

# Noemi Kovacs: Grandparents, Grand Stories: The Legacy of My Family's World War II Experiences

“Grandparents, grand stories” - great grandparents, intriguing war stories. As in many Polish families, the history of my ancestors, who lived during the Second World War, is filled with turbulent and traumatic experiences. In my essay, I would like to present their traumatic experiences, which left a mark on subsequent generations of my family.

Among the many powerful stories passed down in my family, one stands out as a testament to survival and resilience—my great-grandfather Sławomir Wojciech Łabecki's harrowing experience in Auschwitz concentration camp. On August 12, 1940, he was detained during a street raid on Marszałkowska Street in Warsaw, then arrested and held in the Pawiak prison. Three days later, on August 15, 1940, on the orders of the commander of the SiPo (Sicherheitspolizei) and SD (Sicherheitsdienst), he was deported along with 1666 people to the Auschwitz camp. There, he was given the camp number 2602. Later in life, he often shared stories about his time in that dreadful place. He always said that no book, no film can convey the cruelty and brutality of the Nazi executioners. I will now describe a few experiences that have been passed on to me from the stories he told. My great-grandfather, who was eighteen at the time, was an athletic and clever young man. Before the war, he played sports intensively in the Warsaw AZS (Academic Sports Association in Warsaw), which helped him a lot in fulfilling the inhumane camp orders, such as running around the square for many hours until the prisoners were utterly exhausted...



*Sławomir Łabecki - photo ca. 1936*

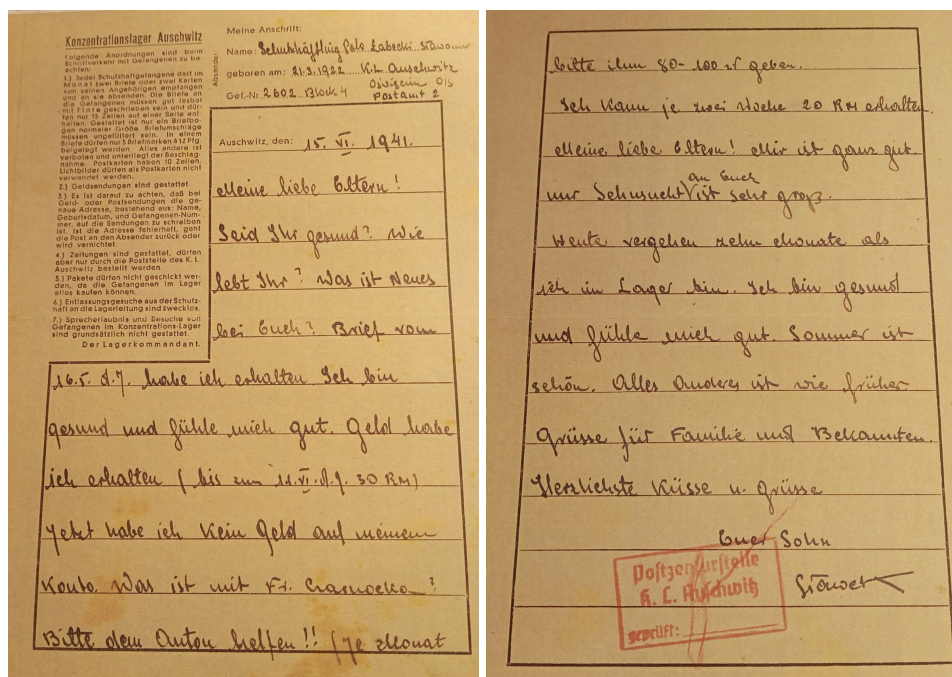
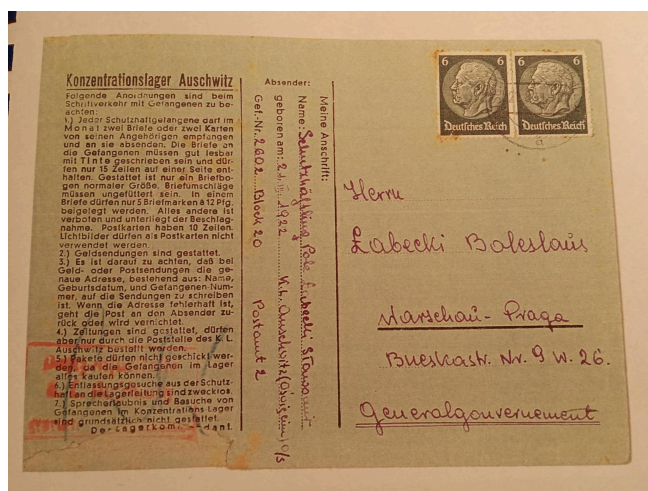
According to the rules in Auschwitz, each prisoner received a monthly ration of bread and cigarettes. Sławomir quickly realized that the amount of bread he received would not be enough to survive. Therefore, shortly after receiving his ration, he decided to exchange some of his bread for cigarettes with fellow prisoners at first. When his food ran out, he began

exchanging his cigarettes for bread. He noticed that cigarettes were much more important to addicted prisoners than bread. Thanks to this, he did not starve to death. Another factor that contributed to the fact that my great-grandfather survived, was his good physical condition. It saved him from the effects of the typhus-causing bacteria, which was injected into him during the medical experiments conducted at Auschwitz.

One of my great-grandfather's stories concerned the daily morning assembly at the camp, during which individual professional groups were selected to perform work inside or sometimes even outside the camp. Sławomir willingly volunteered as a carpenter or bricklayer, for example, just to be assigned to work outside and leave the camp for some time. He knew that on this occasion, he could use additional food, such as fruit from the orchard. At times, there happened to be SS soldiers who, while on a work trip, allowed prisoners to eat everything they found on the way. Given the fact that by doing so they risked their own lives, before returning to the camp they would look into each prisoner's mouth and check if there was any food left in it. My great-grandfather also sometimes encountered "more empathetic" commandants. One day he was asked by an SS soldier to buy a sandwich from the canteen for him. After bringing it to him, the German bit it and threw it in the trash, then ordered: "Take it away!" This was a sign that Sławomir had the right to eat it.

My ancestor showed great cunning in the camp life, for example, by refusing to let a fellow prisoner persuade him to work in the crematorium despite receiving a much larger portion of food. He knew that after a few months, these workers themselves ended up in the gas chambers, because the Nazis tried to do everything to cover up all traces of their crimes. Part of it here was getting rid of the witnesses of their brutal actions. A further experience that Sławomir underwent was during the morning assembly at Auschwitz. He said that the most terrible moment in the camp was when the Nazis randomly selected faces in the morning, and then sentenced these prisoners to death. No one knew whether it was better to look at the ground or in front of you in these moments...

In addition to his daily struggle for survival, Sławomir found ways to stay connected to his family, offering a small glimmer of hope in the midst of horror during his time for an entire year and a half he spent in Auschwitz. His son, my grandfather, is in possession of letters which he sent to his parents, Izabella and Bolesław Łabecki. Due to Nazi censorship, there are holes in them from cut-outs. My great-grandfather wrote the letters in German, and he was forced to lie in them. For example, he wrote that the camp was very pleasant, that he had plenty of food and great conditions. However, he still decided to reveal additional information about the place. For example, he always asked the question, whether Wojtuś (his middle name) would soon be leaving the hospital. This meant that he was asking his parents whether it would soon be possible to get him out of the camp. Like all parents in this situation, Izabella and Bolesław were looking for every available option to free their son.



My great-grandfather's letters sent to his parents from Auschwitz

My great-great-grandmother Izabella, his mother, even wrote to Adolf Hitler himself asking for her son's release. After long effort, in early 1942 she managed to reach a high-ranking SS commandant in Warsaw. She gave him everything she had in exchange for releasing Slawomir from the camp. When my great-grandfather heard that he was being summoned to the capital, he was certain that his inevitable death was approaching. "My legs buckled under me," he recalled when telling about this moment. Slawomir was escorted to the city and after a long talk with the commandant, he was released. Thus he decided to return to his family home in Warsaw. He didn't even have time to finish his soup when he realized that the Nazis were approaching his home to arrest him again and deport him back to Auschwitz once again, so he quickly escaped through the back door. Three days after this event, he learned that the superiors of the commandant who had released him had discovered how his subordinate was earning money. As a result of the truth coming to light, the commandant committed suicide. Slawomir was extremely lucky to have survived Auschwitz.

While my great-grandfather Sławomir's survival in Auschwitz was marked by cunning and luck, my other great-grandfather, Zdzisław Staweno (1923-2022), faced his own set of trials in the brutal reality of war-torn Warsaw. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to meet him in real life. The war started when it was the end of his summer holidays, which he spent as a sixteen-year-old boy in his family home near Łódź, in the town of Grotniki. His parents were in the city at the time. Due to the fact that bombs had fallen not far from their apartment in Łódź, they came to visit their son, terrified. The house was located near the railway tracks, on which the Germans dropped more bombs to prevent the transport of soldiers wounded in the Battle of Kutno (September 1939). As a result of all this, the family eventually left for Warsaw. Before the war, my great-grandfather was living in luxurious conditions and he was an only child, but during the war he lost everyone and was left all alone.



*A pre-war photo, Zdzisław in high school, second from the right in the first row - ca. 1938*

One of the situations he told me about during the occupation was when he was suddenly checked for identity on the street and a gun was put to his head. He lay there for an hour with his face against the pavement. He recalled that he was certain of death. Zdzisław kept wondering and worrying about how his mother would react if her son didn't come home. Only the documents he had saved him. Fortunately he was released.

While Zdzisław fought to survive in the chaos of Warsaw, another heartbreaking chapter of his life unfolded—one that would forever change his understanding of loss. It all took place on August 6, 1944, the sixth day of the Warsaw Uprising. At that time, he lived in Warsaw at 45 Grójecka Street. Because of the so-called bestial and vicious Vlasov army, acting on Hitler's orders, dragging residents out of their tenement houses, my great-grandfather, along with his mother, uncle, and neighbors, hid in the basement of their



house. At some point, the soldiers entered and began to lead everyone outside in the dark. Zdzisław felt an inner voice telling him that he had to stay inside and not go anywhere. He immediately hid, and his mother Florentyna, being taken away, covered at the last moment with a blanket. After leading people out, the Vlasovs set the basement on fire. My great-grandfather, in despair, thought that there was no salvation for him. He decided to just lay down on the ground and he waited for the worst. At that moment, Zdzisław felt a gust of cold air. He began to crawl towards it. In this way he managed to escape, but unfortunately this was not the end yet... He ran to the apartment on the third floor, ate the jam that had been left behind and decided to escape. However, on the stairs leading to the exit of the building he met a drunk, Russian-speaking soldier. He once again experienced a situation in which someone was pointing a gun at his face. Considering that before escaping he had taken the remains of the family gold with him, he saved his life. Zdzisław gave the soldier everything that he had. Luckily the man accepted the gold and let him go. After leaving the building, Zdzisław was afraid that he could be shot from behind anytime. The first thing he did was to look for his mother and uncle (his father Tomasz had died of natural causes two years earlier). He found only his uncle's jacket, which was full of blood. He never saw his beloved mother again, nor did he learn what fate had befallen her. Zdzisław headed South to Pruszków in the hope that he would find her there. Walking through the streets of Warsaw full of rubble, he saw smoke and fire rising from every side. In Pruszków he fell into the hands of the Nazis again. Along with hundreds of other residents of Warsaw, he was led out by the occupiers. At one point, he saw a hole in a fence. Without thinking, he jumped through it and hid in the grass. Zdzisław lay there for several hours. When everything quieted down, he got up and knocked on the door of a nearby house. He came across good people who provided him with food and shelter for a short period of time. From that moment on, he had to cope in life on his own.

The resilience in my great-grandfather's story is mirrored by the strength of the women in my family, such as my great-grandmother Hanna Węglińska (1925-2006), the wife of my great-grandfather Zdzisław, along with her family, whose experiences during the war reflect the determination and sacrifice of the time. During the war, Hanna commuted by train from Płudy, her hometown, to Warsaw for secret classes to study. One day she wanted to get on the train, but suddenly, a certain German soldier, who was standing on the platform said to her: "If you want to go to a concentration camp, you may get on the train." Terrified, she quickly left the train station and returned home. This man probably saved her life with his warning. Hanna was also preparing to fight in the Warsaw Uprising. On August 1, she announced to her parents that she had to go get milk. Her father knew perfectly well what was behind it. He discovered her plans to go to Warsaw, and he categorically forbade her from leaving the house. Michał Węgliński (1895-1969), as he was called, also helped the nuns in Płudy to hide dozens of Jewish orphans during the war. My great-grandmother's family, mentioned above, survived a bombing raid on their home. Everyone was in the house at the time, which was suddenly destroyed by the bombs. My great-grandmother managed to hide under the piano. Her mother, my great-great-grandmother Władysława, prayed throughout the entire war with the following words: "I shall lose everything, but no one shall die". It seems that at that very moment her prayers were answered.

*Hanna Węglińska (Staweno) - photo ca. 1947*



While Hanna's family faced their own dangers during the war, another notable member of my family, Jakub Gordon (1910-1975), my great-grandmother Hanna's brother in law, endured horrors that would leave a lasting scar on his life. Jakub came from a Jewish family living in Vilnius, and he was a doctor. During the war, on July 12, 1942, he was arrested and tortured in a prison in Grodno for providing medical assistance to war partisans. He witnessed brutal executions of fellow prisoners. In November 1942, he was sent to the camp in Kielbasin, where terrible conditions prevailed, such as hunger, lack of water, and violence. In January 1943, he was transported to Auschwitz, where only 345 of the entire transport of 2,650 people survived. He was given and tattooed the number 92,627, which remained on his forearm for the rest of his life. His first family: his parents, his first wife and four-year-old son, were murdered in the gas chambers on June 22, 1943. Jakub initially worked hard in the camp building roads. When he realized that he did not have enough strength for such hard work, he asked for a job that was in line with his medical education. He became a camp medic. My uncle Gordon's testimony, which he gave on May 17, 1945 in front of judge Jan Sehn, was recorded after the war during the trial of Rudolf Heß. This can be found on the website "Chronicles of Terror". Jakub remained in the camp until its liberation in 1945. On the last night, the Germans ordered him to bring all the documents and burn them in a huge bonfire lit in the square. He could have left this terrible place immediately, but as a doctor he decided not to leave sick fellow prisoners sentenced to help. He was with them until the very end. From family stories I recall the fact that this man did not want to talk much about the brutality and crimes he had witnessed. After the war, for many years he wore short sleeves in the winter, saying that he was hot...



*Jakub Gordon - photo ca. 1935*

In conclusion, the war experiences of my ancestors described above shook me deeply. I admire their inner strength, cleverness and charisma that characterized them. I am also impressed that after such traumatic experiences they were able to build their own family after the war and raise my grandparents. Their incredible strength, wit, and resilience inspire me to face life's challenges with perseverance. I would very much like their stories to not be forgotten in the future, and for the next generations of my family to learn about them.