Translation of the
Autobiography of Jerzy Gradosielski

Introduction

My mother’s family were all born in Russia. My mother met my father Aleksander while studying medicine in Moscow and they got married. I was born in Moscow on December 24, 1916. We lost everything in the Revolution of 1917. My grandmother and her daughters Leonytyna and Mila, hidden by the servants, survived. I remained on the estate under the care of my nanny, who pretended that I was her son. It was only after several months that my mother was able to obtain a special permit from the Supreme Soviet in Moscow allowing her to remove me and my belongings from the estate. In 1921, with the help of W. Raczkiewicz whose family estate was next door to that of my grandparents, the whole family received Polish citizenship.

My father was called up into the army as a doctor and my mother became a nurse in the Red Cross in order to be with my father. Unfortunately, my father came down with typhus and died in 1921. The family decided to return to Poland, but the Soviet authorities did not reply at all to our letters. With support of the Provincial Prime Minister Raczkiewicz, in February 1926, we received the order to leave the U.S.S.R within two weeks.

Grandmother Aleksandra, my mother Aleksandra, Aunt Leontyna and I left for Vilnius. After our arrival in Vilnius, my mother received the title Senior Medic (two years of medical School) and she worked as matron in a hospital in Nowe Troki near Vilnius. I attended public elementary school there and prepared for my examinations for secondary school. In September 1927, I passed my entrance examinations to the 1st Class of the Jesuit Fathers Secondary School. In 1930 I transferred to the King Zygmunt August National Secondary School which was considerably less expensive. Already a Boy Scout, having taken my oath in the 5th Wilno Scout Troop, I transferred to the Blekitna Jedynka Zeglarska im. Romualda Traugutta until the outbreak of WWII.

I matriculated in 1938. This was the last graduation of the old 8 class system. In October 1938, I was accepted in the Cadet School of the Reserve Sappers in Modlin, and after passing the examinations and taking a three month unit course, I was transferred to the Officer Cadet School in Warsaw.

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1 Starszy Felczer
2 Gimnazium
3 The Romuald Traugutt Blue Sailing Unit
4 Modlin Fortress (Polish Twierdza Modlin) is one of the biggest 19th century fortresses in Poland. It is located near the village of Modlin on the Bugonarew river, some 50 kilometres north of Warsaw
On September 4, 1939, as a Corp. Cadet since Sept. 1, 1939, with 5 other cadets under the command of Lt. R Pajsker, we were sent out from Fort No.4 in Modlin in three vehicles with 15 tons of explosive material to the fortifications at Dabica near Dubno. After delivering our cargo, we set out back to Warsaw in one truck. In Garwolina, we were diverted to Pulawy where we joined the 2nd Sappers Regiment, while Lt. Pajker drove back to Warsaw in a commandeered car to save his family.

On September 6, 1939, the 2nd Sapper Regiment left in the direction Brzesc, while we waited until September 8, 1939. But since the Germans were already on the bridge over the Vistula, we decided to evacuate to Brzesc too. We took several barrels of petrol and a lot of food supplies from the Sappers Warehouses. Lt. Pajker found us on the road, and we were sent from Brzesc to the Hungarian border. Unfortunately, on September 18, 1939, a few km past Tarnopol, surrounded by Soviet panzer divisions, we were taken prisoner. We shared the food we had brought in our vehicle with our comrades, which saved them from starvation.

We crossed the Polish-Soviet border in Podwoloczyska and pass through the camp at Tetkino on September 20, 1939.

After a month, we were off-loaded in Krzywy Rog at an iron ore mine. The work was difficult and dangerous, but the propaganda proclaimed “U nas nuzno sprawdacee rabotoj”, then you will go home after a month. We worked for a month at 120% effort, and when they would not give us passes to go home, we rebelled and were locked up behind barbed wire in solitary confinement. Here we were very crowded and hungry.

At the end of May 1940, we were loaded into cattle cars and transported to the far north in the Komi-SSR, at Uchto-Pieczora. We arrived in Chibyu below the 64 parallel on June 13, 1940. It was always day here. There were approximately 15,000 prisoners who were distributed in sequence throughout the work camps. My Kolona/camp was No.13/SZDL-Siewierneje Zelazno-Darozneje Lagiera. We worked on the construction of the Kniaz-Pogost Railway to Uchta.

With the very poor rations and 12 hour shifts at work, dysentery and other diseases quickly reduced the population of the camps. Of 1500 prisoners at camp No. 13, only 900 were left after a year. The rest of the details can be found in my journal.

After the outbreak of Russian-German war in June 1941, we were released from the northern camps in August after the signing of the Sikorski-Majski treaty, and still at the points of Soviet bayonets, we were transported by ship, train and on foot and quartered in Wiazanka camp near Kalinin. There were more than 12,000 different kinds of weapons. Col. Nikodem Sulik, known in the camp as Private Sarnecki, representing Gen. W. Anders commander of the Polish Army in the U.S.S.R., presided over the repetition of the swearing of the oaths by the soldiers, and we were soldiers of the Polish Republic once more. From that day forward, our people took control of the camp.

5 “Here, work is necessary to justify oneself.”
6 Renamed Ukhta in 1939.
The pilots and sailors were separated from the rest and sent to England. The remainder was assigned to the 5th Infantry Division.

We left the camp on September 2, 1941 and after several days journey we arrived in Tatishchevo near Saratov on the Volga River. This was the summer training camp of the soviet Army made up of a lot of tents and a few buildings for the administration. The commander of the division was Brig. M. Boruta-Spiechowicz, an energetic and good organizer, liked by the army. September 15, 1941 saw the creation of the 5 Infantry division with three regiments: Infantry, Artillery, the Communications Battalion and the 5th Battalion of Sappers, to which I was assigned. After being vetted by Lt. Grobicki I was appointed Platoon Ensign and became the deputy commander of Platoon 3.

British uniforms and Soviet arms began to arrive within a month, but as the winter was approaching we had to figure out how to survive the cold which would go down to -40°C. We therefore began to dig shelters 2 metres deep. We covered them with boards and earth and erected tents over them.

On January 15, 1942 our division was moved to the south of Russia to the Fergan Valley to the city of Jalalabad. Instead of snow and frost, we had rain and mud. At least it was warm. We trained at full steam. The general manoeuvres of the division were visited by our Commander-in-chief, Gen. W. Sikorski.

We left the “Soviet Paradise” on August 5, 1942 by ship from Krasnovodsk across the Caspian Sea and landed in Pahlavi in Persia (now Iran). Now we had to make a complete change to the British way of doing things. That meant a new organization, new arms and new rules.

Our divisions journeyed through Teheran and Hamadan to Iraq to the city of Kanaqin. Since our divisions were too small the 5th and 6th become the 5th Kresy Infantry Division (5 KDP) with two brigades, the 5th Wilno and 6th Lwow. The Sappers form the Sappers Command 5 KDP with three independent line companies and one stationary company.

In November 1942, I travelled to the British Sappers Center in Ismail, Egypt, and in June of 1943 I completed the course for command of Assault Divisions in Kanqin. I was promoted to 2nd Lt. on July 1, 1943 and was transferred to 6 Komp. Sap. At that time, the division moved to Mosul-Kirkuq to protect the oil fields of Iraq. The sappers trained for battle in the mountains of Lebanon near Tripoli. Toward the end of that year, the whole division moved to Egypt to the city of Quassasin to prepare for their departure to the Italian Front. On February 17, 1944, as the commander, I led the heavy attack of the 18th GMC7 Battalion through Cairo and Mena to Alexandria.

On February 2, 1944, we left Egypt and landed in Taranto, Italy on March 5, 1944. I was then transferred back to my home Company 5, whose commander was Capt. W. Kryk, and I took up command of Platoon 3 to the end of the war. The description for the battles in Italy is to be found in my book “The 5th Kresy Infantry Division of Sappers in Battle”.

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7 A friend who went through the deportations and was in Anders’ Army suggests that this probably stands for General Motors Company vehicles.
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Autobiography

I was born on December 24, 1916 in Moscow. My father was Aleksander Gradosielski, and my mother was Aleksandra Gradosielska nee Budohoska, both of them doctors. My father died in 1920. I returned with my mother’s family to Poland, to Vilnius in February 1926.

I graduated from King Zygmunt August National Secondary School in Vilnius in 1938 and was admitted to the Sapper Cadet School in Warsaw. I went to war in 1939 as a Corp. Cadet. On September 18, 1939 in Tarnopol I was interned by the Soviet Army and put in a POW camp in Komi-SSR. After the “Amnesty”, I entered the 5th Sappers Battalion of the Kresy Infantry Division in Tatishchevo.

I was promoted to 2nd Lt. in Iraq in 1942. I was commander of the Sappers and Reconnaissance Officers Platoon throughout the Italian Campaign.

After demobilisation, I settled in London and worked in the Haden Young Company as an electrician technician for 32 years. In 1956, I founded the Szkola Przedmiotow Ojczystych in Forest Gate, and I was president of the Polska Macierz Szkolna (PMS).

Starting in 1960, I was the secretary and later the president of the Polish Sappers in Exile. Currently, I am a member of the council of the (PMS), secretary of the executive of the Council of the Soldiers’ Fund, a member of POSK and of the Polish Combatants Association SPK No. 316 and the National Treasury. After the war I received a promotion to Capt. of Sappers, and I have the Virtuti Militari 2nd Cl., 2 Crosses of Valour, two Gold Crosses of Service and the English Military Cross.

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J. Gradosielski, Capt. Sap. MC.

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8 Polish language and culture School for the children of Polish immigrants.  
9 The Executive of the Polish Language Schools.