

# Memories in September

By Sonia Kolinski

The aeroplanes flew lower and the soldiers started shooting at the people with machine guns. They ran for their lives and tried to get to shelter. But one nine-year-old girl had other things to worry about: 'Don't drop the ice cream you've just bought on the street!' Now Mela had to run, there was no time to eat. It was the first of September 1939 and the taste of the ice cream would remind her of this moment for decades to come.

On this September day in 2021, it is warm and the sun's rays are streaming through the curtains as Melania sits down at the table. She is finding it increasingly difficult to walk and shortly before her ninetieth birthday, she decided to get a walking stick. 'Over her dead body' would she walk around with a walking aid, she says jokingly. The lady has a sense of humour and a razor-sharp mind, which should become clear to anyone who talks to her after a few moments. Eighty-two years after the outbreak of the Second World War II, the Warsaw-born woman still lives in the flat she moved into after the war. It is located in an old primary school in a small village near Gdansk. The village is so small that the streets have no names and if you want to send Melania Kolińska a letter, you simply write her name and the name of the village with the postcode on the envelope. The date and the month of September always bring back memories to her. Sometimes she remembers her most unforgettable experiences by telling her children and grandchildren about them.

The beginning of the war through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl

She begins to narrate that in September '39, the President of Warsaw and the Supreme Commander of the Polish Armed Forces made an appeal over the radio to the men who had any experience with weapons, instructing them to go to Garwolin near Warsaw, where they were to be organised into army units. The family consisted of her mother, father, Melania and her two older brothers, aunt and uncle. They decided not to split up, but to walk the 62 kilometres together. Like in modern war films, she says, you could see hundreds of people on this route, either going off to fight for Poland or fleeing with their families. Melania remembers: 'Suddenly, German aeroplanes approached and started shooting at the refugees as they descended...' Miraculously, her entire family remained unharmed, as they were able to save themselves under a broken vehicle standing on the side of the road. Further along the route, they reached a forest, where they found shelter in an empty house. After some time there, Melania's father and uncle decided to make their way to Garwolin alone. Her mother, aunt, Melania and her brothers were to wait there for three days; if the men did not return, they should go back to Warsaw. They returned after only two days, as there was only chaos in Garwolin. The family had no other way out than to go back to Warsaw together. Shortly afterwards, Melania says, she experienced another direct attack. They stopped at a farm for a short rest as German aeroplanes descended overhead. The adults fled into the bushes and the children under the table that the farmer's wife had just brought out for their break. Here too, Melania says, she can't explain why nothing worse happened. 'I could see the leaves being cut off by the bullets from the bushes where my mum was crouching and I could hear the hissing sound, it was surreal from the eyes of a child.' Back in Warsaw, the family found their home in ruins which they had rented a flat on

the third floor from their Jewish landlords. The parents decided to seek refuge in a sturdy brick building complex in the centre of Warsaw, whose owner knew Melania's parents. It was located on a street where Roman Polanski's 'The Pianist' takes place. They spent a long time here and were able to survive a few more attacks safely.

Melania takes a short break to have a sip of tea and breathes deeply. On the walls of the living room are photos of a dozen grandchildren, as well as violins and mandolins that belonged to her husband. He was a music teacher, came from Kashubia and spoke German. Melania says that she also learnt German at school for four years, but the experiences she had with the German language as a little girl during the war prevented her from speaking and retaining the language.

### A personal encounter

In September '44, Mela was 14 years old when the Polish Home Army had already been fighting for a month in the Warsaw Uprising against the German occupying forces. Melania says that during this time, she had a personal encounter with a German soldier that remains one of the most vivid memories in her mind. At the time, she was desperate to join the resistance with her father and brothers. She thought she was big enough as a member of the underground scout organisation. But she had to stay at home with her mother. They spent some time there until one day, German trucks with armed soldiers suddenly drove through the streets and ordered people to leave their homes. They had planted mines in the foundations and would blow up the houses if the people did not come out voluntarily. They also told the residents that the German front was not far away. Melania and her family quickly packed a few things, some food and clothes. Gathered outside, the German soldiers were already beginning to separate the people, the healthy and strong on one side, women and children on the other. Hundreds of people were now taken away and brought to a transit camp, from where the prisoners were to be deported on to Germany. Melania pauses and then describes her thoughts and feelings. 'I was unimaginably scared, but I could see that my mum was running out of strength, so I had to be strong for her.' They tried to get to the end of the column to disappear unnoticed. However, this attempt failed. Mother and daughter were so exhausted at this point that walking and carrying their few belongings became increasingly difficult. And then something extraordinary happened. A German soldier must have noticed that the two were getting worse, because he came up to them and wordlessly took their luggage, which he then carried for them. At one point, they passed a street where some shops were still open, such as a bakery. The bakers saw the prisoners and began throwing loaves of bread at them from the windows. The soldier who helped Mela and her mother with their luggage added everything he could catch to their belongings. It was only years later that Melania learnt that there were also Poles in the Wehrmacht. Many of them not voluntarily, but forced to join the Wehrmacht as so-called ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) because they came from Silesia or Kashubia, i.e. from areas where Poles lived alongside Germans and which the Third Reich claimed for itself.

The transit barracks were surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Melania kept her eyes and ears open for ways to get away from there. She says that she saw women from the German Red Cross looking for relatives among the prisoners. She recognised this as an opportunity and they managed to attach themselves to the nurses on the way out. After several checkpoints at the wire mesh fences, Melania and her mother lost their strength and a

German soldier became suspicious. He started shouting and threatening mother and daughter with his rifle. Melania tells how she gathered all of her courage and strength and asked the German soldier to release them. That they already had their brothers and father (they had already been deported to Bochum Gerthe as forced labourers) and that their mother was too ill to go to a labour camp as well. The 90-year-old lady then pauses and seems lost in thoughts. She begins to smile and says: 'And then something happened that still seems like a miracle to me to this day. After I shouted at him, the soldier came up to me, stroked my head and told the gatekeeper to open the gate and let us out.' To write down her complete story and experiences would require a more extensive setting. After all, the effects of the war continued to influence Melania's life after the war: in the years of ruins immediately afterwards, in the years of communism in Poland with the politically forced emigration from her beloved Warsaw and settlement in a historically different region of Kashubia. Her memories are passed on within the family and yet her life is part of European history, of which there is still much to discover.