

Romana Holder's Friends - Zaba And Her Brother Czesio



These are my friends, Zaba and her brother Czesio, in Pozog near Konskowola at the beginning of the 1940s. I don't know who took this picture. I received it from Zaba.

When the war broke out I lived with my family in Warsaw at Leszno Street. My father cut it short and committed suicide in 1940. My mother and I remained at Leszno until the deportations began, and then we got an apartment at 16 or 18 Mila Street. I wasn't there long, only a few weeks. When things got really bad and Jews were being rounded up, one of my co-workers in the ink factory where I was working offered to get me out of the Ghetto. I asked how much for. And it turned out that for nothing. It was September 1942, a few days before the major deportations began. So I got up and left. At first I was hidden in Warsaw in various apartments. Then I wanted to go back to the Ghetto, and I wrote a letter to my brother.

He had been in hiding, but the Germans caught him and sent him to work. He worked outside the Ghetto. When I wrote to him that I want to get out, he wrote back that a woman would come and take care of me.

And indeed, a woman came. She was in mourning. It turned out her father committed suicide by hanging himself. She was my brother's friend, Zaba from Konskowola [around 100 km south-east from Warsaw]. I have no idea where he met her. The year was 1942. I went with her, scared stiff, because I had no papers. The husband of my friend, Wojtek, only managed to get me a fake birth

certificate. He told me to walk on it, so that it wouldn't look too new.

So I went to Zaba's, to Konskowola and I actually was very comfortable there. She was a nurse, 6 years older than I was; before the war she took nursing courses in Warsaw. Her mother was Czech, a lovely woman. Zaba's husband was a railway man. They had a daughter Ewa who was 2 or 2-and-a-half when I came. Zaba was a brave woman, and her husband was a sissy. She took care of me, she hugged me, she ruled that house so that he didn't have much say, lucky for me... We lived in a brick house next to the railway tracks, by the crossing. When they started deporting the Jews, I could see the boxcars with people in the windows. Once I thought I saw my brother, but I don't know if it was him... And when those trains were going to Majdanek, then Zaba's husband-a kind, polite man-said that one good thing Hitler was doing was what was happening to the Jews. I told Zaba about that, and she said 'Come on, he doesn't know what he is saying.' That was the end of it, but it stayed with me. Anyway, it wasn't good company for me. Zaba's sister-in-law, Hela, a bad one, took an astrakhan fur coat from her Jewish friend and denounced her to the gendarmes. Why didn't she denounce me? When one of Zaba's friends came over I had to spend the whole time under the bed. So it was pretty interesting over there...

Everybody around must have known I was Jewish, but nobody said anything. I was there as a cousin; the little girl called me 'auntie.' But the news spread among the railway men who I was. One young one, very handsome, said to me 'I'd find you attractive even if you were Jewish.' And another time, when Zaba wasn't home and I couldn't start the stove-it was a coal stove-I went to the office where that guy worked and asked him for help. Apparently he knew right away that I was Jewish [according to a pre-war stereotype held by some Poles, Jewish women didn't know how to start a fire in a stove]. It was only after the war that I found out why.

When I stayed with Zaba, her brother Czesio came to visit once. But because I was there, he went back to his house for the night. And that night the Germans pulled out all the young people, including him. I had a bad conscience because if he'd stayed the night, instead of me, maybe he would have survived. And he was shot.

I spent two years with Zaba, from 1942 till the end of the war, when Lublin was freed [July 1944], possibly before Warsaw was. When the Russkies came, they wanted to arrest Zaba's other brother, Edward, who was the mayor. People were denouncing him, because apparently he was stealing their cows and produce. To put it short, he was a son-of-a-bitch. When they came to get him he hid somewhere. But the people who he'd rubbed up the wrong way came after him and there was a court case in Lublin after the war. And I was the main witness for the defense. I said in court: 'I can't say anything against Edward, because I am Jewish and this family saved my life.' I did it only for Zaba and her mother, not anybody else from that family. Because of what I said he was released, after having been held for a year and a half.

In 1944, when I was still in Konskowola, the Russian Army and Polish officers arrived. One of them asked what I was still doing there. He told me to go to Lublin to the army and say he sent me. I went to Lublin to look for someone from my family. I went to the Jewish Committee, but I didn't find out anything. I registered in case someone was looking for me. Nobody was. So I went to the army. I went from Lublin to Berlin with the army as an ensign. I was demobilized in Katowice in 1945.