

Memories of World War II

Today is 2025, the 21st century. Times are hard for us, but in a very different way.

Sitting quietly in an armchair by the fireplace, she stares into the burning fire. Sadness shows on her face, and a tear rolls down her cheek...

It was hard for me to just walk by. It was impossible not to notice the tears streaming down my grandma's face—my grandma who has lived so many years.

My grandma was born on June 16, 1940, during World War II, in a village called Cieszacin Wielki. She wasn't born in a hospital but at home. Back then, a woman called a midwife helped with the birth. As a little kid, she doesn't remember much, or maybe just bits and pieces through a fog. She decided to share her story with me—her life—because she says in a few years, no one will remember that awful war.

She remembers...

"When I was a child, I remember planes flying so loud and low over our houses. My mom and our neighbors covered the windows so the Germans wouldn't drop bombs. It was so scary, and we never knew what would happen next.

I also remember trenches being dug behind our barn. People said Russian soldiers were coming, and a battle would happen in those ditches. Our friends and some people brought from the mountains dug them. The trenches were so wide that Mom had to put a plank across so I could walk to the other side. I can still see German soldiers making plans near our land. They'd burst into our house, spread out their maps and papers, and write everything neatly on our table because it was too hard for them in the field. No one asked permission—they just came in like it was their home.

I'll never forget the fear in my mom's eyes when she had to carry me, really sick, to the trench because we had to run from the fighting. We slept there. We left everything we had to save our lives. Some people took their cows and horses with them to the trench. It was awful when Mom covered me with sticks so no one would see us. I was so sick, and blood kept dripping from my nose. Everything depended on my mom, Julia. My dad died when I was 3, in 1943, from throat cancer. Mom took care of the farm, and Dad had been a well-liked tailor in our area. He finished tailoring school in Jarosław and passed his exams, but the sickness took him away.

I had an older brother, Stanisław, who was 14 back then. I didn't understand what was happening when some 'important' people from our village barged into our house and ordered him to go with them. They needed someone to carry rifles.

Mom begged with tears in her eyes for them to leave him alone, especially since he was sick, but it didn't help. He had to follow their orders.

Our only hope was our cow. Mom kept her alive because without her, we'd starve. One day, I saw a German soldier hold a rifle to Mom's back and march her to the pantry. He told her to bring food. She gave him the last of our buttermilk and milk—she gave it all out of fear, and we went hungry.

Another time, a German came into our house and wanted to steal our cow. Mom couldn't find words to stop him, but luckily, a man from Szczytna was passing by. He asked what was going on and spoke to the soldier in German, saying we'd die without that cow. The soldier understood, and our cow was saved.

Something similar happened to our neighbor. Russian soldiers stormed in, held a rifle to him, and threatened to shoot him. They took his horse and left.

As a kid, I didn't understand a lot. I saw so much bad stuff, but no one explained why things were like that. Everyone just lived day by day to survive. One thing I understood years later—and it still stays with me—is when some people came into our house. Mom later told me that Poles wanted freedom. We were under Russian rule, so secret groups called the AK formed. They hid in forests, got ready to fight, and battled for Poland.

So, these AK soldiers came into our house, yelling, 'Give us food!' Mom called them 'partisans.' They didn't want anyone to know about them because they were hunted. I was sleeping in the kitchen. Mom was scared to open the door, but she had no choice. They put a rifle to the back of her head and told her to hurry with the food. They ate, warned her not to tell anyone since they were in danger, and left. I remember Mom saying, 'Those were our brave soldiers.' If the Russians found out they'd been with us, they'd have shot us all—us and the AK too.

People around me had so much faith back then. Everyone really prayed to God. They believed deeply and tried to practice their faith however they could. Sadly, in Cieszacin, we didn't have a church or Sunday Masses. You had to go to Zarzecze for that. One day, some strangers—runaways from Limanowa—came to our village. They settled here and were very religious. After a while, they went to the priest in Zarzecze and asked him to come to Cieszacin Wielki every Sunday to hold Mass. He said yes. That's how our village started having a parish. At first, Masses were held in the famous manor house in the park. After the war ended, they moved to the community house—the building where the Iskra sports group is now.

When I got a little older, I kept hearing new stories. One stuck with me. It was near the end of the war when the Russians came into our village, and the Germans were running away. I saw a Russian soldier shoot a fleeing German. He just shot him, no thinking. The German was young, maybe 19, and as he ran, he cried out ‘Muter’—that’s ‘Mom’ in German. It was so sad.

Another time, something happened across the street at our neighbor’s. Someone accused my older friend of stealing grain, I think. The Germans showed up at his house. When he realized what was going on, he jumped out the window and ran. They couldn’t catch him, so they shot at him. By some miracle, he survived. He was blamed for something he didn’t do and almost lost his life. He still talks about it today.

Now, can I understand why Grandma cries by the fireplace? Yes, I can. Her tears are full of sadness and memories, but also joy because she lives in a free country now. She’s seen the times that Poles fought for.

Grandma, your story makes us young people see our lives differently. But it leaves me with a big question: Would we do the same? Could we handle it—the fear, the feelings, all of it? Everyone has to answer that for themselves.

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