

My Long Journey to Freedom



By
Anna
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INTRODUCTION

Anna Hebblethwaite was born in the Polish Village of Ilawcze on 19th October 1925. She now lives in the small Yorkshire town of High Bentham. First written under the title 'Memories of a Polish Childhood' in January 1974, her autobiography has now been updated and re-written to include numerous additions. This is the story of her long journey to freedom.

- John Hebblethwaite
March 1988

PART 1 - MEMORIES OF A POLISH CHILDHOOD

In the evening when all is quiet, if I close my eyes I can still see my parents as they appeared in the olden days when Poland was free. My Father, tall and slim with light brown hair, a small moustache, and a smile always ready to spring to his lips; Mother, small, dark, and with a short temper; and we children, sitting in the living room listening to Father and Mother singing songs, or dancing to music played on our old horn gramophone.

My story begins when my Father, Janek Morag, was young. He was well-educated and lived in Ilawcze where he met my Mother, Tekla Verstepna, who was a farmer's daughter and very pretty. Her Father had died when she was very young and her mother had struggled to bring up three children on her own. My Father and Mother wanted to get married, but the trouble was that my Father worked in an office and was no farmer, so my Granny did not like him. In fact, she issued the ultimatum, "If you marry that man you won't get a penny from me as a dowry, and when I die, all that I have will go to your brother Pavel and sister Katarina". Needless-to-say, my Father and Mother did get married. They were forced to live in lodgings and, although times were hard and they had to survive on a shoestring budget, they were happy.

In 1922 their first child was born and they called her Maria. Then in 1925 I, Anna, surprised everyone by being born in a potato field. A year later their first boy was born, he was called Jozef, and in 1928 my Mother discovered that another child was on the way. Three children were already quite a strain on my parents' budget and so my Father emigrated to France in order to earn more money. In 1929, Jasio, my youngest brother and the 'baby' of the family was born and we all moved to France, to a town called Segré, Main-et-Loire. My Father met us at the station and took us to our new home in La Rue-de-la-Roquette. The house was one of many down a long road, grapes grew around the front, and there was a garden with peach trees. Father worked in a leather factory as an interpreter and a year later my Mother got a job there too.

My sister Maria and I started going to a Catholic school for girls, Jozef went to a boys' Catholic school, and Jasio went to a nursery. Soon we learned to speak French and made lots of friends. We were very happy in our new home. Eventually we forgot all the Polish we had known and spoke french all the time. Mother had to learn to speak French too, so that she could understand what we were saying. The time flew by, we did well at school and received good reports. I joined in plays and concerts and won many prizes.

During the Summer holidays the weather was very warm and we would go swimming or slide down hills on sacks. One time we went gathering escagots (snails) with our friends Marta Maré, Charlota Gazan, Ivan Laté and Suzana Porté. The snails were collected in a wire basket then washed under the tap, sprinkled

with salt and pepper, and scattered onto the hotplate of the oven. After a few minutes they were ready for eating although I did not have any. At tea that evening I told my family what had happened. My Mother put her hand to her mouth and left the room, my story had made her lose her appetite. After that she didn't join us at the table, but ate alone instead.

Then came the time when Maria and I had to learn our Catechism for our first Communion, but Maria was tired of going to school and began to play truant. In the morning we would set out together then, after we had gone a short way, she would throw her satchel into the grass and go to play with some children who were too young to go to school. I went to school on my own, and when I was questioned by our teacher about Maria's absence I said that she was ill, because she had said that I had better not spill the beans or else...

Some time later our teacher sent a letter to my parents informing them that I would need a white dress and veil for my first Communion. My Mother was indignant because Maria's name hadn't been mentioned, so she sent a letter asking the teacher to call. Our teacher thought that Maria was still sick, but when she came round there was Maria playing happily outside. She went into our house and later, after she had left, our Father told us to get inside. He was very cross. As a punishment, he made us kneel for an hour on some sand in the corner of the room, and we were not given any supper that night. The next day Maria returned to school with me, but she was hopeless at all the subjects, although she spoke French very well. Later, Jasio started school but he did not like it and kept running away. He would go to the factory where Mother worked and sit outside the gates waiting for her to come out.

During the Whitsuntide of 1933 I received my first Communion at the Église-de-la-Madeleine. I was dressed in white and Father took a photograph of me for the family album. At the same time we received sad news from Poland, Grandma Vertepna had died. She had been trying to kill a rat with a pitchfork. The rat had bitten her and, in her frenzy, she had poked out her own eye. One way or the other, her blood became poisoned and she died without being reconciled with my Mother, who never mentioned her name again.

As time passed Father and Mother made a great deal of money, which my Father sent to his Mother in Poland so that she could buy a farm and land. Unfortunately my Mother's health began to fail, and she went to the doctor who told her that she was unsuited to the French climate. She stopped working and stayed at home, but she became thinner and thinner, so she revisited the doctor with my Father. The doctor took Father on one side and told him that Mother would die if she stayed in France. At home my Father broke the news to her and she said, if she was going to die, then she would die at home, and that meant Poland.

So Father made arrangements for us to fly to Poland. We did not want to go because we would be leaving all our friends, and also we had forgotten how to speak Polish. But in the end Mother's health came first and, in the Summer of

1935, we moved back to Poland, leaving Father in France to sell our home and its contents.

Our farm in Ilawcze was very grand. The house was spacious and there was a lot of room for storage, a barn, stables, and a great deal of land. The farms in Poland at the time were built so that all the farm buildings in the area were grouped to form a street, and the farmers were not isolated from their neighbours by acres of land as in Britain. We were no exception and had many neighbours. Our land was scattered all around the countryside and it was quite some distance to the furthest fields. We also had some apple orchards, several cows, horses, pigs, goats, geese, ducks and hens. I liked the horses in particular and soon learned to ride them.

My Mother became happier and healthier in Poland. She was on a special diet, which included horses' milk that was bought at great expense from a neighbour. When she was fully recovered, she held a party for all our relatives. Amongst the guests were my Father's Mother and Father, Aunt Stefka and her family, and Aunt Genia, who was an advocate in Trembowla, and her family. Since we could not speak Polish, we children kept ourselves to ourselves and did not speak to the other children.

At last, school re-opened after the holidays. We had to start in the infants' class even though I was ten-years old and Maria was thirteen. In class the girls sat on one side of the room, the boys on the other, and the teacher put Maria and I at the front so that we could hear her. Unfortunately the children behind us pulled our long plaits, or poked us with pencils, and this made us very cross. But the breaks were worse, the children would come up and shout at us. We did not know what they were saying, but nevertheless we were glad when it was time to go home. Because we could not speak Polish, we learned nothing. Every morning there was a great deal of fuss and many tears, so we stopped going to school and did our lessons at home.

One day in the Spring of 1936, we received a letter from our Father. He was coming home, so our Mother took us to Trembowla to meet him. He was still very handsome and was very pleased to see us. He could hardly recognise Mother because she was fatter and had rosy cheeks. She was much happier, although she was worried because we had not settled in Poland.

Maria had grown into a fine young lady. She helped Mother to look after our farm, but eventually there was so much work that we had to employ a young couple, Vasil and Ola, to work in the kitchen. Father never helped on the farm, he was an interpreter in the police force and was very happy in his work. He had many friends and was forever laughing and joking. Everyone respected him and he was very kind to the poor people. If he saw one of them stealing wood or a chicken at night, he would turn away and say nothing. When we were naughty, he would never slap us. Instead, he would give us a good talking to, or find some other form of punishment.

Father realised that I was not being educated properly, so he sent me to stay with Aunt Stefka in Trembowla where I could be taught by a private tutor. Aunt Stefka was a dentist, and she had had all her teeth taken out and replaced by gold ones. I was a little frightened of her, and every time she smiled I would cover my eyes so that I could not see her flashing devil's teeth. Uncle Franek was more human, he used to make beer in the cellar. My tutor tried his best to teach me Polish, but I learned only a few words and, finally, he pronounced that I was a failure: after a year I was still a dunce, so my Father came for me and took me back home.

While I was away with Aunt Stefka, Maria started looking for a husband. But she did not like any of the boys in our village. My Father and Mother chose many nice boys with plenty of money, but she would always find fault with them and said that she wanted a perfect young man. Eventually, when she was fourteen-years old, she went to Gdynia for a holiday and there she met a boy called Zbyszek Kolacz. She brought him home to see if he met with my parents' approval and they liked him. He was seventeen-years old, well-mannered, educated, and his parents owned a shop in Krakow. Three weeks later the banns were read in church and my parents went to buy Maria's dowry. They gave her two thousand Zlotys, some furniture, linen, and a portrait of Jesus wearing a crown. In July 1936 Maria was married in Ilawcze church. She wore Granny Helena's wedding dress, I was her bridesmaid, and Jozef and Jasio attended to the guests' horses. It was only a small wedding, with Zbyszek's parents, brother and sister, and our family, because it was harvesting time and our Mother said it was more important to bring the bread from the fields.

Now Maria was Pani Kolacz she went to live with Zbyszek and his parents in Krakow. Because it was a long, rough journey, she took only the money and linen, the furniture she left at home and she gave the portrait of Jesus to me. I loved the picture very much and I put it on the wall of my room so that I could see it from my bed. But after a week a strange thing happened, the picture seemed to change, the portrait moved, and Jesus came out of the frame and went out of the room. In the morning the picture changed again and Jesus climbed back into the frame. This happened for two weeks and so I told my parents that Jesus kept coming out of the picture at night and would go back in the morning. They said that it could not be true and that I was a foolish girl to make up such a story. But I said it was the truth and so I told everyone at school and anyone I saw in the street. Soon all the village came to our house to see the picture, and people in other villages heard and they came too. Our yard was full of horses and carriages and people were queuing to come in. The front door was never closed and my Father and Mother were furious with me for causing such a disturbance. One day the portrait of Jesus disappeared and was replaced by a small one. My Father said that he had given the picture to the church because that was Jesus' home and he belonged there. I went to see our priest and he said that it was very good of me to part with such a beautiful portrait. I was not very happy that the picture had been given away, but I didn't have a choice and couldn't say anything.

Now I was back at home, Father told me that I would have to go to school again, but I said that I would not go back to the infants' class. I was twelve-years old and wanted to be with children of my own age. In the end I had my way, I went into class four and sat near the teacher so that the other children could not pull my hair. Slowly, I managed to put Polish words together, I was forever studying after

school and trying to do my best. I made friends with the headmaster's children, Jurek and Rusia Bodnaruk, so I was no longer lonely during breaks, and their Mother and other classmates helped me with Polish speech and pronunciation.

After three months my Polish had improved beyond all expectations and, as a reward, my Father bought me a goat. Jozef was given some rabbits and Jasio had a pair of pigeons. These creatures soon went forth and multiplied. My goat had twins and I sold her and one of the kids at the market. Jozef had so many rabbits that they burrowed under the shed and made tunnels to our neighbour's garden where they ate all the vegetables. Our neighbour, Magda Kotchura, told my Father to come and look for himself. It was as though an army had invaded her garden and he had to pay her for the damage. So Jozef had to be parted from some of his rabbits. Mother took a few for the pot and gave others to neighbours for stew. They returned the furs and she used these to make gloves and coats for the winter. At last Jozef's rabbits were under control, but Jasio had the same trouble with his pigeons. We had to have pigeon broth once a week, Jasio would never eat any, and he was in tears every time my Mother asked for a pair. So she started to take them without asking him. She would give them to old people who had little nourishing food and, that way, Jasio was happy because he didn't have to see his pigeons on the dinner table.

Every New Year, the policemen in our village would hold a Grand Ball, with plenty of food, vodka, and homemade wine, and our parents were invited. This was the only time that Father drank and, unfortunately, alcohol made him very bad tempered, so we children had to be prepared. I found a rolling pin, Jozef a frying pan, and Jasio a long wooden spoon. Then we climbed on the bread oven and were ready to protect ourselves. Father's mates brought him home very late and left him in the room with us. Soon he started to throw cups and plates around the room, then furniture and cabinets, and then he tried to reach us. We hit him with our weapons and, at last, he realised that he couldn't win so he went to sleep. Mother showed him the room in the morning, but he said that he hadn't touched anything and that it must have been us. It was the same the next year, so afterwards we stayed with Granny whenever Father went to the New Year Ball.

After the holidays I returned to school hoping to be a good scholar. Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian children went to the same school, so we all had to learn both the Polish and Ukrainian languages, which I found very difficult because I could not remember the spellings and pronunciation. The boys laughed at me and called me a dunce because I was hopeless at reading, and I was upset every day because I did not make good. So I stopped playing outside in the evenings. Instead, I would read and write and translate sentences from French into Polish. Sometimes I would work until midnight, I even made up stories in French so that I could translate them into Polish and then learn them by heart. Time passed quickly, sometimes I hardly slept because I was thinking up new ways to improve my Polish; I had no time for anything but books.

Slowly, very slowly, I started to read Polish and, after a while, I was able to write Polish without looking up the words in a book. Then one day I heard that there would be a test at our school. Each pupil had to write an essay and read it out loud, but I knew that I would be wasting my time. I wasn't good enough yet to do

well in tests and, when it was my turn to read, all the children could not stop laughing.

A couple of weeks later my report came from school. I was very apprehensive, but to my astonishment, after opening it, my Father lifted me up in the air and danced around the room with me. He said that the teacher had put 'good' on my report, but I was still not satisfied because I wanted to be 'very good'. After that I worked even harder. I read about history, geography, maths, and needlework, or learned poems by heart until the lines stood to attention in my head. My parents saw that I might make myself ill, so they took me and my brothers to see relatives, or we went out in the sun for rides around the land that we now owned thanks to my Father's perseverance in making his dreams come true.

I don't know how Jozef and Jasio made out at school because I was always on my own. They played outside with the other children and had no ambitions as such, but I knew that I would have to work hard so that I would not be just a farmer's daughter. In school I kept the fact that I could read and write a secret. When the boys jeered at me I replied that I would do just as well as them. But they did not believe me and just laughed because it was nearly the end of the school year when we would take our exams.

On exam day all the class was quiet. We were told to write two essays, one in Polish the other in Ukrainian, and then read them aloud. I was first because I was nearest the teacher's desk. I read very well and knew the essays by heart because I had spent a great deal of time preparing them. All the other children were shocked, even more so when the teacher said 'excellent', the word I wanted to hear. It had been a lovely day, all my work had been good and I went home no longer a dunce; instead I was 'big-headed' Anna.

After the holidays, I moved into class five where I sat with the other girls and now no one pulled my hair. Sometimes we would sing or perform plays and I enjoyed being on the stage very much. Once, we invited our parents to a concert, but I didn't want my Father to come and see me because he had a moustache. I didn't like it, and I didn't want the other girls to see him, so one Sunday before the concert I decided to do something about his moustache. My Father was sitting reading some papers, I had a pair of scissors in my pocket and pretended to read too. Soon he fell asleep and the papers dropped to the floor. I took the scissors from my pocket, snipped off one side of his moustache, then picked up the papers and put them on the table. When my Father woke up he went to refresh himself. He looked in the mirror, and what he saw didn't please him at all. He went to find my Mother and started to play hell at her, but she laughed so much that she nearly fell on the floor. She said that he would look very nice without a moustache, so he shaved off the remainder. Now I was happy and we all enjoyed the concert.

At last I had more time for hobbies. I took up horse-riding and sometimes I would take our horse and carriage to collect our workers and take them home. Often I would watch my Mother making waistcoats or dresses on her pedal-operated

sewing machine. I was fascinated by the needle, which moved so fast and did the work so quickly. One day I was doing some embroidery for school and I needed to make a straight hem around the edge. When my Mother had gone out to the fields with a tea basket for the workers, I took out her sewing machine, put my work under it, and started pedalling. I didn't sew for long because the needle trapped my hand and I didn't know how to release it. My Mother found me fast asleep with the needle still in my hand. She sent for my Granny who bandaged the wound and took care of me until it had healed; after that accident I lost all interest in sewing.

Winters were bitterly cold. In the evening people used to hold dances and concerts to amuse themselves or they would spin cotton for sheets and sacks, or make mats. My Father did not work too much during winter and so he spent more time with us and supervised our homework. He used to call us to his small study and ask us to read. Jozef was not too bad, but Jasio was hopeless. Instead of reading, he would look at the pictures on the pages and then make up a story to match them. It was often very funny, and he had an amazing imagination, but for the first time my Father realised just how bad Jasio's reading was. He decided to help us all and, from then on, he set aside time twice a week to see our work and note our progress.

During the winter the snow was deep and remained on the ground for a long time. Wolves visited our village and I often saw them in our backyard. They were just like dogs, but with an excited look in their eyes. I never went near them because we had all been warned not to pet strange animals and my Father used to light a fire in the yard to keep them away from our livestock. We had to do all our shopping for the winter in October and November, after that the roads were too dangerous and we had to wait until the thaw. If a foolish person tried to go to Trembowla they would never be seen again. Sometimes we would find boots in the yard with feet still in them and so we would know what had happened and who the person was by identifying their boots.

Since the rivers were frozen we often went skating using homemade skates of wood and wire, which were tied to our shoes. Unfortunately we did so much skating that the snow ruined the shoe leather. Mother played hell at us and, to stop us from skating, she used to hide our shoes as soon as we came home from school. Jozef and I were not put off, we took her large fur coat, cut off the sleeves, and wrapped them around our feet as shoes. When we had finished skating, we hung the furs in the barn with other rabbit pelts. Sometime later Mother went to look at the pelts because she wanted to make some gloves. She noticed that some were a strange shape and, on closer inspection, she realised they were the sleeves of her fur coat. When questioned, Jozef admitted what we had done and was slapped for his mischief. Luckily I was not around and Jozef was able to warn me of our Mother's wrath. I was too scared to go home, and I went to stay with my Granny until Mother had calmed down. Three weeks later she came round to Granny's house and said that she missed me very much, so I went home and was only given a good telling off.

My Granny had been married three times. She met her first husband, Jozef Morag, when she was very young and on holiday in Bethlehem. One day he had a very

bad toothache, so a neighbour pulled the tooth out with a pair of pliers, and sometime later he died in his sleep, probably from blood-poisoning. My Granny was left with three children to look after and two years later she married a painter and decorator. They were very happy, but for only a short time. Six months later he was painting the windows of the Orthodox Church when some children playing near his ladder knocked it. He fell to the ground and was killed instantly. After her children were married, my Granny found her third husband, Jan Luceszen, who kept a sweet-shop and who I knew as my Grandad. Although he was to live to reach old age, she eventually survived him too.

Granny stayed at home and looked after the house and their one cow. In her spare time she collected herbs and filled her loft with them. People would come to her for cures for their aches and pains, she was very kind to everyone and called them sisters and brothers. If a person had a bad back, or rheumatism, she would fill a barrel with hot water and herbs and tell the person to sit in the barrel for half an hour. Afterwards she would rub their back with oil, give them a cup of hot milk, and send them to work. She would do this three times, then the patient would be cured without having to spend a long time in bed. Sometimes she used small glasses instead. She would rub methylated spirits around the inside of the glass and set it alight. Then she would put the glass on the person's back and the flesh would be sucked into the glass. After the glasses had cooled, she would take them off, leaving a pattern of red rings on the patient's back.

Soon it was exam time again and I was forever reading, learning, and revising. When the day of the big exam came we were taken into a large empty room. There, the headmaster from Trembowla told us that the time had come to prove to ourselves what we could do. Our future was in our own hands, so we had to think about what we were doing. After the exam I went home and my parents told me that they had been praying for me to succeed. I said 'thank you' and went to feed my goat.

The results were announced a month later and I had passed to go to a college for girls in Trembowla. My parents said that they wanted to reward me with a present, so I said that I would like to go to Warszawa to see the Prime Minister, General Wladyslaw Sikorski. Luckily there was an annual school outing to Warszawa and my Father went to our headmaster to have my name added to a list of forty other children. Then for two months our teachers taught us songs so that we could perform before our Prime Minister.

In the middle of August we set out from Ilawcze in horse-drawn carriages and headed for the station at Trembowla. It was very hot, all our friends had come to wave goodbye, and our parents were there to give us farewell kisses. At one o'clock we boarded the train for Warszawa, we were full of excitement and could hardly believe the events were for real. Once we had settled down in our seats, the three teachers who were with us took out prayer books and we all knelt on the floor and prayed for God to take us safely to Warszawa and back home again. Then our teachers told us stories or we sang to pass the time. After supper we had to change trains at the large station at Lwow. It was very noisy and, amidst the hustle and bustle, a metallic female voice could be heard announcing the arrivals,

departures and platform numbers. Eventually we found the right train and climbed aboard. I took out my note-book so that I could jot down all that I saw and the stations that we passed, but since I was very excited, and because it was night time, I did not write very much and soon fell asleep.

Just before mid-day we arrived in Warszawa and, walking in pairs, we made for the college where we would be staying. Later that day we went to the hall where the performance was to be held. Children from other schools were there too, performing plays and songs in front of the Prime Minister. At seven o'clock that evening it was our turn. The spotlight shone on us and we performed perfectly. How we were proud of ourselves! Afterwards General Sikorski gave us all a little book describing Warszawa and its history, then we returned to the college.

We stayed in Warszawa for two weeks, visiting the museums, churches and other places of interest. One night it was very hot and stuffy in our room. I could not sleep and kept tossing and turning from one side to the other. Then in the morning the trouble started. German soldiers came and told us to get up and dress ourselves. Soldiers were in every doorway, so there was no escape, and we realised that we were trapped and that Poland had been invaded.

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PART 2: MY LONG JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

Chapter 1 - Life in Germany

We were locked in a stark, stone building for many weeks, then we were taken to Germany. We travelled for a long time in a cattle truck, there was no food or drink and we had to use a corner of the truck as a toilet. At last we were given bread and black coffee. My God! I don't know how long we were on that truck! Girls started to scratch their heads and bodies, then I began to itch too and my long hair became greasy and dirty. We were always crying because we did not know where we were going, or what was going to happen to us. But at last, tired and hungry, we arrived at a camp in Germany.

At the camp we were given a bath and sprayed with disinfectant to get rid of fleas and lice. Then we were examined by a doctor and given a number. Next morning we were sent on a long journey by train. When we arrived at our destination there were many German people, some were farmers. We were made to stand in a long line and were questioned: Can you milk? Are you any good at cleaning? Do you work hard? At last it was my turn, a man came up to me and asked:

"Can you milk?"

"Yes."

"Do you milk at home?"

"Yes, I milk my pet goats."

"What else can you do?"

"I can ride a horse."

The man laughed, noted my number and took me to the office. After signing my name, I said a tearful farewell to my friends, then the man put me in his farm truck and we drove away. The journey was long and the road bumpy, soon I was sick and, by the time we stopped at his farm in a small village called Prielip, I was smelly and covered in dirt. The man took one look at me, put one hand to his nose the other to his eyes, and shouted, "Schnell, schnell". I did not understand the words so I stood still while he went inside.

It was not long before the farmer's wife appeared. She too shouted, "Schnell, schnell", and I followed her into an out-building where pig food was prepared. There I had a long, hot bath, and afterwards I was given some clothes. The vest was so long that it reached down to my toes and the other garments were similarly large and ill-fitting. Once again it was "schnell, schnell" into the kitchen, where I was given potatoes, sauerkraut, thin sausages and bread to eat, and black coffee to drink. After supper I was asked more questions by the farmer and his wife, who were called Henri and Elizabet, but this time an interpreter was present. I told him that I was still at school and that I didn't know how to work, but no one took any notice of me. Later Elizabet showed me the farm and told me about the work that I would be doing. Then she showed me my bedroom, it had a polished wooden floor and a small radiator for which I was to be very thankful during the cold winters.

Next morning I was awoken by Elizabet's shouts of "schnell, schnell", and I began to think that it was some sort of greeting because the Germans were forever using it, but I found out later that it really meant 'quickly, quickly'. I dressed and went downstairs where Elizabet gave me a skirt made of sacking, an apron, and wooden shoes. Then I was taken to the cowshed and told to milk the cows. I had never milked a cow before. It seemed to me that the cow's teats were too big and hard for my small hands, and I was afraid to pull or squeeze them. Elizabet had gone back to the kitchen so I was alone and, after trying several cows with no result, I gave up. Some time later she came back for the milk. What a temper she had! I could see her eyes watering and her mouth working. I just stood still afraid to move. She went back to the farmhouse and brought back her Mother, Father and several other workers, and they all set about milking the sixteen cows while I watched. When they had finished, Elizabet took me to the pigsty where I helped to feed the pigs, and afterwards we all went indoors for breakfast.

After breakfast, I was taken outside and told to get into a trailer with many German people. They were chatting and staring at me; luckily I couldn't understand what they were saying. We set out for the fields where potatoes were being picked. I was given a sack-cloth apron and a wire basket and told to pick up potatoes that had been uprooted by a special machine. I was very slow and soon well behind the rest, so Henri lost his temper and shouted at me. Afterwards I tried to work harder but he was never satisfied.

Later that afternoon we returned to the farm to do the milking. This time I succeeded in milking one cow, but the other workers had to milk the remaining fifteen. Then I had to feed the pigs and afterwards it was suppertime. This routine continued for three more weeks until all the potatoes had been harvested and, by that time, my hands had become very rough and blistered. I was soon able to milk all the cows by myself, which I did in the evening, but in the morning Elizabet helped me because the milk was collected at 7.30am.

One day I was very busy with my work when Elizabet came to me with some paper and an envelope and told me to write to my parents, which I thought was very kind of her. I ran upstairs and wrote three pages. When I had finished they were posted by one of the workers who was going into the nearest town, which was called Uelzen.

One day in November, Elizabet sent me into the garden to put out the washing before I went to chop branches in the forest. I started to peg out the clothes one-by-one when something hit me on the back of my legs. At first I didn't see anything, then I was hit very painfully on the behind so I turned to see who could be doing such a thing. I came face to face with an angry ram with big horns. I tried to shoo him away, but he came at me again, this time from the front. I was screaming for help and the ram became worse, butting me all over and dancing from side to side, so soon I was bleeding from the hands and legs. Finally I couldn't stand any more and lost my temper. I managed to grab him by the horns with both my hands. He pulled me all over and around and around. The washing basket was knocked over and all the washing trampled, but I still clung to the

horns with all my strength. Then I gave a big twist and fell on my back. The horns had broken off in my hands and the ram was kneeling on the grass looking at me. I threw the horns at him and ran from the garden. Henri's father was standing at the gate, he had been too frightened to come and rescue me from the bad-tempered ram.

I was white and very shaken, but I didn't want to sit down, so Henri told me to get an axe and go into the forest to chop some branches and tie them into bundles. I went to the forest and looked where to begin, because there were about a hundred bundles cut and stacked already. Then it started to rain. I was still trembling inside and my stomach hurt from all the ram's blows. So I made myself comfortable under one of the stacks, put another bundle of branches in front of me to close myself in, and, surrounded by the smell of pine, I fell asleep.

When I awoke it was dark and the moon was shining. I wondered what I was doing and why I wasn't working. Then I saw the axe and remembered I was supposed to be chopping branches. I took the axe and went back to the farm. The farmer's family were just finishing milking and they all looked shocked to see me. Elizabeth was first to recover, she sent me to bed with no supper because I hadn't done any work that day. In the morning Henri told me that he had gone to the forest to see if I had cut plenty of branches, but he couldn't find me, or any freshly made bundles, so he had gone home and called the police and SS. They and the farmers in the village had tried to find me.

At last I received a letter from home. My parents told me that they were very worried about me and unhappy that I had not returned. They promised to write again and, after that, I only lived for the letters from home.

Then came the day in the Summer of 1942 when the farmer brought back two more girls, Olga, who was from Kiev, and Annie from Stanislaw. I was sixteen then and Olga was slightly older, she had a good figure and spoke very quickly. Annie was a year younger than me, very quiet and crying everyday. I showed them around the farm and a new routine began. I would milk the cows, Olga fed the pigs and Annie fed the chickens. On Sundays we did our own jobs, went walking in the fields and pretty valleys, or visited the village of Rosche, which consisted of a few shops and a bar. We were not allowed into the bar because we were foreign, and we could not go out onto the street after 9.00pm on pain of a fine or punishment. If we had to be out on an errand after curfew, we had to have written permission from the farmer's wife, so we rarely went out in the evenings. Instead, we used to tell each other stories about our homes and countries.

Winter came, the snow fell, and the work became harder: Threshing for oats, chopping wood, and plucking geese. Christmas came and went and was hardly different from the ordinary days, except the food was slightly better. By now, Olga, Annie, and I were like sisters, we got on very well and rarely quarrelled amongst ourselves. I had become used to the Germans' constant shouts of "schnell, schnell"

and began to curse them in Polish and called them names, such as 'schwaby', which they could not understand.

Now that there was plenty of labour, Henri told me that I would have to learn to ride a bike, so that I would be able to go to another village to help on the farm where Elizabeth's mother lived. One evening he took me out on the road, sat me on the bike, and told me to start pedalling. At first he held on to me, then he shouted, "Schnell, schnell", so I pedalled faster. Soon I was pedalling so fast that he let go of me and I rode on for a long time. Eventually I wanted to stop but I realised I didn't know how, so I rode into a trench full of water and made myself very wet. I had ridden a long way, leaving Henri far behind, and he had gone home. It was too far to walk, so I had to climb onto the bike and teach myself to ride on the way back. That evening Elizabeth gave me her old bike to use when I went to help her mother on the farm.

The same week, I saw a beautiful bike standing next to mine. It had a big, shiny lamp and coloured netting around the wheels. This was Elizabeth's new bike and I couldn't resist having a ride on it. I crept out of the yard with the bike and rode away. I decided to go and show it to another girl, Zosia Zofi. But she lived down a hill and the road was too narrow for me; I still needed plenty of room. I tried to slow down but couldn't. I was going so fast that I panicked, and I didn't see the sand-filled hole in the road. Suddenly I was thrown from the saddle into a bush. I lay still for a while then I saw the bike. It was in a mess. The beautiful lamp was broken in pieces and the wheels were twisted. I wanted to cry over that bike, but I couldn't because my face and jaw were sore. I took out my handkerchief and went to a stream nearby to wash my face. An ugly face with a big lump on the forehead and blood covered scratches stared back at me from the water. My clothes were all ripped, and I wondered what would happen when Elizabeth found out what I had done to her bike. I carried it back home and put it in the same place that I had found it. Then I tried to sneak back to my room, but I bumped into Henri's mother who caught me by the hand and marched me to Elizabeth and Henri. Elizabeth knew that I had smashed her bike, but she couldn't do anything because she could see that I had already been punished by my injuries. After that, Elizabeth had to have her old bike back and I would borrow it when I needed to go to her mother's farm.

At the beginning of 1943 a letter came from my parents. They told me that I would soon be home. The Germans wanted two thousand Zlotys for my freedom and my parents had raised the money by selling some land and animals. However, once the money had been paid, the Germans told them that I was safer in Germany, and I was not allowed to go home. The war made the Germans very irritable and they seemed to be in a temper every day. A new law was passed making all Polish people put a 'P' on their clothes, the Russians had to wear an 'R', and the Ukrainians a 'U'.

One morning in 1944 Henri told me to pack my clothes because I was going to a different job. We set off in the farm truck and it was night before we reached Uelzen station. From there I was taken with many other girls and young women from neighbouring farms to a place called Clausthal. It was very cold and frosty, and the village was very small and surrounded by hills. We slept in barracks that

were encircled by a barbed wire fence, so there was no possibility of escape. The barracks consisted of rooms containing wooden bunk beds, with two blankets for each person, and in the middle of the room was a stove. I chose a top bunk because the heat from the stove rose to the ceiling, so I was always warm and needed few blankets.

At six o'clock in the morning we had breakfast, which was turnip and potato water soup and one slice of bread for each person. Then we were taken to a factory where we had to mix powder. I wasn't sure what the ingredients were, or what we were making, but the work was very hard and the food was very poor. Sometimes we were given black bread with splinters in it. These became embedded in my tongue so sometimes I could hardly speak. The Germans became very tense and we were forced to step up production by getting out of bed at 4.00am instead of 6.00am. It was a long walk from the barracks to the factory and, because the work was so hard, we were all exhausted and people were dying.

Every night after work I used to wash my clothes and put them around the stove to dry, then I washed myself. I kept a cup of water near my bunk to wash my face and dampen my hair in the mornings, making sure that I would be awake and alert. It was very fortunate that I did this. One morning the Germans told us that we could all have a bath. Everyone went to get their towels, but I had already washed. In any case, I did not like having a bath in the morning, so I went to work instead. Imagine my surprise when I returned in the evening to find strangers in my friends' beds. The guard said that my friends had gone to another camp, so I was even more surprised to find that they had left behind their special belongings, such as photographs and letters from home - something which I am sure they would never have done. After this I was frightened and was always careful not to be caught out by the Germans, who were always on the look out for dirty and tired-looking girls.

I was in Clausthal for three months. One day I was taken to an office, I was told that I would be returning to the German farm and was taken back that same day. Everything was the same on the farm. Olga and Annie were still working hard and we had three more labourers, Michael, who was Russian, Janek, who was Polish, and a Ukrainian called Wasil, so now I did not have to milk the cows by myself. Soon it was potato-planting time again and we were always busy. The war was now at its height and I received no more letters from home, bombs were always falling and planes flew low overhead. I stayed on the farm for three months, then I was sent back to Clausthal for another period. This continued until 1945 when bombs fell on Clausthal and the factory where I had worked was destroyed. Then the sounds of war came closer and we heard the sounds of heavy guns. German soldiers came to the farm for food and we discovered that it would not be long before the war was over. Every night we prayed for the war to end so we would be free from the Germans' hands.

Soon the fighting was so close that we had to stay in the cellar and only came out at milking times. Then the ground trembled and we hid in the cellar not even daring to come out for milking, or to feed the animals. We stayed in the cellar for three days until all was quiet. I was the first to go out. I saw three soldiers coming towards me. They started speaking, but I could not understand them so I took

them back to the cellar where the Germans were arrested. It was May 1945, the soldiers were British, and we knew that for us the war was over and we were free.

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Chapter 2 - Life on the Road

That day we did not work. The soldiers took us all into Rosche to the shops. They broke the windows and let us go inside. There we put on beautiful clothes and each filled a suitcase with the equivalent of five years' wages. Then we had a holiday for a week and just lounged around the farm eating, talking and sleeping.

After our rest we all set out for our homes. Olga went with some Russians from a neighbouring farm, Annie and I left together. The roads were damaged by tank tracks, so we put our cases in an old pram, which made the journey much easier. It was great fun to be going home and we sang as we walked. When we were hungry, we just walked into a cafe, had dinner, and walked out without paying. Our journey started at the beginning of Summer and the weather was lovely. We slept outside in the fields, so we had plenty of fresh air and were soon very sun-tanned. Sometimes, instead of walking, we rode on goods trains or had lifts on farmers' trucks.

At last we were on Polish soil. We went to the Red Cross centre, where we had a good wash, and were given a bed for the night. Poland was in ruins, but nevertheless the people were cheerful and generous with what little food they had. Everyone asked us what life was like in Germany, because we were the first people to return after the war. The Polish weather was great, everything was in bloom and the fields of green barley were bending in the breeze and swaying to and fro like an ocean.

Eventually we arrived at Lwow station. Annie was going to Stanislaw and I was going to Tarnopol so we had to part. This was very difficult since we had become like sisters and had been through bad times together. Tearfully we boarded our trains and within a few hours I was in Tarnopol. The situation was very bad and the town was in ruins. I went to the market place where I found a horse and cart with my village's name, Ilawcze, written on it. I waited until the farmer came and asked him if he would take me home. He agreed so, after lunch, we set off for Ilawcze. The roads were dusty because there had been very little rain, and the breeze carried the fragrance from the hedgerow and fields of undulating corn. I was lost in thought, remembering the time when I was thirteen-years old and had just passed my exams. Now I was nineteen and had missed what should have been the best time of my life.

"Ilawcze!" The farmer shouted, making me remember where I was. The village was just how I remembered it, although the roads were badly damaged by tank tracks. I thanked the farmer and began the ten-minute walk home. Everything was quiet. No welcoming dog's bark or any of the usual farmyard noises. I stood motionless outside the house for I don't know how long, then I went inside. There was nothing but rubble, rubbish and dust.

I left and made my way to my Granny's house. It was not far, perhaps a twenty-minute walk. I saw few people, they were still working in the fields, only a few children whom I did not recognise. Finally I arrived at Granny's house which was on top of a hill. From there I could see housewives washing their clothes in the lake which was close by. Granny opened the door. "My God! It's our Andzia!" She said and took me inside. She and Grandad kissed and cuddled and squeezed me, then wept with relief that I was alive and well. After a hot bath and a good meal I felt much better. My Grandparents did not say much that evening. They said that I needed plenty of rest because I was thin and tired looking, so I went to bed.

The night was hot and sticky, and there was a great deal of noise from the lake nearby; the croaking of frogs, quacking of ducks, and crickets chirping. I could not sleep because I was so excited to be back home in my own village after travelling so many miles from Germany. Then I began to cry and, because I did not want my Granny to hear me, I put the bedding over my head to muffle the noise. Some time later there was a knock at the front door. I heard my Grandad go to the door and open it, then I heard men's voices. The men were Ukrainian partisans who had heard of my return and wanted me to join them. They said that if I refused I would be killed. They wanted to wake me up and take me that night. But Granny and Grandad begged them to let me sleep, because I had just returned and was looking tired and ill. So the partisans said that they would return the following night and left. All that night I could not sleep because I was wondering what I should do. I did not want to work for the partisans. After years of oppression and bad experiences I wanted, above all, for a life of my own, with freedom, peace, and a light heart.

"Did you sleep well, Andzia?", Granny asked me in the morning. "I slept like a log", I lied, so as not to cause her any further worries. After breakfast I asked Granny what had happened to my parents. She said that she thought they must have been killed when the war finished, during the time when there was a lot of fighting to gain land. There was a large grave in our yard, but she did not know who was buried there. Granny said the only reason that she was alive was because Grandad was Ukrainian and so they were safe. She then told me about the partisans. Since I did not want to join them, I asked Granny if we could visit my favourite aunt, Aunt Stefka in Trembowla, and she said we would go the next day.

That night I did not sleep. Instead, I lay down and waited for the partisans. They came at midnight and I had quite a shock. The men standing with long rifles in their hands were the boys from my old school. They told me to come with them, but I insisted on having time to visit Aunt Stefka, and they agreed.

Early in the morning, Granny and I set out for Trembowla and reached it before noon. At Aunt Stefka's house we found her suitcases in the doorway. She and Uncle Franek were leaving and moving to the Polish sector. I told Granny that I would stay with Aunt Stefka for a few days and would write and tell her when I would be coming home. Then Granny left us and began the long walk back to Ilawce. That night was spent reminiscing, and recounting my adventures in Germany. The next day I said goodbye to my Aunt and Uncle and, without saying where I was going, I left and went to the station.

Trembowla station was very crowded. There were families all over the platform waiting for trains to take them further into Poland. I found one Polish family and told them of my plight, begging them to help me. They agreed and, when the train arrived, we loaded our luggage and I went with them as one of their children. The train was very slow and the journey a long and rough one. I nursed the children and told them stories. At one point, the train stopped and Russian soldiers inspected our belongings, then we were off again. Eventually we reached Katowice, where I said goodbye to the family who had helped me. I went to a Red Cross centre and was given food, a bath, and a clean bed for the night.

The next day I went in search of work. But there was nothing to be found, so I returned to the station and boarded a train bound for Krakow. Some of the passengers were very generous and gave me bread and milk. One lady said I looked thin, as if I had been in prison. I said that I had been in Germany. They told me I was the first person they had seen who had come back from Germany and asked if I wanted any help. I needed a dress, because I had left all my clothes at Granny's house, so a lady offered me one and I accepted gratefully.

Soon we arrived in Krakow and, once again, I went to the Red Cross centre for help. There I met other girls who were looking for work, but the only jobs were for nurses. I could not stand the sight of blood, so I said that I would go to Poznan in search of work, and two girls, Zosia and Marysia, decided to come with me.

Next day we went to the station. All the trains were full and a conductor told us if we didn't have a ticket we couldn't climb aboard. Then Zosia and Marysia said they had seen people riding on the roofs of railway carriages, so we decided to try it. It was quite a ride. The train went so fast that we could only see the countryside as a blur. We were afraid to lift our heads because some of the bridges were very low; those who did were soon knocked off. We just clung to the roof and eventually we arrived in Poznan. We could hardly recognise each other. Our clothes and faces were black with soot, and smoke and particles of coal from the steam engine's chimney had clogged up our hair. It was very funny and we couldn't help laughing at one another. Then we went to a large water pump to wash our hair and clothes, and afterwards we went to the Red Cross.

We stayed in Poznan for three days, but there were no jobs to be found, and more people kept arriving in search of work. On the third night we did not sleep. Instead, we tried to think what was the best thing to do. When it was my turn to suggest something, I said that I would like to emigrate to France. It would be easy enough to walk, or travel on the roof of a train, and at this particular time the frontiers were not well guarded. Zosia and Marysia turned to me and asked, "Why France?" I replied that I had lived there when I was young, and that my parents had bought a farm with the money they earned there. Perhaps we could do the same; so my mind was made up.

In the morning, Zosia and Marysia asked me if we could visit all the large Polish cities before we set out for France. I agreed, so the three of us travelled on train rooves from Poznan to Lodz, then Gdynia, and finally Wroclaw, where we stayed for three days. The River Odra formed the border between Poland and East Germany. We went down by the banks and hid in some woods. Then we took off our clothes and pretended to be going for a swim. I took a long stick with me to measure the depth. The river was very deep, so I said that we would have to swim. At that moment a fisherman came along and told us not to try and go in. Many had attempted the crossing, but none had survived. We took no notice of him, but we decided to wait until night before we tried to cross. In the evening we went to a farm where we were given milk, bread, and Polish sausages. Then, when it was dark, we returned to the woods.

There was a full moon, so we could see what we were about, and at last it was time to cross. I asked who would be the first to go into the water, but my friends were taken aback. They could not swim and asked if they could ride on my back. I said that was impossible because we would all drown, but I told them that I could help by holding them under the arms while they kicked their legs. They were too frightened, and panicked, so I took off my clothes, made them into a bundle, and said goodbye to my companions. The water was warm and I jumped in. For an instant I could not remember how to swim, but soon I started to kick my legs and beat my hands in the water. The crossing took some time, but at last I was on the other side and in Germany. Then I walked for a while until I found a wood where I put my clothes on a bush to dry.

The next day I walked and walked. By night I was very hungry, but I did not go to the German houses for food. I was still too near the border, so I went into a wood to sleep. On the second day I walked along the road to Dresden. Several cars passed, but no one stopped to offer me a lift. I walked all day without food or drink, to keep up moral I sang, and at night I slept under a bridge.

I walked for three days without food. Then I remembered that many Polish girls I had spoken with had eaten weeds. I picked several leaves and stalks, they were quite edible, so afterwards I was no longer hungry. While I was walking a large car pulled up beside me. Inside was a Russian officer who was wearing many medals. He asked me for my papers and my destination. I told him I came from the village that I had just passed, and that I was going to Dresden to see my aunt who was ill. He offered me a lift, so in no time I was in Dresden. The officer asked me where my aunt lived so I replied Hanover Street, because most German towns have a street by that name.

Dresden was in ruins. I looked around the shops then continued on my way. That night the sky was dark. It began to thunder and then to rain, so I sought shelter in a wood. There were many small pine trees and I crept under one, put my head on my knees, and tried to sleep. The weather was very bad, in Poland we say 'the Devil must be getting married'. There was thunder and lightening, and the wind blew down several small trees. It was pouring down and soon I became soaked and covered in pine needles. Suddenly, the lightening struck a tree and it fell close

by. I spoke to God saying, "I don't know what you think you're doing. You've let me come all this way and now you'll let me be killed in this wood. What a waste it is!" I looked up at the sky thinking I might see God in the lightening. I saw nothing, but after a while the rain stopped and I came out of the wood.

I shook the prickly pine needles from my coat, washed them from my hair, and hung up my clothes to dry. I tried to keep warm by jumping up and down and, when my clothes were dry, I continued on my way, walking briskly or running, but I could not warm myself because I was cold inside. Around noon I was still cold and very hungry. I did not fancy eating any sour leaves, and luckily there was a German farm near by. I knew that most of the Germans were working in the fields, so I went and knocked on the door. There was an old woman in the house. She was making the dinner, and she said she would make me a cup of coffee. She asked if I had a passport, I said I did not think I needed a passport for a cup of coffee. Then she went into the next room and, suspecting her of treachery, I decided to leave. But not before I had crammed into my pocket several hot potatoes, which had been placed on the windowsill to cool. I ate the potatoes and, at last, I felt warm inside, so I continued on my journey.

I walked for several more days, sleeping in woods or under bridges, until I was close to Hoff and the final border that I had to cross. I caught several lifts on milk lorries, by jumping aboard and hiding behind the milk churns so that the driver would not see me. Finally, I arrived at Hoff and, in the evening, I went for a walk near the border. Some couples were going for a stroll, so I followed them and walked very slowly. Around a bend there was a field of oats or barley. The seed was almost ripe, and I stayed in the field for several days, eating the flour in the grain. I wandered about the field looking for the border, but no matter which way I went I could always hear Russian soldiers. Then I went to a different corner of the field. I stayed and listened for anyone passing along the road close by, but no one came. That night I slept in the corner and, in the morning, I saw a farmer coming down the road with a horse and cart. I asked him if he could direct me to the nearest camp. He told me to run as fast as I could, because German police would be coming to guard the border. I ran faster and faster until I was a long way from the border and, soon afterwards, I saw a man in Polish uniform on a motorbike. I asked him how far it was to the nearest Polish camp. Luckily it was nearby, and he took me there on the back of his motorbike.

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Chapter 3 - Camp Life

The Polish Officials at the camp could hardly believe that I had come all the way from Poland. They thought I was an African, because my skin was sun-tanned after weeks of walking in the open air. I was asked many questions: Were the Polish towns badly damaged? How had I travelled from Poland? How long had it taken? Where had I crossed the border, and what did I eat? They could see that I had not been eating good food, because I was all skin and bone, and very weak. After answering their questions I was given a bath and clean clothes. Then I had a medical inspection and, after that, a meal and a clean bed were provided. I slept for two days and afterwards I did nothing but sleep and eat. After another medical inspection, I was given a ticket for a Frankfurt bound express and sent to Darmstadt camp - a health centre in a valley surrounded by trees.

I showed my letter of introduction to the camp doctor and was given a bed. At the camp I had plenty of rest and good, nourishing food with plenty of vitamins. During the next three months I recovered and was then transferred to Wildfleken camp. This was a large camp two miles from the village. It was completely self-contained with doctors, a hospital, a meeting-hall where concerts were held, and a cemetery. I was given my own room, blankets, sheets, pillows, underwear, dresses and new shoes. I was very happy at the camp and met many Polish girls. Soon, I found myself a job in the canteen so I would never be short of food. The kitchen was very large, because the camp had once been used for German soldiers, and we provided all the meals for the people in the camp. I also joined the Polish choir, which was run by Father Swatkowski, and we toured the other camps, singing and performing Polish country dances to raise money for charity.

I worked hard in the canteen and received my wages in beans, coffee, cigarettes and chocolate, which I exchanged for clothes, and soon I had everything I needed. Then one day the painter came and told me that I would have to stay in another block while my room was being decorated. This block had been the camp stables, and in the upper storey there were rooms that had been used by the cavalrymen. I shared a room with a girl called Adela. There was a stove in the middle of the room and so we were quite comfortable. But one day I decided to have a bath, and I put plenty of wood on the stove so there would be enough hot water. Unfortunately, the stovepipe became so hot that it set alight the hay that was in the loft. Adela was ironing and I was happy in the bath, we were chatting when the room became very hot. I thought that I could hear people shouting, so I asked Adela if she could hear anything, but she said `no'. Then she opened the window and we saw that there were flames all around our room. Adela slid down in only her pants, and I only had a towel, but at least we had escaped alive. Once more I was issued with a set of clothes, and I had to start saving again to replace my lost belongings.

Some time afterwards, the boss told me to go and find some girls to help in the canteen, because we were having to cook for more and more people. So I went round the camp and, in Block P2, I found the girl who was to become my best friend, Kasia Jablonska. She came from a village near Ilawcze and, later, we shared a room together. Canteen life was good. Summer ended and Winter came, then Spring, then Summer again. It was in Autumn that we were told that it was

emigration time, and that all young people wishing to emigrate had to go to the camp office. Kasia and I went too. Other girls were going to America, Brazil, Canada, Holland, Belgium or France. We wanted to go to England, because we wanted to be far away from Germany, so that the Germans would never capture us again.

Our papers, passports and certificates were made ready. Then a large truck came for us and we set out for England. There was a medical examination and many girls did not pass. Kasia was one of them and she was taken to hospital. I travelled to England with fifty other girls. We were taken by boat, it was my first sea voyage, and I stayed on deck because I was feeling seasick. Early next morning we arrived in England and, after another medical examination, we were taken to a camp at Havant in Hampshire.

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Chapter 4 - Life in England

It was Christmas 1947, our first on English soil. A Polish priest invited us to have evening supper with him and afterwards Midnight Mass. To end the evening, he told us about life in England, and afterwards we were taken back to the camp. We stayed at Havant until the end of December, then the man in charge told us to have our cases ready and labelled. We were to be taken to our new jobs and our luggage had to go separately, so we could only take handbags with us. We travelled by train and at each stop a few girls would get off. At last we reached the small town of High Bentham in Yorkshire where three other girls and I were to work. It was dark and a Mr John Cockshot from the Angus factory took us to our lodgings.

Two girls stayed with each English family, a girl called Franciszka Dubowska and I stayed with Mrs Maud Jackson and her husband Tom. The other two girls, Stasia and Anna Rembelska, lived with the Crawley family in Robin Lane. Mr and Mrs Jackson's house was on the main street and it seemed very strange to us. I could touch the ceiling if I stretched out my hand and the bedroom was small and contained a large bed with clean sheets. We went to have supper but we couldn't speak a word of English and Mrs Jackson only knew one German word 'essen' - so at least we knew when it was time to eat. We were still waiting for our cases, and Mrs Jackson was surprised that we had only the clothes we were wearing, but we couldn't explain what had happened. Our belongings never did arrive and so, after a while, Franciszka gave me some coupons for 'smalls', and gradually we had to save and scrape to replace our lost clothes.

On 2nd January 1948 we started work at the George Angus factory which made fire hoses. Mrs Jackson took us to the foreman who showed us around, and later I started to learn the job of winding. The lady teaching me was Mrs Madge Robinson, she was very kind and spoke to me using her hands. I had to take hanks of yarn and wind them onto bobbins, which then went to the twisting machine. At lunchtime we had our first cups of tea and a meal which we enjoyed very much; all the people were looking at us and smiling. When the day was over Mrs Jackson took us home and after tea she held up objects and said their names, then we repeated them until we had learned them. It was very funny, the words were so hard to pronounce and our tongues had trouble getting around them.

The next day we went to work with a neighbour, it was still dark and very foggy so we could see nothing. The morning passed quickly and soon it was lunchtime. In the afternoon Mr Cockshot sent me home to get my papers. It was the first time that I had left the factory on my own. I walked all over the streets but I couldn't find Mrs Jackson's house and in the end I went back to the factory. Mr Cockshot didn't say anything because he knew I couldn't speak English. When it was time to go home I said to Franciszka, "I don't know what we are going to do, I can't find our house." So we stayed in the Winding Room and when Mrs Robinson tried to turn off the light we switched it on again. We sat on the bench too frightened to leave and eventually she took us home. After that Mrs Jackson put a certain vase in the window so that we would know which was her house. The same week I sent

a letter to my Granny telling her I was alive and well. It was the first of many, but it would be several years before I received a reply.

We were content in our work and made many friends. They tried to teach us English, and sometimes singing and dancing in the cloakroom. I was forever writing English words in a book, using my own system of spelling, and repeating them to myself. I wrote down any word I heard and in the evening I would proudly recite them to Mr Jackson, but unfortunately some of them were swear words. We were very happy with Mrs Jackson and stayed with her for two months until she was taken ill and we had to move across the road to new lodgings with Mr Bert Bibby and his wife Nelly.

One day I decided to try and get in touch with my friend Kasia, so I wrote to Father Swatkowski at the camp in Wildflecken. He sent my address to her and eventually she wrote to me. She was living in a hostel with many other Polish girls at Elland near Halifax and worked in a mill spinning silk. I went to see her in June and wanted to move from Bentham to work with her. Unfortunately I was told that I could not go until I had finished my contract. In the meantime she met her future husband Broniek Krecz. They were married in 1949 and moved to Derby.

During the Summer holiday, Franciszka and I went sunbathing in the fields. One day we fell asleep for a long time and when we awoke it was quite late. We walked all over Bentham but we could not find our lodgings. Eventually we came to Robin Lane where we approached several people and asked them if they could direct us to Bentham. Some of them laughed, others thought we were crazy, in fact we were suffering from sunstroke but no one knew because our English was so poor. At last we saw Mrs Easterby who worked in the factory canteen, we went to her house for a drink and afterwards she took us home. That evening our heads were very sore and we were both sick.

Once the holidays were over we started work again and the time soon passed. After a year the other girls moved to the cities because they did not like living in a small village. Stasia went to Coventry and Anna Rembelska to Huddersfield. In February 1949 Franciszka married Janek Kozyra and moved to Lancaster, but I stayed in Bentham because it reminded me of my own village, Ilawcze. At first I was very lonely, but then I changed lodgings and went to live with Mrs Dorothy Foster at Mayfield Avenue, where I had a room to myself for ten shillings per week. She was very kind and had four young children. I made friends with them and they helped me with my English by teaching me the alphabet or lending me their schoolbooks. Sometimes they held concerts for me in the coal shed, so I was happy and doing all right.

Then I met a young man called Donald Hebblethwaite who was quiet and handsome. I liked him very much and we made a date to go to the picture-house in Robin Lane. I now knew that I wanted to stay in Bentham for a long time and, since there was little privacy in lodgings, I started saving money to buy a small house. When the factory was very busy I worked double shifts to earn more money

(6 instead of 3 per week) and Donald saved too. Sometimes we hardly saw each other because I was working so hard, but at last, after two years, I had saved enough money for a mortgage. One day in September 1950 I was lucky, two houses in King Street were to be auctioned in the Town Hall. I went with Mrs Ellen Harrison from the Winding Room in our factory and she helped me to bid. Both houses were sold together, No.3 King Street was empty and No.2 had tenants, Mr Dick Marriott and his wife Betty. I bought the two houses for £950 and paid £4.4s.5d every month for 10 years.

Afterwards I was very busy preparing the house, stripping the old wallpaper and burning off the paint. Then Mr Errington came to do all the painting and papering, which cost me £90. It was a very slow job, but after three months the house was decorated to my liking and complete. Then I started work in the factory canteen so that I could learn English cooking. It was fun learning the recipes for cakes and puddings. Many times I mixed the wrong ingredients, using plain flour instead of self-raising, cornflour for white sauce, or sugar for cheese sauce. Luckily the canteen manageress, Mrs Connie Grimshaw, was good to me and always corrected my mistakes. I made friends with other girls in the canteen, Nancy Hoop and Lily Evans, who helped me to distinguish between the different types of flour and showed me how to read cookery books. They tried to help me to understand the English way of cooking and, after a couple of months, I had learned a lot about the job by watching how it was done. I practised baking at home and took the results to the canteen where Connie said, "Good, you'll do!"

I enjoyed working in the canteen. All the girls were friendly and, best of all, it was quieter than the mill so I could hear everything that was said which made learning English easier. Sometime later Connie asked me if I could take dinner to her Granny, Mrs Reid, who was ill in bed. I said "yes" and soon made friends with Granny and Grandad Reid and their son Lesley. Later I met their daughter Margaret Miller, who sometimes came to look after Granny Reid when Connie was working, and after a month I was a welcome guest in their house. One lunchtime I arrived to find the living room in a complete shambles. Grandad Reid had left the dog behind while he went to see Lesley and it had ripped out all the stuffing from the sofa. I went into the sitting room to see Granny Reid but she was covered in feathers and all I could see was the white hair on top of her head. I went back to the canteen and told Connie what had happened. She said that she would kill the dog when she got home but luckily Margaret returned first, cleaned up the mess, and took the dog away.

On 14th January 1953, Kasia's first daughter, Krysia, was born and I was asked to be her Godmother. I was very pleased and accepted gladly, so that Easter I went to Derby and stayed for two days. There was a grand party, Kasia and Bronek invited the Polish priest, and the Godfather, who was called Jasio, sang 'Dominoes, dominoes' so loudly I was nearly deaf for a week. To this day, if I hear that song it makes me laugh! I was still going with Donald. We would go to the pictures, or to Morecambe, and we were talking about getting married, but I didn't want to tie the knot until I was ready and my house was completely furnished. In Summer, Bronek and Kasia came to see me for three days during Queen Elizabeth's coronation and so I had to buy a new bedroom suite, but I still didn't ask Donald for any money because I wasn't sure whether the courting would last.

That same year, Franciszka had a baby daughter, Danka, and I was asked to be her Godmother too. I said `yes' and it was a great honour to hold the baby in church at the christening in December. Time passed quickly, days were spent at work and nights cleaning, knitting, or mending clothes in front of the open fire. During the September holidays of 1954 Donald and I became engaged and he took me to see his parents to introduce me. I liked his Father, who was a farmer, because he reminded me of my own. His Mother did not like me at first because I was foreign, and gave me a frosty look, but eventually she accepted me. Then we fixed the wedding day for 26th March 1955, a week before Easter.

Now that we were engaged, Donald helped me to buy furniture for the living room: a dining table and four chairs, a sideboard, and two fireside chairs. For six months we planned the wedding expenses. It would be costly because we had to save for linen, carpets, a kitchen cabinet, and my wedding costume. We decided it would have to be as cheap as possible - which meant a Registry Office wedding. Also, we had a problem because Donald was Church of England and I was Roman Catholic. Donald didn't want to upset his parents and relations by converting to my faith, so that was another reason why we decided on a quiet Registry Office wedding. The special day soon arrived and we hired a taxi to go to Settle Registry Office. Afterwards we had a small reception at the Brown Cow Hotel in Bentham with a few friends, including Nancy Hoop and Connie Grimshaw, and Donald's parents, sister, and her husband Bert. Later that day we went by train to Derby to stay with my friend Kasia and her husband Bronek. It was my first holiday since 1948.

Just a couple of months later, in May 1955, I received the first letter from Poland. It had my Father's name and address on it - and my hair literally stood on end. I just stared at the envelope and would not open it until Donald came home from work. I discovered that my parents were alive and had been in hiding when I had visited Ilawcze. They would have made contact if I had stayed just another day or two. Now their letter had come too late, I was married and could not go home.

During the Summer, we had plenty of time to go walking and often went with Donald's best friend Sydney Dawson, his wife Elsie, and their son Melvyn. One Sunday in August we went to Ingleton to climb Ingleborough. Elsie and Melvyn only went part of the way, but I decided to climb to the top although I had never been so high before. Donald said, "Keep going, and don't look down", and slowly we climbed upwards. At last we reached the top and Sydney gave me his binoculars. It was a breath-taking view and we could see all the way to Morecambe. Then it was time to go down. I went to the edge to see how far we had to go, and it was then I saw how steep the hill was. I was too frightened to go down, and Sydney and Donald were worried because they didn't know what to do with me. They needed a rope to tie around my waist to lead me down, but all they had was a little string. Sydney tried shouting to Elsie that they had a problem on their hands, but it was too far and she could not hear. Eventually I calmed down and, with Sydney in front and Donald at the rear, we descended gradually. At last, thank God, we were on level ground and after that Sydney and Donald never asked me to go climbing with them again!

The next year I had to give up my job in the canteen to wait for a new arrival in the Hebblethwaite family, and our only son, John, was born on 30th May 1956. Taking care of our baby was very touching and a thrill. It was sheer joy to see such a small human being and know that he was dependent on me for everything. Two months after he was born I took him to the factory canteen to introduce him to my workmates, especially Nancy Hoop, who was a widow with four children and my best friend in Bentham. I asked her if she would like to be the Godmother to our son and she agreed, kissing him on the head and saying, "See you in church my little cherub." Then Donald went to see his friend Sydney and asked him to call on us. When he came around we asked him if he would be John's Godfather. He said that it was a great honour and so our dearest friends became Godparents at John's Christening at St Margaret's Church on 12th August 1956. Afterwards we invited Donald's parents and some of our friends and neighbours to a small party at the Brown Cow Hotel. Donald's parents were very happy; now they had an heir and the Hebblethwaite name had been saved from extinction.

It was a grand time for me after John started walking and talking. Going for walks and playing with him were the best moments of my life and I shall always cherish them. The years passed quickly and little changed in our lives. In 1959 Grandad Hebblethwaite died from a Thrombosis and it was a very sad time for all the family. I still received letters from my parents, sister, and brothers. In them they were forever asking me to come and visit. If only they knew how I wanted to go, just once, to see them! But it was too far and our son was still small, so I promised myself that I would go - someday.

In 1961 John started Primary school. It was a sad day for me and the tears started rolling down my cheeks. The memory came back to me of the time when I was starting school in France and afraid to go. My Mother was in tears then, and now, after so long, history was repeating itself. I returned to work part-time, cleaning offices at the Angus factory. There I met women who were in the same position as myself. We talked to each other, and laughed, and the feelings I had improved. I think the work and company were the best medicine for me; they cured my depression.

John liked school very much. He had little friends to play with and was a contented, small boy. Donald was a good worker and a happy man. He enjoyed work in the mill and took good care of us, doing jobs around our home: painting, decorating and joinery. On Sundays we went walking and during the holidays we would go on day-trips, or for walks down by the riverside. Once we went away from home, but John didn't like sleeping in a strange bed, so afterwards we always came home at night.

In 1962 Mr and Mrs Marriott moved to a new home and we rented No.2 King Street to a young couple, Mr Brian Carter and his wife Pat. They stayed for two years and, by then, they had a son and daughter. Now the cottage was too small for them so, in October 1964, they left to go and live in a council house. At that time both cottages had just a living room and kitchen downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs, one large, the other very small. There was no bathroom, and the toilet

was outside at the end of the yard. So we decided to convert the two houses into one building with two rooms and a kitchen downstairs, and two large bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs.

In 1965 we obtained planning permission and the long job began. We hired a local joiner, Leonard Tyrer, and a builder, Edwin Chapman, to help us. Lenny supervised the work and Donald and I stripped the ceilings to the beams. Then we knocked through a passage between the cottages, both upstairs and downstairs. Our front door was walled up and the recess converted into a cupboard. Also we knocked down the stairs leading from our living room, converting the space below into a pantry and the space above became part of the bathroom. In the other cottage the internal wall between the kitchen and living room was removed and the back door was walled up forming one large sitting room. Stairs lead up from the sitting room to a long passage formed from the two small bedrooms and at the end was the bathroom. Edwin re-pointed all the walls, put up new plasterboard for the ceilings, and laid a concrete floor to replace the old flagstones. Lenny made new windows and doors, and electricians rewired all the lights and sockets. Then Cowgills the plumbers fixed the bath, toilet, hand-basin and airing cupboard. After six months, the work was complete in October and had cost £773.18s.5d.

Later, in 1966 I started work full-time, as caretaker at the local Primary school. I liked the work because I could see John, have meals ready, and have the time to talk and play with him before his bedtime. Watching my son growing was very interesting and important to me. To see our child each day made us very happy and it was a treasure to keep in my heart. How the time went quickly! Before we had time to think it was holiday time, or Christmas, or a birthday to be celebrated by going to the cinema or museum. John was soon old enough to go on his own to play with friends, exploring fields and woods, or painting, so Donald and I had more time together at weekends and sometimes we would go to Lancaster shopping.

In September 1967 our John went to the Grammar school in Low Bentham. He did very well in any sort of lesson and liked his new friends and teachers. A few years later, in February 1971, I started work at the Wenning Silk mill. I was on days; it was good work and paid well. Now we were able to save for John to go to university and for a rainy day. There was another reason why I liked working in the factory: the company of young ladies and older people who were always willing to help me to correct my English. They had a good laugh at my expense and I had a good education from them. Now I am able to write English all by myself and read many books; all thanks to the workmates who deserve medals for teaching me all that I know.

In the same year, I learned that my Granny had died at one hundred years of age. She had always said that I would return, but now she had become tired of waiting, and she died in her sleep with a Bible and magnifying glass in her hands. All her life she had been cheerful and had helped people. Now she was sadly missed and her treasured knowledge of folk medicine was lost. Only one item was passed to my Mother, the benefits of the Lime flower. These must be harvested while they are still being pollinating by bees, then dried and stored in a cotton bag. Tea made

with the flowers, and to which a slice of lemon and spoonful of honey have been added, will cure a cold. And, if the flowers are boiled in water, the liquor can be used to ease tired feet.

Later, in 1973, I changed jobs again and went back to the Angus factory. The yarn was better to deal with and less strain on the eyes, also it was not far from home. I worked shifts again and enjoyed the work because everyone cared for each other. I had worked with the people before and it was like one big family. I had plenty of time to do my jobs at home and keep our son straight and out of mischief. John was now a tall, young man and he was working hard so that he could go to university. I was glad when he passed the adolescent age because he had a motorbike, which made me nervous; these machines are so dangerous and they go too fast! But Donald was proud of John and always sided with him. He said, "Let the boy do what he likes, because he's only young once." And so far so good, John behaved himself and respected us, and we both loved him because he was our only son and very dear to us.

Life for us was very good and so, between work and small pleasures, we survived the difficult times and were both very happy and content with our marriage. Sometimes I wanted all the things that other couples could afford; I wanted to make our home look as smart and rich as theirs. I would think, "How can they manage on the same income as us? Why are they so much better off?" But I would soon come to my senses. I would remember that I had come to Bentham with nothing, now I wasn't cold or hungry. We had a roof over our heads and that was more important than being rich! God gave us health everyday and it was a big bonus to be happy.

At last John passed to go to university and we were very proud of him. My dreams had come true, he would have a better chance in life than I had; with a good education he would be able to get a better job. We tried to get over the excitement and I was a little sad that my small boy had grown up and wouldn't be needing me any more. I was glad to have a job in the factory, providing yarn for the weavers. I wasn't on my own and in that way I was able to control myself. I didn't want to burst into tears and disgrace myself in front of my workmates - I was so happy it was only natural for a Mother to weep.

After a short holiday, the packing had to be done and in October 1974 John went to Loughborough to his new life. Donald and I were lonely at first and missed not being able to see him; just waiting for the post was agony for us. Eventually I started work on our house, keeping myself busy all the time stopped me from thinking too much. Donald tried to do the same and at the weekends we went walking in the countryside; in this way we managed to preserve our emotions. Hard work is the best medicine in the world and I would recommend it to anyone who has to come through times like we did. Soon we were back to normal and able to laugh and joke about it. We went visiting Donald's relations and, in June 1975, went to see our friends from long ago, Kasia and Bronek in Derby.

Time passed quickly, too quickly for my liking, and lots of people whom I had known had gone to the other world. We still lived in the same little house. It was now modern and furnished and decorated to our own taste. We liked it very much because it was near to the shops and factory. There was a railway station in Bentham, and 'buses, so we didn't need a car for transport. John came home at the end of each term. He had grown taller and had a moustache. I couldn't think why he had changed so much. He liked to play records very loud and went out at night. What kind of a son would he be? Another worry for Donald and me! But Donald said, "Never mind, he's living in the university and wants to be the same as the other young men. He'll grow out of it when he has finished his studies." I hoped so.

In August 1977 John managed to get his degree in Human Biology. Thank God our prayers had been answered! He came home on holiday for a short time and sometimes we went to the city in his car or for rides around the countryside. Once, he took us to see Broniek and Kasia, and we stayed for three days. Their children, Krysia and Janina, were both married now and had children of their own. Soon John was off again, but by now we were used to it and accepted his way of life.

In June of 1979 we went to France, to the sleepy town of Segré where my first memories of home began, so long, long ago. The town was still beautiful but it was now modern and well maintained. The people were friendly and there was plenty of work for them. We went to the church where I was confirmed, the Église-de-la-Madelaine. It was just as I remembered, although the red seats had been replaced by wooden ones, and there was plain glass in the window instead of the stained glass picture of the Holy Family. We stayed there until mass was over, then Donald took some photographs of the church where I used to pray and had my first Communion. Then we went to see La Rue-de-la-Roquette, the street where I used to live. The houses were abandoned, apart from one where an old lady lived, but the same peach trees were still growing outside. Everyone else had moved to new homes and someday, when the old lady is gone, the street will be demolished and new houses built. Later we went to see the place where I used to play and slide down hill on sacks, but there was nothing to be seen. The land was built over, houses, flats and a modern swimming pool were there instead. My old school was just as I had left it in 1935, but we could not go inside as it was locked for the holidays.

I tried to find out if any of my old friends were still in the town, especially Marta Maré and Ivan Laté. We discovered that Marta was married to the headmaster of a school and worked in an electric shop. Ivan was married with children, as was Charlota Gazan, who was living in Angers. Then we went to the bar where my parents used to go, and which was near the factory where they worked. The owner M. Lapage told us the news of what had happened since I had left. We stayed for fourteen days in a hotel in Angers and the sun shone everyday. It was the best holiday I had ever had! But soon we were home again and back at work with the usual chores to be done. Home was the best place for us, we could read books, watch television, or go for walks, and we had our jobs in the mill, so time went quickly.

Now I was content with everything we had achieved and nothing new happened in our lives. Donald's parents were gone, and so were mine, and my brother Jozef, who died in 1985. It was very sad for me, I didn't get the chance to see them all and now there was so little time to go and see my sister and brother. Often I wondered about my family at home, how they lived, whether they had changed, and if they were happy in the village where I had been born. Many times I have dreamed about our small cottage and I walk around it or run quickly down the street, but I never go inside and then I awake. I still receive letters from my sister Maria, we exchange news and she tells me about life in Ilawcze. I would like to go and see my relations very much but I am afraid to go in case the Ukrainians remember me, and the way I escaped from them to freedom in June 1945! Maybe someday when I grow old I will make the effort to go to Poland and see them all.

A few more working years passed and at last the time came for me to retire. Now I would be free to do what I liked, no more getting up early in the morning or coming home very late at night. Good news at last! I was ready to relax after working since the age of fourteen. It was time for me to do different things and I planned how I would enjoy my freedom. Best of all, our son was getting married in my retirement week. We were surprised at first but very happy. John had been working in Kendal, at Farley Health Products, since April 1980 and had met a nice lass called Dawn. I was to be relieved of all my responsibilities, thank God! So we started preparing for the wedding. At last the special day arrived and on 19th October 1985 John and Dawn were married at St George's Church, Kendal. It was a beautiful day, and a smart wedding with all the trimmings and many friends and relations as guests. Afterwards they went for a honeymoon in Portugal. It was a happy day for us and we were very pleased with John's choice of wife. Dawn is a pretty girl and good-hearted; we love her and are glad to have her as a daughter-in-law.

So now I am retired, but I have plenty to do: Shopping in the morning, housework, and dinner to prepare. Then in the afternoon, my favourite part of the day, I go for walks in the country, sometimes with two sisters, Linda Chapman and Edith Campbell. I have known them for a long time, since the days when we worked together in the mill. Linda used to work with me in the Winding Room and Edith worked in the canteen. We chat and exchange news as we walk. When I am walking in the open air it is so calm and peaceful, and the sun brings a smile to my face. There are so many beautiful sights around Bentham: the mountains, the many greens of the hedges and fields, and the animals in the pasture. Often the cows come to meet me at the gate and stay with me until I move on. There are rabbits in the fields, and they aren't afraid when I walk near them, or friendly horses come running to meet me when I call. The clouds roll by and birds sing in the woodland. I see wood pigeons, or squirrels climbing up trees, and sometimes a weasel playing near the river. The riverside is my favourite place. I go there alone and think about how time has flown so quickly and how so many things have changed. I am never lonely when I am out in the countryside, and I see the seasons of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter in their beautiful colours.

In the evening I like reading a good book and so the time has passed by and it is two years since I retired. Now I have a new walking partner. Donald has finished working at the Angus factory, after 48 years and six months he decided it was time for him to be free to enjoy the fresh air like me.

This year, 1988, is very special for me, because I have been in this country for forty years. Forty years ago I didn't know anything about England. In the camp we saw a photograph of the Queen's smiling face taken on her wedding day and were amazed. What a beautiful fashion for a bride, such rich dresses and so many guests! I soon discovered it was not so easy to have an expensive wedding and I had to work to save every penny first. Today I saw the same picture in the newspaper and I was reminded of all my yesterdays. I am just a little older than the Queen, but I lived in hell when I was young. Thank God I was reprieved to celebrate my forty years of freedom! It is the Polish custom to pass one's life story to the next generation, my parents told me theirs and my grandparents did the same. Now it is my turn to leave a description of my life and tell the story of my long journey to freedom.

Anna Hebblethwaite

March 1988

EPILOGUE

For many years after her retirement, Anna could be found walking the country lanes around Bentham enjoying the sights and sounds of nature. She never forgot her early trials and counted her blessings. In the 90s, Anna became a proud and loving Granny to Robert and he joined her on many of her walks.

However, she became increasingly forgetful and was overcome by a sudden confusion in April 2002 that required her to be taken into medical care, first in Oaklands, Lancaster, then Moss View, Heysham. Since April 2004 she had been resident at Anley Hall Nursing Home, Settle. She died peacefully in her sleep on Monday 1 September.

- John Hebblethwaite
September 2008

'Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!'
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.'

William Shakespeare
A Midsummer Night's Dream