

European Network Remembrance and Solidarity

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**Slipping Through Our Fingers:
My Family's Journey to Preserve Grandpa's War Memories**

An essay written for the competition:
“Grandparents. Grand stories. The Closest Stories from World War II”

Warsaw, March 2025

One piece of a puzzle at the time

- *So what exactly happened to great-grandpa Piotr during the war?*

The question I asked during a family dinner has caused quite a turmoil as my relatives could not come up with one coherent sequence of events. Everything was dim and blurry, each person had a different piece of information that we tried to fit into a story, just like playing with puzzles. Even though I had never met him, it felt as if we let grandpa slip through our fingers and our connection with him started to fade. And we have not even noticed. We decided that our family's history had to be maintained. We have to remember. With that being said, my task became to conduct and record interviews with my relatives who happen to remember stories told by my great-grandfather.

He was born and raised in Bukówiec Górny- a village located in Wielkopolska, Poland and these territories were still ruled by Prussia when grandpa was born in 1911. He finished primary school and became a bricklayer, even though he truly wanted to work as a woodworker. Unfortunately, his family just couldn't afford to buy all the required tools while there were seven children at home to feed. When he received his call to arms, he had already met his future wife, Helena. She promised to wait for him, not knowing if he would ever come back. He, on the other hand, had no idea she would be forcefully displaced with the local priest to be his servant.

***"So that there is never a time when you have to share a wild berry"*¹**

Grandpa was sent to the front without a gun and wearing shoes a few sizes too big. He recalled a bridge he was crossing during the September Campaign, running over dead bodies while bullets were flying right above his head. Once he looked behind himself to see if he had not lost his oversized shoes, the bridge was blown out, but he managed to cross it safely. Eventually, he was captured by the Soviets and found out that his true hardships were just about to start. Cramped up in a cattle wagon so tightly that fainting people were not even able to fall to the ground, he was taken to a Russian tserkov. The cold was slowly draining him with each passing day, his coat was constantly freezing to the ground and his empty stomach was playing up as he was forced to share a single potato with others. The sense of cold and hunger became his constant association with Russia for the rest of his life.

We have no idea about his exact whereabouts in the East, as every family member lists different city names from his stories which, on the other hand, have already started to mix with pieces of information they have read or heard somewhere on the TV or the Internet.

- *What about Gniezdowo? Didn't he mention that one?*
- *Gniezdowo? There was something!*

¹ Original fragment of the interview: *"Żeby nigdy nie było czasu, że się poziomką będziecie musieli dzielić"*. It was a common phrase for grandpa to repeat while talking about his captivity time in Russia and hunger he experienced there.

- *But did he actually mention it or was it in this one movie we have watched recently together?*
- *I cannot really tell...*

Grandpa did not want to use specific names to protect his family, but my relatives claim to remember him mentioning Charków, Kozielsk, Starobielsk, Ostaszków and Różan from time to time. He preferred to refer to his captivity in Russia generally as Katyń.

Soviet Union, decided to kill Polish intellectuals and military personnel to get rid of potential rioters against the communist system. Russian method of recognizing them was based on the look of their hands. Soft palms were meant to signify a non-physical profession, most likely officers or academics. Grandpa, having spent a few months in captivity, showed his smooth hands to a soldier and the next thing he remembered was a gun directed towards him. He was meant to be executed, but a young bilingual woman started translating for him. Supposedly she was not convincing enough and they directed a gun towards him again. The woman begged them to spare him and the miracle happened- they let him go. He escaped inescapable. He survived Katyń.

A few days later he was looking at Poland through cracks in the cattle wagon he was put in as he was transported to Germany for captives exchange. There he worked in the iron mines near Hanover and all we know is that he eventually joined the ranks of the Anders' Army. He never wanted to give away any details on that to protect his family from any harm that they could face from the communist regime. Photos and a military uniform he brought back home in 1946 posed the only testimony of his affiliation there. *"If he survived that war, he must have had something in him,"* says Piotr, his grandson. And I could not agree more.

Anna, his granddaughter, remembers grandpa when he was already old, waking up from his nap stiff and unstrung. He tended to mutter *"Oh, Jesus! I am at home!"*². He admitted that once he was closing his eyes, he was in this tserkov again, with his coat frozen to the ground so he never dared to move in his sleep. Even though he was physically away from Katyń, he carried the trauma of these events back home with him and those never let him sleep peacefully ever again. Because this is what war is. It breaks people. Innocent people.

The uniform whispers in the distance

What happened to the uniform?

- *No one knows.*
- *Someone, someone is lying...*³

And just like that, one of the last remaining pieces reminding our family of grandpa is gone. It was a source of remembrance and kept him alive in our memory with multiple stories tied to it. One

² Original fragment of the interview: *"Ło Jezu, jo żym jest w domu"*

³ Original fragment of the interview: *"Ktoś tutaj coś kręci"*

day, at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, grandpa was coming back from his work at a brickyard. He was slowly approaching home, when two silhouettes of his oldest grandchildren appeared on the street, wearing his Anders' Army uniform. He quickly ripped the eagle emblem off the forage cap, grabbed the boys and urged them to go inside. It was the first time my aunt saw him shaking in fear, explaining them that they could not show the uniform outside for other people to see. If the communist regime had found out, grandpa would have gone to prison. That was the moment they realised the weight grandpa has been carrying on his shoulders all this time.

I embody this military uniform with the way my family preserves the memory of our grandparents and their experience with war. For many years it stayed hidden in the old wardrobe in the attic, slowly getting eaten by moths. Taken out occasionally, was teaching about the cruelty of war and forewarning about it. However, as soon as grandpa passed away in July 1987, people kept on taking a look at it less and less. It obviously stayed somewhere in the back of their heads, but the facts started mixing and became vague. Eventually, it became forgotten and disappeared without anyone knowing what actually had happened to it.

The same pattern unveils how we pass the knowledge to the next generations. At first, grandpa was sharing his memories at home, forbade to spread it at school or on the street, scared of the government apparatus. But no one acknowledged the value of these testimonies. While helping her daughter with handicrafts at the kitchen table or when he was going for a walk with his grandchildren, words kept on spilling out but there was no one to write them down. And once he was gone, only unclear pieces of information remained. Because of the fast lifestyle, we stopped talking about it. Children who do not remember him, do not really know our family's history.

I believe it can be changed. Even though it is not possible for us to gather information first-hand, we can write down everything we remember and restore the memory of our grandparents. This, along with conversations, are the only ways for younger generations to receive the message grandpa tried to convey: *"God, forbid war!"*⁴. With that being said, maybe there is still a chance to find a uniform as well.

New beginnings

If you could meet grandma Helena and grandpa Piotr what would you like to tell them?

- *A man regrets that he knows too little, that he asked too little. Maybe I also had broken something my grandfather owned, then I would apologize to him [laughs].*
- *I would also say that now [as an adult], I am capable of understanding them better than before.*

⁴ Original fragment of the interview: *"Nie daj Boże wojny!"*

- *Why did we ask so little? Or didn't even want to listen? And now we wish they could come back [...] Everyone would probably want someone who has already passed away to come back and tell something, right?*
- *I would like to sit with them over a cake, over a tea [...]*

The process of conducting interviews has become an incredible journey not only for me but for my entire family. I have noticed while talking to my cousins that they know very little about our great-grandparents and their experience during the war as they do not remember them and their relatives do not bring this topic up anymore. Starting a discussion, invoking memories and writing them down renewed our bond with grandpa and our heritage. It is just the beginning of the process of re-discovering stories of our ancestors so they could stay with us for a little bit longer. It is time now to preserve our memories of grandma Helena while we still can.

I would also like this essay to give voice my grandpa Piotr and spread the message he tried to convey. War is the absolute evil that leaves scars on innocent people who are never able to heal afterwards. We have to keep this awareness alive to stop history from repeating. Unfortunately, detached from our roots, we forget about stories of our ancestors or the cruelty they had to experience and eventually we detached from them. However, current times clearly show us that we have to change this approach immediately if we do not want our grandchildren to write essays about us the same way I am writing about my grandpa right now.

Sources:

This work is entirely based on the interviews collected by the author of the essay with descendants of Piotr Mocek and Helena Mocek nee Bura. Interviews were conducted with two of his daughters, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

No other sources were used in the writing process.

Comments:

All participants expressed their consent to use their names and statements in this work.

Interviews mentioned above were conducted in Polish and translated into English by the author. Some of the phrases, whose exact messages author considered difficult to convey in translation (e.g. due to the use of a local dialect), contain references with original fragments of interviews in the footnotes.

Capacity of the essay (excluding title page, sources and comments): 9,595 characters with spaces.