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At six o'clock in the morning of Friday, September 1, 1939, the news first came to us over the Polish State Radio. The German army had crossed the Polish border near the city of Bogumil the night before and our country was at war with Hitler's *Reich*.

The people of Warsaw lost their heads. They crowded into the grocery stores, desperate to buy up every last bit of food. Women formed lines several blocks long for bread to store in their cellars for the time when there would be nothing else to eat.

Just before noon the radio reported that our soldiers had repelled the German invaders. My knees went weak with relief. But minutes later reality intruded; even as the announcer proclaimed the incredible victory of Poland's armed forces the first German bombers appeared in the skies above Warsaw.

I was a young man then, twenty-five years old. I had been married three years and was earning a good salary as the office manager and chief accountant of a leather goods factory in Warsaw. Despite the commotion in the streets that day, I set out for my office. But no one seemed to be in the mood for work. We stood huddled in groups outside the factory building, discussing the situation and listening to the news reports that burst every few minutes from megaphones mounted to the walls of buildings nearby.

Two Polish policemen sauntered by. "Don't worry, don't worry," one of them said cheerfully. "Those planes

up in the sky aren't German. They're ours. Polish." But even while the policeman grinned at us, we could hear the anti-aircraft batteries firing away.

I later learned that the first German bomb dropped near Warsaw had hit a Jewish children's sanatorium at Miedzeszyn, a health resort not far from Warsaw. The hospital sustained a direct hit and most of the children were killed.

After a while I went home to the apartment on Nowolipki Street which my wife, Pela, and I shared with my parents. I found Pela and my mother in tears. We kept the radio on day and night. The news reports reflected Poland's woeful lack of preparedness. My own mood seesawed between excitement and apprehension because I expected to receive my draft notice at any moment.

Our orders came over the radio only the next day—Saturday, September 2. All able-bodied young men were instructed to report to their recruiting stations immediately. But when I arrived at my recruiting station I was sent home "until further notice." They said that their supply of uniforms had run out....

All over Poland, *Volksdeutsche* (Polish citizens of German descent) revealed themselves as traitors and saboteurs. Disguised in the tight black work costume of chimney sweeps they appeared on the roofs of Warsaw's apartment buildings, pretending to clean the chimneys while using their brooms to signal the low-flying German bombers.

At one point the Polish State Radio announced that the Germans were likely to drop gas bombs and informed us that the neighborhood civil defense committees would distribute gas masks to the public free of charge. But there were not enough gas masks to go around. So the drug stores sold gauze pads soaked in a chemical to hold

in front of our noses and mouths in case the Germans really used gas. There was a run on the drug stores and soon it was no longer possible to get the gauze pads.

At home, my mother sat on our living room sofa, cutting gauze pads to size for the four of us, while the radio continued its announcements in a steady monotone. A bulletin came, advising every household to keep on hand one blanket for each person and to store as much water as possible in buckets. If the Germans used gas we should soak the blankets in the water and throw them over our heads for protection against the poisonous fumes.

The following day—Sunday, September 3—the radio announced that Great Britain and France had declared war on Germany and would come to Poland's rescue. Warsaw thrilled with renewed hope. There were demonstrations in front of the British and French embassies, with thousands of excited Poles belting out cheers for our brave allies.

But on Monday the mood plummeted once again. It was rumored that Poland's president, Ignacy Moscicki, and his cabinet had fled across the border to neutral Rumania, taking with them all the funds of the Polish government.

On Tuesday, September 5, Warsaw was bombed all day long. That evening, the janitor of our apartment building rang our doorbell with the latest orders from our neighborhood civil defense committee. Every able-bodied male was needed to dig trenches on the outskirts of Warsaw. Along with the other young men from our building, I set out for civil defense headquarters, but within an hour we were back home again: the civil defense committee did not have enough spades for us....

We stayed awake all that night, listening to the radio and looking out of the windows to scan the skies for German planes.

At one o'clock on Wednesday morning, September 6, Colonel Umiastowski of the General Staff Military Headquarters came on the air. All young men, he said, were to leave Warsaw and travel east to the city of Brzesc, where they would be supplied with uniforms and inducted into the army. He did not even mention the address or the authority to which he expected the young men to report when—and if—they got to Brzesc, some 120 miles east of Warsaw.

We spent the rest of the night discussing whether or not I should heed the Colonel's confused appeal. My father argued that since the Colonel had not issued any clear directives, I had better wait until more definite orders came through. While Father and I talked, my mother and Pela sat on the sofa side by side, in dazed silence. I was my parents' only son at home. My older brother, Henry, had left Poland six years earlier. Our family had never been particularly devout, but we had been caught up in the Zionist pioneering spirit that had swept Polish Jewry in the 1920's and 1930's. He went to Palestine with the Maccabi team on motorcycles to attend an international Jewish athletic meet. Once in Palestine, my brother and some of his friends "deserted" and, armed only with the short-term visitors' visas issued to them by the British authorities, managed to stay in the country. My brother found work as a construction laborer, carrying bricks to help rebuild the Jewish homeland. I might have gone to Palestine with him, but I had not done so because I was then already keeping company with Pela. We'd been childhood sweethearts.

Brzesc was not an unknown city to Pela and me. I had worked in Brzesc several months after our marriage, and both Pela and I had made good friends there during that time. But both our parents had been unhappy about our move; so we had returned to Warsaw. We did not know

whether our friends were still in Brzesc. Father and I went for advice to our neighbors across the hall, our old friends, the Golds. Mr. Gold, like my father, had been in the leather goods business. The Golds had three sons. The older two—Jerzyk, who was 20, and Lutek, who was 18—were of draft age. The third and youngest, Rysio, was only 14. After a lively discussion in our apartment, it was decided that Jerzyk, Lutek and I should set out for Brzesc together. Rysio announced that he would go with us. He assured us that he could fight the Germans better than all the rest of us combined. Had our minds been functioning normally, his brothers and I certainly would have refused to take him with us, but we were so completely cut off from the realities of ordinary life and thought that not even Mrs. Gold raised any objections to Rysio's leaving.

At five o'clock in the morning Pela packed a knapsack for me with some food and a few changes of underwear. I wanted to carry as little with me as possible because I knew that traveling conditions would be chaotic and we would probably end up making most of our journey to Brzesc on foot. The one valuable possession I decided to take was my wrist watch. At the last moment, I removed a map of Poland from my desk drawer and stuffed it into my knapsack. It occurred to me that the map might come in handy.

The three Golds and I were joined by another neighbor, Mr. Kaplan, the editor of a Warsaw Yiddish newspaper, and his son Jerzyk, whom we called "Jerzyk II" to distinguish him from Jerzyk Gold and who had just graduated from gymnasium with the highest academic honors. Also with us were my good friend Edward Dolniak and his brother, who was only 17. A few more neighbors joined our group, but since they were not close friends of ours, I cannot recall their names now.