

Grandparents. Grand Stories.

Emilia Połńska

The story of four countries and one fate

Grandparents. Grand Stories.

Emilia Polońska
The story of four countries and one fate

I

Treasure



The Gadowski Family, June 1966, Łysakowo, Mazury, Poland

This photograph is a treasured family keepsake, tying my fate to Poland's turbulent 20th-century history. It captures five people: my great-grandmother Janina Gadowska, my great-grandfather Stanisław Gadowski, their grandson, three-year-old Sławomir Jaszczuk, the parish priest of St. Wojciech from Nidzica, and an unnamed young neighbor, a participant in the religious lessons held at their home. This image preserves one of the few happy moments in a family whose fate was marked by the dramatic events of World War II and the hardships of postwar communist Poland.

Stanisław Gadowski

Stanisław Gadowski was born on August 7, 1909, in Nowiny, Ludwipol commune, Kostopol county, in the Volhynia region. He was the son of Bolesław Gadowski, originally from the Kielce governorate, and Leokadia Księżopolska, born in Annowola, Kostopol county. He had seven siblings, including brothers Franciszek and Zygmunt.

Before the war, he was a well-known and respected craftsman: a carpenter, joiner, and cooper. He could bend wood and build wagons, sleds, barrels, buckets, and church scaffolding. His skills made him one of the best craftsmen in the area. In 1936, he married Janina Grabowska. Together, they bought land and a forest in Nowiny, near Kostopol, building a home and quickly becoming prosperous landowners through hard work.

In 1943, Stanisław was drafted into the 1st Polish Army, formed in Sielce on the Oka River. He tried every possible means to avoid service, even falsifying his birthdate. As a soldier in

Grandparents. Grand Stories.

Emilia Polońska

The story of four countries and one fate

the 1st Infantry Division, he fought in the Battle of Kołobrzeg and the capture of Berlin. Severely wounded, he returned to Łysakowo in 1946. He never spoke about the war, only hinting that the NKWD always shot people in the back. With the help of the Red Cross, he found his wife Janina and their daughters, including my grandmother Jadwiga, born in Nowiny in 1941, on the former German lands in Mazury.

Settling in a German house in Łysakowo, he never considered it his own, always expecting its previous owner to return. He occupies a former German house in Łysakowo, not seeing it as his property, but rather as a pretext to complain about this new, foreign reality. The fence, the roof, the walls, even the rosebush visible in the photo, were not his; they belonged to the German who could return at any moment. He longed for what was his—there, far away: his house, workshop, homestead, and beloved horses.

For the rest of his life, he ran a carpentry workshop, earning the respect of the locals, the displaced people from Bug region (pl. *Zabużanie*) whom he treated like family, the foreign Ukrainians (the Salonik family), the newcomers from Mława (the Malinowski family, perhaps still looked down upon), and the indigenous Mazurians who ordered cartwheels from him in broken Polish. He never joined the cooperative and, despite numerous invitations and penalties (for private initiative), he refused to become a member of the State Agricultural Farm (pl. *PGR*) in Łysakowo.

He was the first in the village to own a radio, then a Junak motorcycle, and finally a television. His home became an unofficial community center, where neighbors gathered to listen to news or watch TV. In 1953, following a neighbor's denunciation, he was arrested by the UB (secret police). As a radio owner and a listener of Radio Free Europe, he was deemed a threat to the communist regime. After brutal interrogations in Nidzica, he remained silent for years, never revealing what had happened to him.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, his home hosted religious lessons for children, as religious education was banned in schools. A priest from Nidzica visited regularly, and every village child was welcome. However, his daughters, labeled as "kulak's children," were denied scholarships and other government support for workers' and peasants' children, completing their education only as adults.

Stanisław died in 1979 from lung cancer. His funeral became a major event in the Łysakowo community. My grandmother remembers the long procession of people paying their respects—an acknowledgment of his honesty, kindness, and work ethic.

Janina Gadowska

Janina was the daughter of Adam Grabowski and Florentyna Gromczyńska, who had moved from the Kielce region to Volhynia when she was sixteen.

Grandparents. Grand Stories.

Emilia Polońska

The story of four countries and one fate

In 1937, at the age of twenty-two, she rejected the advances of a suitor named Michał and married Stanisław Gadowski. Together, they settled in Nowiny, Ludwipol commune, Kostopol county, Volhynia, leading a typical rural life—waking at 4 AM, washing clothes in the Słucz River, picking mushrooms and berries, tending animals, farming, and caring for the garden, orchard, and beehives.

In 1943, Janina was left alone with their two daughters—Jadwiga, born in 1941, and Maria, two years younger. The true tragedy was not her husband's draft into the army but the Volhynian massacres. She had to flee multiple times from advancing bands of Ukrainian nationalists. Her father, Adam Grabowski, fluent in Ukrainian and Polish, tried to maintain good relations with local militia members, but it was futile. One of his daughters had married a Ukrainian man, only to be murdered by him. Janina must wrap her children in quilts and flee to the forest. There, her brother Stanisław serves in the underground AK army. They hide, but they must somehow survive. The worst experience – the summer of 1944 – if it hadn't been for the thick rye stalks and the escape, she would have ended up like her uncle Michał and aunt Antonina, on a pile of manure with pierced backs, breasts severed with a sickle, and their children nailed to a tree with barbed wire.

In 1945, as soon as repatriation became possible, the entire family was deported to an unknown destination. The train could have taken them north to Olsztyn or west to Wrocław. By chance, they stopped at the Nidzica station to water the cows traveling with them in cattle wagons. They remained there, in a foreign and unfamiliar land. She clung to her parents—her only protectors, with her husband still at war. Like Stanisław, she never felt at home in Łysakowo. She compared the apples, soil, and honey of Volhynia with longing until her death in 1997, understanding that individuals are powerless against history.

II

Irony of fate

The story of the Gadowski family, intertwined with the dramatic events of the 20th century, serves not only as a testimony to individual fates but also as an opportunity for reflection on the forces that shaped the lives of many Polish families. The tragedy of their fate lies in the conviction that the values they lived by—honesty, hard work, and attachment to the land—found no recognition at any stage of their historical journey.

Before the war, the Gadowskis lived according to simple traditions and values: devotion to their land, family, diligent work, integrity, and respect for tradition. Their lives could have remained peaceful, yet the outbreak of World War II altered their fate forever. The war blurred the lines between victims and perpetrators, forcing the family into a tragic situation—on the run, and ultimately repatriated to the western territories.

Grandparents. Grand Stories.

Emilia Polońska

The story of four countries and one fate

Even after the war, their fate was subject to further brutal transformations. The communist regime, though not as ruthless as wartime terror, forced them to adapt to a system that rewarded values foreign to them. Although Stanisław Gadowski, despite the hardships of war, was a respected craftsman in Łysakowo, he never fully benefited from the opportunities the new system supposedly offered. His life—and the fate of his children—reveals how harshly post-war Poland treated those who refused to take part in the "construction of a better tomorrow."

Regardless of the era—interwar Poland, wartime, or the communist years—the Gadowskis faced a constant struggle against a system that did not recognize their way of life. Common sense, diligence, and devotion to their home and land clashed with political favoritism, sycophancy, and informers. Missed opportunities, unfulfilled potential, and lost educational paths all reflect how political systems, regardless of their form, dominated their lives, marginalizing the very qualities that should have been rewarded in any just society.

The tragedy of my family, like that of millions of others, lies in the repetition of the same mechanisms from generation to generation: rejection, suffering, and loyalty to values that had no place in a reality governed by different principles. The grief and disappointment left in the wake of these failed attempts shaped the future of the family.

The history of the Gadowskis is not only a record of individual destinies but also a universal truth about the fate of many Polish families. Shifting political regimes and changing realities, in which honesty, hard work, and respect for tradition held no place, left people with a sense of injustice. Their lives became a series of sacrifices that were never properly recognized by the system. And though this tragedy may not be visible in the grand narratives of history, in the small, everyday experiences of families like the Gadowskis, it cast a long and lasting shadow over generations.

III

This is not the end.

The fate of my great-grandparents from the Gadowski family intertwines in fascinating ways with the history of my great-grandparents on my father's side—Sergiusz Nosowy, from Yaroslavl near Moscow, an officer of the Red Army, and his wife, my great-grandmother Helena Makarewicz, a native of Vilnius. They married in Vilnius in 1943, after the Red Army occupied the region. Together, they marched with the Soviet Army toward Berlin and lived there until 1950. Upon returning, the Nosowy family settled in the Rossa district, home to other military officers, and my grandfather worked at the Vilnius military airport until the end of his days.

I am, therefore, an outcome of history—a historical anomaly woven from the fates of two profoundly different worlds: on my mother's side, the tangled destinies of Poles from the southern Kresy; on my father's, the blended histories of Poles from the northern Kresy. My

Grandparents. Grand Stories.

Emilia Polońska

The story of four countries and one fate

lineage carries within it a deep awareness of history's power—the way it can entangle the great events of four nations—Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and Lithuania—within the life of a single teenage girl.

My heritage is not just a collection of dates and facts; it is a story of people who, in the face of war and political upheaval, had to redefine their identity, preserve their traditions and family bonds, and build new lives wherever fate cast them. My life is a continuation of these stories, which still live within me, reminding me that every family carries not just a past, but also the strength to shape the future.

This is the true story of four countries and one fate...



Great-grandmother Helena, née Makarewicz, with great-grandfather Sergiusz Nosowy, Vilnius, 1943, Lithuania (?)