

MARIA LELIGDOWICZ

Maria Leligdowicz was only seven years old when war arrived at her doorstep. Living in a small village with her parents, two older brothers, and a newborn sister, she had dreamed of becoming a teacher. Just three days before the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, all the dogs in the area howled—a strange omen. Her world changed overnight. Schools closed, neighbours disappeared, and fear filled the air.

In 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied eastern Poland under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, her family was labelled "enemies of the people." One freezing night, the NKVD—Soviet secret police—banged on their door.

"You have one hour," a soldier barked.

Maria barely had time to grab a coat before she, her parents, newborn sister, and two brothers were forced onto a cattle train bound for Siberia. Packed into freezing, overcrowded wagons with hundreds of other Poles, they spent weeks on the train, enduring hunger and cold. They survived on scraps of bread and melted snow, the air inside the wagon thick with sickness and fear. Babies cried, elderly people died, and bodies were tossed out at every stop. Many didn't make it.

Upon arrival at a forced labour camp deep in Siberia, Maria's mother was put to work cutting trees in temperatures that reached -40°C. Her father and two brothers were conscripted into the army. That was the last time Maria saw her father. Hunger gnawed at them daily. Maria and her little sister, Zosia, were separated from their mother and placed in a cold wooden barrack with other orphaned children. Maria, now the eldest, became Zosia's mother overnight.

One bitterly cold night, Maria woke to find Zosia shivering violently in her arms.

"Hold on, little one," Maria whispered, wrapping her coat tightly around her sister. "Just a little longer."

Zosia looked up at her with tired eyes. Maria fought back tears as she began humming their mother's favourite lullaby.

"Sleep, my darling, close your eyes..."

She rocked Zosia gently, rubbing her tiny hands to keep them warm. But the little body in her arms grew still.

Maria's heart skipped. "No, no, no... Zosia, wake up."

But it was too late. Zosia was gone. Maria held her all night, rocking back and forth, whispering, "I promised to protect you. I promised." The war had taken so much—her father, and now, her baby sister.

Exhaustion finally overtook Maria. Her body collapsed, drenched in sweat, unable to move. At first, it was just overwhelming fatigue. Then came chills, followed by burning heat. She had contracted typhus. Left to suffer in a wooden storage hut, Maria's fate seemed sealed. But, in a twist of fate, she and a few other children were transferred to a submarine and taken to Pachlewa, India. There, in a miracle of God, she was reunited with her mother. Her mother took Maria to a hospital, but doctors gave little hope, telling her she was too ill to survive.

"After everything the Russians did to her, you think she'll die here?" her mother replied, refusing to give up.

Maria was released from the hospital, but still gravely ill. She was then taken to Isfahan and Tehran, where it took six months for her to fully recover. Afterward, she was placed in an orphanage for two years, where she was also able to attend school. Eventually,

she returned to Isfahan, where she met her brother – but he didn't recognize her. Maria asked about their family, but her brother knew nothing.

By now, the typhus still lingered in Maria's body, but a new illness had also taken hold: tuberculosis. Somehow, the typhus burned it out of her system. It was nothing short of a miracle.

Maria's journey eventually took her back to India, where she lived for a time before moving to Africa. There, she reunited with her mother, a reunion that had been 8 long years in the making. This encounter occurred two years after the war in 1947. Maria lived in Africa for many years, finding a bit easier than the previous chapter of her life.

However, after a few years, she and her brothers moved to England, hoping to finally find stability. But life there wasn't much easier. The scars of war never truly faded, and adjusting to a new country brought its own struggles.

Though she tried to move forward, the memories never left her. The bitter cold of Siberia, the cries of the dying, the night she lost Zosia—these moments were etched into her soul. Every time she thought about the past, tears welled in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

The war had taken so much from her, but it could never take away her memories. She carried them always, a silent weight in her heart.

Me and Maria @ Polish social club in Northwich build by her, her husband and Polish community...