

*"Stories were gifts and treasures she was given, and Judith nourished, respected and shared them."*

Demon Salesa's foreword to Judith Binney, *Encounters Across Time*

*"History is the shaping of the past by those living in the present."*

Judith Binney, *Encounters Across Time*

There is a geographical, social and historical distance between New Zealand and Poland, where I come from, but inspiration to discover one's roots can come from all sorts of places and events. I have wanted to write my family history for many years. Without a training as a historian and with access only to the oral histories passed down to my mother by her grandparents and parents, I felt unprepared, as if knowledge needed authorization that I have not been given. My sentiment changed as I encountered a book by New Zealand historian Judith Binney about the oral histories of Māori indigenous tribes argues for the validity of such stories as sources of knowledge. I began to question - what have I been given instead? Which stories were gifts to me, which have I nourished and respected yet continuously hesitated to share?

I can trace my close ancestry, great-grandparents and grandparents, to Polish villagers and German middle-class settlers in Mazovia, living south and north of Warsaw respectively. As my knowledge of their stories is fragmentary, passed onto me by my mother, I present the following text in the form of four vignettes - brief glimpses into the lived experiences of one particular member of my family, my great-grandmother Karolina Jabłońska. They reveal and again veil those moments that form history even if only silently and in brief intermissions, narratives of survival, stories of class and gender inequality, of power and vulnerability, of memory and amnesia.

#### I "no name"

Karolina was a peasant from a poor family who lived in Pogorzel, a tiny village near the town of Osieck, 40 km south-east of Warsaw. According to oral tradition, there was an estate in the area belonging to a nobleman for whom she worked as a servant. This unknown man supposedly fell in love with Karolina and they had a child, my grandfather Henryk, who was born just before the war. They did not marry, although they were supposed to when the Second World War broke out. In the conservative society of the Second Polish Republic, such a marriage between people from two different social classes would have been a *mésalliance*, a social scandal in aristocratic circles, but my mother insists in her telling of the story that Karolina claimed it was true love and that the unnamed great-grandfather really wanted to marry her. But it was not to be. As the war began and the front line passed through the region, the nobleman was to be rounded up with other nobility and intelligentsia, possibly as part of the *Intelligenzaktion*, one of the iterations of the Nazi genocide in Poland. Karolina was left behind and who my great-grandfather was and whether he had been killed remains unsolved.

#### II "forty kilograms or more"

Life as a single parent is difficult in the modern world, but it was even harder for a poor peasant woman in occupied Poland. Hoping to find a better life elsewhere, or perhaps to lose her home in Pogorzel, Karolina moved to Pilawa, a village eight kilometers from Osieck, a railway junction and my home town. Here she met a man, Franciszek Korab, and tried to start a new family. They had a son, but soon after he was born, Franciszek was taken away by the Germans, never to return. She was alone again, this time with two sons. Barely scraping by, she was not the only single mother in the village struggling to survive with children. Winters during the war were harsh. There were people in the region who froze to death in their homes if they did not manage to gather enough fuel for the fireplaces. In late autumn, expecting the coming winter to bring freezing temperatures, Karolina and her friend Józefa, who had no money or valuable resources, became desperate and decided to try to steal coal from a German camp near the local railway station.

Coal was also valuable to the occupiers, so there were always sentries guarding it, ready to shoot on sight anyone who dared to steal it. But the desperate women knew it was either a chance of being shot or a certainty of freezing to death with their children. They managed to sneak in through the fence with two large burlap sacks, and as they filled them, they lost all sense of their surroundings. Soon they heard a commanding voice, a mixture of German and broken Polish - a railway guard. For a moment they thought he was going to shoot them on sight, but as he lowered his gun they began to plead with him in broken German, trying to explain why they were trying to steal the coal. Somehow the sentry overcame the communication difficulties and made them understand that they could take some coal, but only as much as they could carry outside the fence. Small and undernourished, they did not have much energy, but at the same time their imagination was overwhelmed by the images of warmth in the chimney throughout the winter. So they filled the sacks, forty kilos or more, and laid them on their backs, bending almost to the ground. The sentry grinned at the sight and did not help, but they were glad to be away from this place and from him, so they stumbled forward, step by step, and managed to carry their loads far enough to keep their end of the bargain. The sentry did not shoot, and the coal was enough for Karolina to keep her little family warm through the winter. What happened to Franciszek? How did Karolina manage to survive the occupation with two children? Was the sentry's behavior a sign of humanity in inhuman times?

### III "the one she did not carry"

A few months later, Karolina heard a loud and heavy knock at the door of her hut. It was an afternoon in early spring, and she was cooking whatever scraps of food she could find to feed her children, and she always ended up eating whatever was left over. Known in Poland as *przednówek* (the hungry gap), this time of year, when the last of the food in the pantry was almost used up and before the plants sprouted and became edible, was the most difficult for most families in the village, and even more so for a poverty-stricken single mother of two. When she opened the door, Karolina saw a tall man, a German soldier, standing in front of her. As he pushed his way in, though without violence, her first thought was that he had come to punish her for stealing the coal a few months earlier. Would he shoot her in front of her children? Will he take her away like the others took Franciszek? Or will he hurt her in some other way? She grabbed her boys, both curious about the new visitors, and hid them behind her back, waiting for the worst to happen. The soldier looked around and approached the hearth, where something was boiling in a single pot. He took a ladle and mixed the thin soup, water with a few small pieces of vegetables, mere morsels rather than any substance. The soldier smiled and approached Karolina and her children, getting down on one knee and gesturing for the boys to come closer. Although still somewhat apprehensive, the mother allowed her sons to approach the German soldier as he fished a small bar of chocolate out of one of his pockets. He gave the boys the chocolate and, with gestures and a few Polish words he knew, told her he'd be back in a few days. Indeed, a few days later there was another knock at the door, again frightening Karolina, who was relieved but still not trusting when the soldier went in and put a heavy sack on the table, containing potatoes, some carrots and a tin of meat, she later learned. He showed her a photograph of himself standing next to a young woman with a few children around him - his family. She didn't see him again.

### IV "no photo"

In summer and autumn, all the villagers, including Karolina and her young children, would go to the woods to gather blueberries and mushrooms. The nourishing bounty of the forest helped the villagers to survive even before the war, but now it has become so much more important. The forest still surrounds Pilawa, and foraging is still popular, although the survival aspect of it is long gone. But between 1941 and 1944 there was one part of the village that no villager dared go near, and everyone heard gunshots, sometimes every few weeks. Lisie Jamy is a part of the forest between Pilawa and Miętne. More than 2,500 Jews, Poles, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war and Polish resistance fighters from the Armia Krajowa (Home Army) were shot and buried there. Most of those murdered were people

from the local communities (was Franciszek one of them?), so everyone knew what was happening there and lived in fear. When the soldier, who turned out to be friendly, knocked on Karolina's door a few months later after the theft of the coal, the faith of thousands murdered in the forest could have been that of my great-grandmother.

Karolina survived the war, worried about the future and tired of barely surviving and looking after her children alone. Her life was one of struggle and survival, but also of care and love for her children and grandchildren. My mother's fondest memories of her entire childhood are those connected with Karolina. Unfortunately, all that remains of her are the snippets of stories my mother has memorized and a gravestone in a nearby village. Not even a photograph of her remains. In writing these final words on International Women's Day, through these short vignettes from Karolina's life, I wanted first and foremost to commemorate her and all the women in my family - their struggles and struggles, their endurance and perseverance. The second aim was to show, through true life stories, however altered by distant memories and distorted by time, that war and foreign occupation are terrible things, but they are both driven by people, and people can rarely be painted in black and white. What is survival? What is hatred? What is humanity?