

My Grandmother's Rosary

My hand on the map

as if on an old scar.

Dunya Mikhail, *My Grandmother's Grave*

My grandmother's rosary does not look like much. It is small, a necklace of white glass beads slightly darkened with age, a small copper crucifix, and the back of the metal engraving showing Christ and the Holy Mother above the crucifix carries an inscription on the back that says "Your first Holy Communion" in German. As insignificant as it is to the world, to me it represents the life of my grandmother and the history of Central Europe like few other items.

My grandmother's name was Cäcilie, but we called her Cilly. My mum and dad worked when I was small, so after school I would stay with my grandparents until my parents picked me up in the evening. Cilly played cards and boardgames with me, helped me with homework, bought me sweets and books – and told me stories of her life. Listening to her experiences taught me about memory, history and identity, themes that I remain fascinated by. Her rosary is a direct link to all of this, and I often imagine her praying the decades of that rosary throughout the decades of her own life.

I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth

Cäcilie Barabasch was born in 1923 in the village of Lengainen in the German province of East Prussia, to a family of farmers. The region around the village was known as Warmia, *Ermland*, a bishopric originally created by the Teutonic Knights in 1250, then part of Poland from 1466 to 1772 when it became part of Prussia during the 1st Partition of Poland.

As the bishops were also the secular rulers, Warmia existed as a Catholic island through reformation and counter-reformation, and maintained a strong Catholic identity into the 20th Century despite being surrounded by Protestant lands.

Warmia was, and still is, a predominantly agrarian landscape full of melancholy, a region of fields, forests and lakes - and one of Europe's old cultural landscapes. People from all over Europe settled here over the centuries and had to arrange themselves - for better or worse - with those who had come before. In the 13th century, the Teutonic Order brutally colonised the pagan Prussian tribes living here and brought Christian, German-speaking settlers with them. After the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, Polish settlers from Mazovia arrived in turn. The people and languages intermingled, giving rise to a Warmian dialect and identity. In the 1910 census, almost 60 per cent of the population of the district stated that they spoke predominantly Polish. The district capital of Allenstein had its own Polish-language newspaper, the *Gazeta Olsztynska*, since 1866. The people here saw themselves - especially before the First World War and the subsequent nationalist fervor throughout Europe - as Warmians. Warmians who spoke German with one neighbour, the Warmian dialect with another, and Polish with a third.

Cilly's father Jan was active in the cultural activism of the Union of Poles in Germany, a Polish minority organisation that existed since 1922. It organised singing contests and scout groups, ran co-operative banks and Polish schools. So it was no wonder that all of Jan's children received Holy Communion age nine, where Cilly got her rosary. Later the same year, her father died of cancer.

Our Father in heaven

A year after her communion, the National Socialists, which always had a strong supporter

base in East Prussia, came to power. For a while, not much changed for the Poles in Warmia: the activities of the Union were allowed to continue, and while there was some anti-Polish propaganda in the newspapers in 1934 the new German Reich and Poland signed a declaration of non-aggression, pledging to resolve any issues by negotiations and forgo armed conflict for 10 years. But some smelled a rat. Cilly's brother Franz, also member of the Union, volunteered to become a spy for Poland when he joined the Wehrmacht in 1936, and remained one when he moved to Berlin for work two years later.

Cilly grew up as a feisty young woman, helping to run the farm while continuing her education in the nearby district town of Allenstein. But everything changed with the German attack on Poland in September 1939: Franz was redrafted into the Wehrmacht, and all activities of the Union of Poles were prohibited, its leaders arrested and sent to concentration camps where some were murdered. In 1940, Franz' espionage activity was uncovered, he was sentenced to death for treason and executed in 1942.

Hail Mary, full of grace

Warmia was a fertile region, and no one had to go hungry when the war turned against Germany in 1943. Being located far east also meant that no Allied bombers reached the cities of Allenstein or the province capital of Königsberg for a time. But in August 1944, a massive RAF bombing attack destroyed much of the centre of Königsberg, killing 5,000 and making 200,000 homeless. On the 13th of January 1945, following a massive artillery barrage, 1,7 million Red Army soldiers supported by 3,000 tanks began the East Prussia Offensive, sweeping aside the 500,000 German defenders of which 200,000 were teenagers and old men of the *Volkssturm* militia. The Red Army reached Allenstein and Lengainen nine days later. Unlike many others, Cilly's mother refused to flee as she had witnessed the Russian invasion of 1914 and was convinced the invaders would be pushed

back, like twenty years before. The family stayed, and suffered the mass rapes of the pillaging soldiers. Cilly never explicitly spoke about her own experiences, but told me stories about “all the young women, even pregnant ones, taken to the barn...”.

Her suffering did not end there. In February 1945 she became one of a million female forced labourers from central and eastern Europe deported to the Soviet Union, where she spent four years in a number of camps in the Urals - the first two years in horrible circumstances where many of her comrades died of malnutrition, disease or work accidents. She had left the farm with a set of clothes and some supplies, but most of that was taken from her. What she did manage to keep - and hide and protect from any overeager camp guards or thieving inmates - was the rosary.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

Cilly survived the GUPVI, Главное управление по делам военнопленных и интернированных НКВД/МВД СССР, a Soviet camp system related to the infamous GULAG. In 1948 she established mail contact with her family again and learned that some family members had made it to West Germany, that her mother had stayed behind in Lengainen and others had not survived the war. Her older brother Bruno was forced to join the Wehrmacht at the end of 1944 and went missing in action somewhere in Czechoslovakia. Her young brother Bruno had volunteered to join the Nazi paratroopers and was killed on his first mission in January 1945, aged 17. In 1949 Cilly was released, and she - and the rosemary - went from the Urals mountains to join her family in newly founded West Germany. Warmia had become part of the so-called “Recovered Territories”, the German provinces of Pomerania, East southern East Prussia and Silesia that had become part of postwar Poland after 1945 by decision of the Allies. While many Protestant Germans from nearby fled the Red Army or were forced to leave later, some Catholic

Warmians decided to stay in the People's Republic of Poland, where Lengainen had now officially become Łęgajny. After 1945, there was also another group of new arrivals to Warmia: Polish expellees were resettled here when the eastern regions of pre-war Poland fell to Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, also by decision of the Allies. Otilie died in Łęgajny in 1953, without ever seeing Cilly again.

Her daughter settled in the small town of Solingen in North-Rhine Westphalia, where she fell in love with quiet man ten years her age named Willi, also displaced from his home in Pomerania, got married, and gave birth to my father in 1951. At some point in the previous decade she had lost her trust in the Catholic Church. She stopped going to mass, and agreed for my father to be baptised Protestant like her husband. She remained a believer, but her faith now became a private one.

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy

I was born in 1977, and growing up she was for me, at first, a proverbial German granny with impeccable cooking skills who dished up perfect chicken cutlets with cucumber salad, the richest chicken soup and my favourite dish, *Königsberger Klopse*, veal meat balls East Prussian style. She mostly spoke German with my brothers and I, and I loved listening to her stories of sleigh rides to church, of howling wolves in the woods, of helping her brothers on the fields in autumn. Only when her sisters visited would she sometimes lapse into Polish, or rarely shout at my father in Russian when she was angry. But her experiences during the war and after had not made her bitter, had not made her give up.

Cilly's refusal to become dominated by her traumatic experiences had a profound effect on me. With her stories of a lost home and the survival in the camps, with her resilience and humour she became a key inspiration for me. I continue to find traces of her in the

shadows of the past: two years back I discovered that she, as Cecylia Barabasz, went to the Polish school in Olsztyn for almost ten years. But when she left the Soviet Union and arrived in Solingen, she left the Polish part of herself behind. Like so many other displaced people, in exile she reinvented herself.

Cilly died in 2009. My father gave me her rosemary after her death, and even though I'm not religious I wore it on my wedding day, and when I went to find my great-grandmother's grave in the Polish Voivodeship of Warmia-Mazury, which I now visit often. Căcilie/Cecylia/Cilly, and the rosemary with the German inscription given to a Polish-speaking girl, have taught me that we don't need to fear the past.