

## **Author's note**

To meet the demands of my friends and potential readers who insisted that I should write more stories about my experiences from the time of war, I decided to include in *Part Two* this particular story, which was previously published in *Looking back – Part One*. I think the story is important because it describes the atmosphere in Warsaw and among my close family just before the start of the war and during its very beginning. The other reason could be that I had a special fondness for this story because it was the first one I ever wrote many years ago when I lived in Poland and its original text was of course in Polish. In addition the story is also about my Aunt Alexandra, whom I always loved and respected.

As *Part One* is not available anymore, reprinting this story in *Part Two* was the only way to save it from being forgotten.

As usual Gareth Owen has made some editorial corrections to the text.

## **Aunt Alexandra Makes History**

In our family, we have only one English connection. The connective figure was Aunt Alexandra, and at the root of this connection was – love.

When I say “our family”, I’m not thinking about my present family, but the family of my childhood, a small and close-knit Polish family, living in Warsaw in the time marked so strongly by two World Wars. When I was the youngest child in our family, Aunt Alexandra was its oldest member, and ruled from a position of seniority over the whole family for quite a long time, until she died, reaching almost the age of the British Queen Mother.

Strictly speaking, she was not my aunt, but my father’s aunt. Everybody called her Aunt Alexandra, so did I, and as the years passed, the word “Aunt” became almost like an official title. I was warned by my parents that she would not tolerate the prefix “great” before that title.

A still vivid picture of Aunt Alexandra recorded in my memory, and confirmed by a photograph, shows her as an elderly but not fragile lady, very tall, strong and energetic, with a straight figure in spite of her age, with white hair and a rather prominent nose, suggesting a strong character, softened by her gentle eyes and mild voice. With this picture in my mind, it is difficult for me to imagine that there was a time when she was a young and attractive girl.

At that tender age she met an English officer attached to the British Legation in Warsaw. They fell in love and soon realised they could not live without each other. They decided to marry. The young officer finished his service and they went together to England, where young Alexandra would be introduced to his parents. They accepted her without reservation as their daughter.

The young couple started preparing for their future – to fix the date of their wedding, to make a list of invited guests, to find a proper house for themselves, and to choose furniture – the usual things.

Then suddenly, in the middle of these preparations, Alexandra’s fiancé received an urgent order to go to India. There was some unrest there, which required an increase of the British military presence. The young couple were confronted with the dilemma – whether to marry immediately, or to postpone the wedding until he came back from India. They chose the second option. So he went to India, while she stayed with his parents, waiting for him.

But he never came back from India. He was killed there.

After this tragedy, Aunt Alexandra lived in England for four more years, then she returned to Poland. She never married. She visited our home regularly, at least once a week. I don’t know

whether England has ever had a better good-will ambassador in Poland than Aunt Alexandra. From her love for an Englishman, from her personal tragedy, and from her experience of four years spent in England, she had developed a tremendous admiration for England and for everything that was English.

When I say “everything”, I mean it. She admired the monarchy and the political system of England, her economic and military power, her culture, science, and education, but most of all, the English people, their lifestyle, habits and good manners.

I think Aunt Alexandra was seriously annoyed by my restless and free-spirited behaviour as a boy, and she tried to anglicise me by teaching me good manners, with the hope that in future I would develop into a young English gentleman. The people who know me can guess easily and correctly that her efforts were fruitless.

Aunt Alexandra’s Anglophilia was never stronger than at the outbreak of the Second World War. In August 1939, everybody in Warsaw realised that war was inevitable, and late preparations for it were visible everywhere. Although the atmosphere was tense and warlike, it was far from one of panic. The generally accepted opinion was that the war would not last longer than one or two months, and of course Germany would be defeated. Aunt Alexandra was able to support this opinion with more detailed explanations.

“If Poland is attacked by Germany, England and France will declare war on Germany; they are bound to Poland by a treaty” – she explained to everybody. “Even if the Germans invade the western part of Poland, they will be stopped by our Army concentrated around Warsaw. At the same time, France will attack them from the west, and don’t forget that France is the biggest military power in Europe! So the Germans will be forced to withdraw their troops from Poland, to move them to the western front. If they don’t do that, France will occupy Germany, and it will take no longer than one month. Now, think about England. Everybody knows that England has the biggest Navy in the whole world. It will be used to bring English troops to our port of Gdynia, from where they will move south in the direction of Warsaw. Here they will meet Polish troops, and together will attack the Germans from the east. When can we expect the English to reach Warsaw? Perhaps in one, maximum two months, if there are some logistic difficulties with preparing such an operation”.

If you think that Aunt Alexandra’s optimism was an isolated case, then you are completely wrong. Many people, not only in Poland but also throughout Europe, even many governments, shared similar unrealistic views.

With the belief that for the civilian population the war would be nothing more than a temporary inconvenience, the discussion between people concerned the topic of what would be the best way, and where would be the safest place, to survive this short period of time. In our family, opinion was divided. My father claimed that Warsaw would be the best place, with a huge amount of food supply already stored, with hospitals and all emergency services available, and air-raid shelters already built. In addition, there was a big concentration of the Polish Army around and inside the town, which guaranteed that Warsaw could defend herself till the end of the war.

Aunt Alexandra had a different idea. “I think a small village will be a much safer place. It has no strategic meaning to the enemy, and for that reason it will never be an object of air-raids or artillery bombardment. And don’t forget that the Germans may use gas, that terrible weapon of the First World War. They will not waste it on a small village. And where is the best place to find food and water? Of course, in a village”.

Because of this difference in opinion, my parents decided to stay in Warsaw, while Aunt Alexandra with her family went to a little village hidden among small, scattered forests surrounding

Warsaw. They knew the place well from previous summers they had spent there. It was a picturesque village only 25 kilometres away from Warsaw, and because of that, was quite a popular summer holiday place for city dwellers. As it became a historical place, though only in our family's history, I think I should mention its – perhaps unpronounceable in English – name. It was, and still is *Żabieniec*.\*

Looking retrospectively, Aunt Alexandra was right with her choice. We in Warsaw suffered from air-raids and almost constant heavy artillery bombardment, spending most of the time in the basement of our apartment building, which had been converted into an air-raid shelter. Some of our neighbours were killed. At the end of one month's siege, there was no water, and no food.

During this time, Aunt Alexandra was living as though on an extended holiday in her no-man's-land village. Plenty of food and water, and the weather was beautiful the whole of September. But she was far from happy. Every day, when she looked at the sky, she saw German bombers flying in the direction of Warsaw; sometimes the rumble of explosions was heard as from a distant storm; and at night, in the sky over Warsaw, there was a permanent, red glow.

For the people of *Żabieniec* these were gloomy and depressing pictures. What made the situation worse was the complete lack of any news. The village had no electricity, so, no radio; newspapers they had received normally from Warsaw didn't come any more; telephones were not working.

Under those circumstances, the only source of information was Aunt Alexandra. Her news, always good and optimistic, supported the morale of the people around her. She told them her often-repeated theories about the war strategy. As time passed, she gradually elaborated on them, adding new details and some old examples from history, until she had developed them into a logically accepted concept. Soon her persistence and strong belief in her preaching won her some equally ardent followers. At the end of September, the whole population of *Żabieniec*, including holidaymakers, was waiting for the English. But "the English" were evidently delayed somewhere. Then came that memorable day when a group of children came running to Aunt Alexandra with news that on the cart-road on the outskirts of the village, some motorised troops were moving in the direction of Warsaw.

Aunt Alexandra was triumphant. "I told you! At last the English are coming!" In haste, she picked some flowers from the garden and ran towards the road at a speed which left much younger people far behind her. When she reached the road, she saw it with her own eyes – in a cloud of dust, with a roar of engines, a column of tanks was moving slowly.

With a shout at the top of her voice, "Long live England! Long live the King!" she threw the flowers on to the nearest tank.

In response, the figure of an officer emerged from the commander's hatch. He raised his right hand in the well-known Nazi salute and shouted, "Heil Hitler!"

When Warsaw capitulated after one month's siege, and the Germans overran the city, they began publishing, almost immediately, a newspaper in the Polish language – *Nowy Kurier Warszawski*. It was hated by the Polish people because its only purpose was to glorify Germany and to spread German propaganda. On the front page of its first edition, the following piece of news was printed: *"In many places in Poland the victorious troops of The German Army were welcomed by the local population with flowers"*.

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\* I visited the place 63 years later, in September 2002