangements could be made about what to do next.

As if by instinct, families started to gather together for comfort and safety. Zosia came to help her sister with the children; next, Wanda's mother, Anna, and her other sister, Czesia, came from the country to be with her in case the war did start. Anna had some health issues and wasn't very strong. She wanted to be with her daughters and grandchildren. She left everything behind in her apartment and only took her daughter and a few necessities.

Czesia was disabled and still lived at home with her mother. She was born with a speech impediment. At that time in Poland, no medical help was offered to special needs children. She was regarded as a mentally disabled child and was never allowed to attend school. Despite her disability, she was strong, healthy, and a hard worker but she always stood in the background because she could not express herself clearly.

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Rumors of the impending war quickly became intense and everyone began to prepare. There was a buying frenzy. Quickly, everything disappeared from the shelves in the stores. All the non-perishable foods were carefully stored away in the homes. Bread was sliced and laid out on large, flat tins. These tins were taken to the baker, who put them at the back of his ovens to dry. Most households did not have ovens. Apples were peeled, cut in circles, and also dried at the bakery. Noodles were made using lots of eggs for protein. The dough was rolled out, cut, and laid out on bed sheets to dry.

During World War I, small bombs were thrown by hand from biplanes. Wanda remembered seeing them as she watched from her basement window as a child of five. During an air raid she could even see the pilot as the plane swooped low, close to the buildings. These bombs did not do a great deal of damage unless they made a direct hit. Remembering World War I, preparations were made as then.

Brown paper was cut in strips and glued to the windowpanes in a criss-cross pattern to keep the glass from shattering if a bomb should fall. Each home had two buckets by the door. One was filled with sand, the other with baking soda and water. Sand buckets with little shovels were also in the streets. The instructions were that if a bomb should fall, pour a little sand over it; when the fire is out, scoop it up with the little shovel and throw it away. They called these bombs “little golden eggs.”

The other bucket in the home had water and baking soda in it. If poisonous gasses were detected, alarms would sound. Everyone was instructed to immediately dip rags into the solution and stuff the rags under the doors and in all the cracks. A wet rag was to be placed over the mouth and nose of everyone, including babies. People joked and laughed about the gas even as they heeded the false alarms. As instructed, rags, clothing, and every bit of available material was soaked in the soda water, even

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baby pants. One lady in the building became so excited that she soaked her fur coat and hung it over her door.

As fall approached, radio reports told of Hitler's invasion. Everyone prepared for a quick escape. Only the most precious possessions and absolute necessities were packed. At Wanda's one suitcase was filled with dried apples and another had dried bread and other food items. The baby buggy was stuffed to the brim with supplies for the children. Everything was made ready for the flight. As the invasion of Lublin became imminent, everyone slept in his or her street clothes. Some even wore shoes to bed.

Early one morning, before war had reached Lublin, there was a knock on the door. Wanda was afraid to open it. It was much too early for visitors. She peeked out the window and saw to her utter amazement that her brother Bernard, from Gdynia, was there with his bicycle in tow. Quickly, she rushed to the door and opened it. Just as quickly, he pushed his way into the apartment and closed the door. His face was ashen—his voice shaking.

"What happened to you? Why are you here? Where is Natalia and your baby? Why did you leave Gdynia?" The questions poured out as his sisters and mother gathered around him. His eyes filled with tears as he started to unweave a terrible account:

"We were sleeping in our house—it was the middle of the night. Loud banging on our door woke us. Hitler's soldiers were at our door demanding to come in. They had rifles with bayonets attached and were pointing them right at us. We were told that we had half an hour to pack and leave the house. Half an hour! This was our house. How could they tell us to leave? What can you pack in half an hour? The soldiers stayed with us while we dressed and packed." He started to sob, but still wanted to continue.

"When we came out of our house we saw that all of our neighbors were in the street. We were all packed together like

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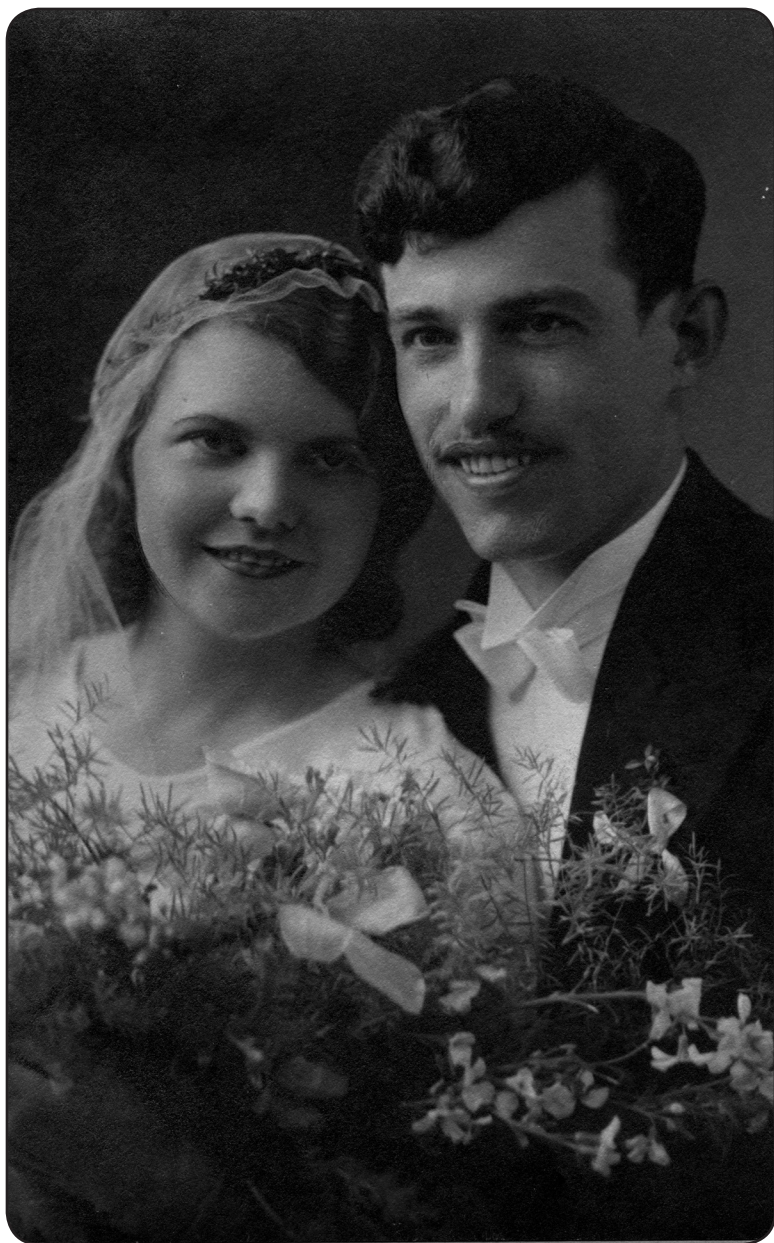
sardines. They told us we were going to be relocated because the Reich needed our houses. The mothers and young children were separated from the men and boys. Natalia and the baby went with one group and I went with another. Both groups marched to the station. I took my bicycle. The soldiers demanded that I leave it behind. I told them that I needed it as a support for my injured leg. I limped profusely to show them. I really hadn't injured my leg, but I had a plan.

“At the station we were all herded into cattle cars. Natalia was taken to one train and I was put on a different one. There were so many of us in the cattle car that we could not even sit down. We had to ride like that till almost dawn. At dawn, the train stopped outside of a little town. Some of the men and boys were chosen and told to get off. They were taken to dig ditches. Whispers alluded that they were digging graves for themselves. I didn't know what to think.

“The train stopped again, this time outside of Lublin. Hope sprang into my heart. Perhaps I could manage to escape and come to you. As men were selected to get off the train, I pushed into that group. I took my bicycle. Again the soldiers objected. Again I told them about my leg. When they saw how I limped, they let me keep the bicycle.

“As we walked toward a field at the edge of the woods, I limped profusely and slowed down until I was at the end of the line. When the soldiers weren't looking, I disappeared and hid in the woods. They didn't notice that I was gone. I hid till they were all out of sight. Then I came here.”

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Wedding photo of Wanda and Józef.