

## ENCOUNTER WITH A GERMAN SOLDIER

My grandpa George (Jurek) was 2 years old when World War II broke out. He was born in 1937 in Poznań, in the Greater Poland region. In September 1939, just after the war began, he, his younger brother Andrew (Andrzej), who was a year younger, and their parents were forced to move to southern Poland. It seemed that it would be somewhat safer and calmer there, making it easier to survive those difficult times.

My grandfather's entire childhood was essentially an escape from the war. From what grandpa often told my mother, despite multiple relocations to different villages and small towns, he had a happy childhood—his parents did everything they could to ensure that the ongoing war did not negatively impact their children's lives.

My great-grandparents came from intellectual families, and both were teachers. Before the war, my great-grandfather Stanisław and great-grandmother Stefania usually ran primary schools together in small towns. Great-grandfather was usually the school principal and taught humanities subjects—Polish, history, and art—while great-grandmother taught science subjects such as mathematics and geography.

As teachers, my great-grandparents were always highly respected by the local community and were part of the local elite. Ironically, during the war, this status could have put them at risk under the occupation authorities. Despite their efforts to give their sons a carefree childhood, the sense of danger was always present.

In early 1943, my great-grandparents moved to Brnik, a small village near Dąbrowa Tarnowska (the current Małopolska region). My great-grandfather took a job as the principal of the local primary school and was able to live with his family in an official apartment within the school building. Since it was a rural school in a small village, my great-grandparents were also allowed to cultivate a small piece of farmland along with a vegetable garden. In the middle of the field, there was a small underground storage cellar for vegetables.

One day in the autumn of 1944, my great-grandmother Stefania went shopping to Dąbrowa Tarnowska. My grandpa Jurek stayed at home with his brother Andrzej and their father. My great-grandfather Stanisław went to work in the field, while the two boys played together and waited for their mother's return. Suddenly, while working in the field, my great-

grandfather saw an armed German soldier entering the school. Although he was very worried about his sons, he believed that nothing bad would happen to them—he hid himself in the underground cellar.

Grandpa Jurek remembered that encounter very vividly. He was 7 years old at the time. While playing with his brother at home, he suddenly heard loud knocking at the door. Because it was wartime, their parents had always told them that it was safer to follow the orders of the occupying forces, as disobedience could lead to severe consequences. Grandpa opened the door.

An armed German soldier entered the room and began looking around, speaking in a language the boys did not understand. Uncle Andrzej started crying, and grandpa Jurek became very frightened because he knew their father had just gone to the field. The German soldier kept speaking, but grandpa blocked his path, crossed his arms, and repeated several times, “Niks, niks”—his attempt at saying “no” (**nicht** in German). Seeing the determined stance of the small boy, the German soldier eventually left.

Once my great-grandfather was sure the soldier had gone, he returned home. Shortly afterward, my great-grandmother also came back from town. They found their sons shaken and frightened but safe, and the boys told them what had happened.

To this day, we do not know why the German had come. However, after this incident, my great-grandparents often said that not all Germans were bad people during World War II.

I know this story from my mother, who heard it many times during her childhood. And I deeply regret that I never had the chance to meet my grandfather, as he passed away a few years before I was born.