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## **ENGRAVED IN MEMORY. A FRAGMENT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

My family stems from the Ropczyce land, which included the territory of present-day Ropczyce-Sędziszów county, located at the border of Sandomierz Basin and Carpathian Foothills. Ropczyce is an old medieval city, located at the Wielopolka River, which had been called for many centuries Brzeźnica. Thanks to this favorable location at the intersection of important trade routes from Russia via Cracow to Silesia, and from Hungary via Krosno to Sandomierz, Ropczyce was quite a prosperous city. King Casimir the Great granted the city rights in 1362. Prof. Kazimierz Rymut, a student of our high school, demonstrated that in the course of phonetic assimilation Ropczyce was derived from Robczyce, the original city name, which comes from the name Robek (from: to do, work [Pol. robić, robota]).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after Swedish Deluge and the invasion of the army of Prince Jerzy Rakoczy, the town began to plunge into decline. In the aftermath of the First Partition of Poland in 1772, the Austrian army entered Ropczyce from the Slovakian side and installed its garrison, which continued to exist until the first days of November 1918. It means that the population of a larger part of the so-called Galicia, to which my ancestors belonged, had to endure national slavery much longer than inhabitants of other Polish regions.

The Austrian authorities treated Galicia as a colony, but modernized its administrative system, and created a new communication network. Over the period 1775–1780, at the request of Empress Maria Theresa, the imperial road was built from Bielsko via Wadowice, Cracow, Tarnów, Ropczyce, Rzeszów and Przemyśl to Lviv. This “cobbled public road” is present-day international motorway A4. My family is specially attached to it as it was a place of work for my father who served as a gateman for several decades. This position does not exist today. In the middle

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most important iron road in Galicia was built, which connected Cracow with Lviv, but bypassed the city.

In 1855, as a result of the administrative reform, Ropczyce became the capital of the county, including as well the following cities: Dębica, Sędziszów Małopolski and Wielopole, which lost the status of a city in the interwar period.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ropczyce went into economic decline. Gradually, the craft industry disappeared, the craftsmen scattered across the countryside or got involved in agriculture. Only some shops, mostly Jewish, and various agencies purchasing mainly crops remained in the city. The majority of the inhabitants of those towns were farmers or people combining work in trade and services with farming and land cultivation. In Germany, this combination of “peasant and townsman” was aptly called *Ackerbürger*. The residents of Ropczyce were famous for growing onions, which they successfully sold at nearby fairs. This is the reason why they are called *cebularze* (*onion cultivators*) up to date. In 1912, the city had 3,339 inhabitants, including 2,258 Poles, 1,069 Jews, 10 Ukrainians and 2 Armenians<sup>1</sup>.

During World War I, the Ropczyce county – twice occupied by the Russian army – was seriously damaged. Several hundred houses were burnt. The population was plundered by soldiers of both fighting parties, and many families suffered from hunger.

Freedom came to Ropczyce earlier than to Warsaw. Already on October 7, 1917, the Polish flag was waving on the municipal council building despite the protests of the county office and the military police. On November 1, 1918, *at 8 a.m. the eagles and Austrian emblems fell down in front of the Austrian battalion composed of Czechs and Germans*<sup>2</sup>.

In the interwar period, despite various modernization attempts, Ropczyce remained a poor and rather under-developed town. It did not have water and sewage works, did not know electricity or asphalt roads. Sidewalks, as far as I remember, could only be found in the city center. I reckon that the greatest achievement of Ropczyce in the Second Republic of Poland was the establishment of two high schools in 1923–1924 and the progress in constructing the third one, i.e. the horticultural gymnasium. The Coeducational Municipal Classical Gymnasium, with an eight-year course, enjoyed the full rights of state schools, and one of its graduates was Wilhelm Mach, a famous writer. The Municipal Female Teachers’ Seminar was also soon filled with students who came not only from the Ropczyce land. However, the life of these schools was short. After the so-called Jędrzejewicz reform of 1932, the first school was transformed into a four-year gymnasium

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<sup>1</sup> Much information on the history of Ropczyce comes from: *Ropczyce. Zarys dziejów [Ropczyce. An outline of history]*, ed. W. Bonusiak and F. Kiryk, Rzeszów 1991.

<sup>2</sup> *Przeszłość wsi powiatu ropczyckiego w ustach ich mieszkańców [The past of the villages from the Ropczyce county in the testimonies of their citizens]* written and concluded by Jerzy Fierich, Ph.D., Ropczyce 1936, p. 75.

without state rights, and the female seminar was liquidated. The general misery of the city was further worsened by the decision of the authorities to transfer the county capital to Dębica in 1936, which was already an important industrial center with nearly ten thousand inhabitants.

In the period of People's Poland, they promoted in Ropczyce a view, enjoyed by some historians from Rzeszów, that the gymnasium was degraded, the teachers' seminar was closed, and the county liquidated in reprisal for political radicalization of the population, the culmination of which was the Ropczyce uprising in 1933. This view was easy to refute. The reform of the educational system developed by Janusz Jędrzejewicz, the minister, abolished all teachers' seminars, introducing pedagogical high schools. The most prominent teachers of the Classical Gymnasium left Ropczyce at that time and moved to larger cities. However, others could not guarantee an appropriate level of education, especially at a high school, if such one had been constructed. The transfer of the county capital to Dębica contributed to the impoverishment of Ropczyce, but it was fully justified by economic and administrative reasons.

The spark, which triggered a mass rebellion of peasants, was the events which took place in Kozodrza, a very poor village belonging to our parish in Witkowiec. At the end of May 1933, a court bailiff, called a sequestrator, went there – accompanied by police officers – and as part of the tax collection procedure, took away from the peasant the last cow which was the only breadwinner in the family, especially for the children. In his defense the whole village stood up and chased the policemen away. This event won a lot of publicity throughout the entire Subcarpathian region. Thousands of peasants from the Kraków and Lviv provinces set out to help the inhabitants of Kozodrza, while the authorities sent the military police units against them. On a Sunday, a mounted military police unit opened fire on the crowd that had gathered at the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Ropczyce, killing five people. The events in other towns were more tragic. At least twenty-five peasants were killed in Nockowa, which was defending itself against the forces of law and order for a long time.

The main reason was the poverty deepening in the overpopulated village, which was aggravated by the economic crisis. In his doctoral thesis, Jerzy Fierich stated that peasants were suffering from poor nutrition, in the period of hungry gap they starved, and because of poverty, the number of marriages also reduced. The level of morality also decreased: *There are thieves among people who have never stolen before*<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, the causes of the peasant revolt were evaluated by Stanisław Kot, a professor at the Jagiellonian University. In August 1933 he informed Ignacy Paderewski, former Prime Minister, about the course and consequences of the bloody events, i.a. about the imprisonment of two or three thousand peasants. *The riots were caused by poverty, misery and political abuses of*

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<sup>3</sup> J. Fierich, *Broniszów – wieś powiatu Ropczyckiego. Studium ekonomiczno-społeczne [Broniszów – a village in the Ropczyce county. The economic and social studium]*, Warszawa 1933, p. 271.

*the government, which suppresses them bloodily, but in that way, the government rebels peasants against the state*<sup>4</sup>, S. Kot wrote.

The bloody suppression of peasant riots did not calm the village. In 1937, they exploded with even greater force, covering almost all Southern Poland. And also this time more than forty peasants died from police bullets. Ultimately, thanks to the biggest industrial investments made by the state to strengthen the country's defense potential the rebellious moods in the country quelled. As a result thereof, the Central Industrial District was established, which was located in the bifurcation of the Vistula River and the San River, i.e. the so-called "a safety triangle". Melchior Wańkowicz provided a beautiful description of this great economic and civilization venture<sup>5</sup>.

Investments in developing industrial plants in the Central Industrial District completely bypassed Ropczyce. As a city distant from the railway line, it did not arouse interest. Several industrial plants (e.g. magnesites, a sugar factory) were established only in the late years of People's Poland. Much earlier, Ropczyce Ropczyce became a city of schools, mainly vocational schools, which for many years for many years provided mechanics and technicians to industrial plants established before 1939 in the Central Industrial District (Dębica, Mielec, Rzeszów, Nowa Dęba, and Stalowa Wola). Since 1945 people – even from distant places – associated Ropczyce only with schools.

My family village, Witkowice, which was originally a royal village, is closely related to the history of the city. The parish was founded here in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. I spent the first twenty years of my life in this town. Several dozen years ago, the village was incorporated into Ropczyce. Currently, the settlement called like that does not exist in any administrative list. The Registry Office determined that the actual place of my birth is Ropczyce.

A few words about my family. My father, Michał Miąso, was the son of a sacristan (born in 1895). As a soldier in the Austrian army, he was taken captive by the Russians. As a prisoner, he worked in Kiev, where he escaped from and wandered for a long time in Ukraine. When he came back home, he became a policeman in Ropczyce. In 1919 he got married to Aniela Pękala (born in 1895). In 1920, he volunteered for the army. In the battle with the Bolsheviks he was wounded and returned home walking on crutches. He was employed as a gateman and thus, became a state officer. We had certain privileges – discounts for train tickets and free medical care. My father was a very intelligent man, he spoke two foreign languages – German and Russian, he was eighty-eight years old when he died. My mother, the daughter of a railwayman, protected the family and was a wonderful guardian of the hearth. She died on her sixtieth birthday.

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<sup>4</sup> *Archiwum polityczne Ignacego Paderewskiego [The political archive of Ignacy Paderewski]*, Vol. III, Wrocław–Warszawa, Ossolineum, 1974, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> M. Wańkowicz, *Sztafeta. Książka o polskim pochodzie gospodarczym [The relay race. A book on the Polish economic parade]*, Warszawa 1939.



I had three siblings: Janek (born in 1921) became an organist, Marysia (born in 1924) graduated from gymnasium before the war, and Staszek (born in 1928), the most talented of us, managed to finish two classes of mechanical high school. After the war, he was arrested by the Secret Political Police (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa UB) in Dębica, and massacred and slaughtered during the investigation only in 1954. He lived only for forty-two years. He died tragically.

For a long time our family had no tradition of educating children above elementary school. It was not until Marysia went to gymnasium, because her grandmother, Tekla Pękala, covered her tuition fees from her retirement. Only my father's cousin, Władysław Woźnik<sup>6</sup>, a well-known actor, called the legend of the Polish theater, completed higher education.

The description of my family environment should start with comments on my family name. It is a very old name found in many historical documents. According to prof. Kazimierz Rymuta<sup>7</sup> *Miąso*, *Miąs*, *Miąsko* had the same meaning as *Mięso* (meat). *Miąsz* (flesh), *Miąszy* (fleshy) which meant *gruby* (fat), *mięsisty* (fleshy) or *tuścioch* (fatty). Twenty years ago there were 88 people in Poland with the surname *Miąso*. There were significantly more surnames which were close to mine, e.g. *Miąsko* (607) or *Miąsik* (579). The following surnames *Miąsek*, *Miąsko*, *Miąsk* were noted already in the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. I observed that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the councillors in Ropczyce bore the following surnames: *Miąso*, *Miąsso* and *Miąsowicz*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the surname was still popular, and during the period 1901–1920, 20 newborn babies bearing the surname *Miąso* were recorded in the parish register book in Ropczyce. Apparently in the battle of Obertyn (1531), the knight Jan *Miąso* stood out. The famous Zygmunt's Bell was cast from the guns captured at that time.

The Ropczyce land gave birth to many people of science and culture. This is the birthplace of Józef Mehoffer (1869–1946), Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990) was born in Wielopole Skrzyńskie, Karol Olszewski (1846–1915) in Broniszów, a professor of the Jagiellonian University who managed to liquify oxygen, and Tadeusz Sinko (1877–1966) in Mała. That was also the place of origin of many prominent historians of education and science – all of them came from the village: prof. Stanisław Kot (1885–1975) – the Jagiellonian University, prof. Kazimierz Kubik (1910–1986) – the University of Gdańsk, prof. Stanisław Gawlik (1928–2010)

<sup>6</sup> Władysław Woźnik (1901–1959), an actor, a theater director; a graduate of the Municipal Drama School, a long-time co-worker with the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Cracow and the Cricot Theatre. He was the director of the Wyspiański Silesian Theatre in Katowice (1949–1951), the Polish Theater in Poznań (1951–1953), the deputy director of the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Cracow (1945–1946). Since 1946 he was also a lecturer at the AST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków. See: P. Łopuszański, *Gustaw Holoubek – filozof bycia [Gustaw Holoubek – a philosopher of being]*, Warszawa, Oficyna Wydawnicza RYT, 2010, p. 46 and subsequent; *Holoubek*, Interviews by M. Terlecka-Reksnis, Warszawa, Prószyński i S-ka, 2018, p. 82–83 and subsequent.

<sup>7</sup> K. Rymut, *Słownik nazwisk współcześnie w Polsce używanych [Dictionary of surnames currently used in Poland]*, Vol. VI, Kraków 1933, p. 313.

<sup>8</sup> *Słownik staropolskich nazw osobowych [Dictionary of Old Polish personal names]*, Vol. III, ed. W. Taszycki, Wrocław, Ossolineum, 1971, p. 448.

– the University of Opole, prof. Stanisław Litak (1932–2010) – the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, prof. Józef Miąso – born in 1930 (the University of Warsaw and the Polish Academy of Sciences).

I was born in a small house next to Wielopole, as the fourth and the youngest child of my parents. In the happily preserved *Birth Certificate* and *Baptism Certificate* (*Testimonium Ortus et Baptismi*), written in Latin, it was written that the Church of St. Michael testifies that I was born on February 10, 1930, already on February 15 I was baptized by Rev. Zygmunt Grodnicki, the parish priest, and was given two names: Józef Jan. This document states, i.a. that I am a Roman Catholic and a legitimate child (*thorus legitimus*). The latter is not found any more in today's birth certificates, as it was banned to place it only in the times of People's Poland. For several centuries, children born out of wedlock were stigmatized for life. The so-called bastards were not permitted to practice particular professions, i.a. they were not allowed to enter the officers' corps, the clergy, as well as some craft guilds. Already the Sejm Act of 1578 stated very clearly and concisely: *Extra matrimonium liberii nati sunt illegitimi* (*Children born out of wedlock are illegitimate*). We read further *Illegitimi, neque in bona, neque in nobilitatem succedunt*, which means that "bastards" can inherit neither the social status, nobility, nor any property from their parents<sup>9</sup>.

As the youngest of children, and also poorly physically developed and sickly, I was the apple of my parents' eye, in particular, of my mother's, who took special care of my health. I grew up not in a yard but in the large, backyard garden, where it was possible not only to play football, but also to run. The garden overlooked the railway track and the bridge leading to Wielopole. We used to play a lot next to those railway tracks and railways. Our house was separated from the river by a road running through the whole village, where people sometimes "lost" their shoes as it was mostly muddy. At present it is an asphalt road, very busy and dangerous for residents, especially for children. It was named after one of the defenders of Westerplatte – major Henryk Sucharski. The school and church were close, about four hundred meters away. Our closest neighbors were the Kumans (Aniela and Józef, a small-scale farmer and also a carpenter), Władysław (my mother's cousin) and Wiktoria Stachnik, and a widow – Maria Bochenkowa, a very cultured woman, living in a large, multi-room house, with a roof covered with metal sheet. She usually rented a half of it.

My memories from my early childhood are limited only to certain events that were so important that sunk into my memory. I do not know, e.g. when I learned to swim. After many years, I learnt that as a small toddler, I fell into the Wielopolka river, a very deep river next to our house. My mother saved me from this oppression and immediately taught me to swim. I think I could be then three maybe

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<sup>9</sup> See: *Zbiór praw polskich i W. Ks. Litewskiego od roku 1347 Sejmu Wiślickiego aż do roku 1786* [A collection of legal acts from Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the Sejm in Wiślica of 1347 to 1786], ed. F. B. Piekarski, Kraków 1813, p. 21–22.

maximum four years old. I should add here that probably all children brought up by the river could swim well. Their parents took care of it. I remember very well the day of July 16, 1934, the day of the terrible flood that had wreaked havoc in the city center of Ropczyce and in the neighboring villages, i.a. Witkowice. We had to leave our house then. My uncle Michał Pękala carried me on his back across the railway bridge to his house, where my mum and I spent the night. The water flooded then hundreds of hectares of growing cereal and root crops. That summer, many farmers had nothing to collect during the upcoming harvest. From my parents' stories I know that only thanks to the American help and supplies in the form of flour and lard many people managed to survive this difficult year.

I still have deep in my memory the day of the funeral of Marshal Józef Piłsudski – May 18, 1935. Since morning hours, my mother urged my father to hurry up, because as a state officer he was obliged to attend the mourning ceremony in Ropczyce, which at that time was still the county capital. Sobbing, she asked the father how we would make ends meet if he was dismissed for breaking the order. I remember when she was sewing a black, mourning ribbon on the left sleeve of his jacket. Was the village in mourning on that day? Probably not. The people remembered the bloody events of 1933, when the military police units shot desperate peasants, many of them shot dead.

During the holidays, starting from 1935, I went to kindergarten, or more strictly to nursery located in an empty vicar house, a house between the church and the presbytery. The classes conducted by a young graduate of the teachers' seminar for a few hours were limited to games and singing activities such as *Stoi różyczka (There is a little rose)* or *Lata ptaszek po ulicy... (A little bird is flying over the road...)*. I enjoyed neither these games nor this nursery. My desire was to go to school together with Staszek, my older brother. I finally convinced my mum and she enrolled me to school, even though I turned only six, not seven years old. It should be added here that the existing provisions allowed the possibility – “depending on the number of vacancies” – to start education sooner.

The Public School in Witkowice, which I began to attend in September 1936, was the first grade school in accordance with the so-called Jędrzejewicz Act of March 11, 1932. During seven years of education, it was supposed to provide students with information covering the scope of four classes, only slightly broadened. Education in the first and second class was supposed to last one year, in the third – two years, and in the fourth – three years. Such schools, numerous in the countryside at that time, did not open the way to further education not only in gymnasium, but also secondary vocational schools. They employed only one teacher who had shifts and taught two classes in one school room at the same time. The education in this situation had to be divided into: quiet and loud. The first-class curriculum included the following subjects: religion (2 hours), Polish (7 hours), arithmetic with geometry (4 hours), drawing and practical classes (1 hour), singing and physical exercises (1 hour). 3 hours were spent on quiet education of the Polish language and 2 hours on arithmetic. An

identical lesson plan was applicable in the second grade. In the first half-year, first grade students could not be given homework, they did not receive school certificates at the end of the school year.

My school was located in a beautiful, old building made of red brick, with a decorative façade crowned with a turret, where a signature was hung calling students for classes. It was erected in 1890, i.e. during the reign of Emperor Franz Joseph. Today, it is over one hundred and twenty years old and can certainly be considered as one of the most interesting monuments of the old school architecture not only in the Subcarpathian region. The building was composed of two large, well-lit school rooms and a comfortable flat for the teacher. The school – attended by children from Witkowice and Pietrzejowa – included a large garden, neglected at that time and a plot of fertile land stretching along the Wielopolka River. A relatively modest number of students (about 50) suggest that some of the children from Górne Witkowice and Pietrzejowa attended public schools, male and female, located in Ropczyce.

My first and, unluckily, unfortunate teacher was Janina Szypułowa. Her husband was an official in the municipal council or in the county office in Ropczyce, and probably that was the reason, why this kind of “pedagogue” was tolerated by the educational authorities. I do not remember much of what she taught me, probably some songs and poems. I learned to read, write and calculate primarily at home, with the help of my older siblings. My mother encouraged me to read aloud. Mrs. Szypułowa taught interchangeably two classes in one school room. However, she did not spend much time among students in the classroom, but in her apartment because she had a small child. At that time, what we were involved in was not quiet learning, but various, mostly loud games. I remember that the tallest boy in our class, called Draus, often complained to the teacher that the “MP” should be called Drala-lala. It was about a student called Stachnik, who was the son of Franciszek Stachnik (1895-1981), a well-known MP, who lived in Pietrzejowa at that time, a close co-worker of Wincenty Witos. An inseparable attribute of power over the students for Mrs. Szypułowa was a long stick, which she used to hit children uncontrollably on their heads and backs. Fortunately, she taught us only for one year. In June 1937, after transferring the county capital from Ropczyce to Dębica, an inspector came to our school, who – in the presence of a teacher – checked the level of our knowledge for an hour and for sure, was dissatisfied. At the end he asked us if the teacher sometimes beat us. At that time already mentioned Draus replied that she beat us almost every day. Our whole class supported him, shouting unanimously: *She beats us and she beats us a lot!* The school inspection ended the teaching career of Mrs. Szypułowa, who was dismissed immediately. In my opinion, the responsibility for the “pedagogical” activity of this teacher was borne by the authorities in Ropczyce. After all, there was no shortage of young, well-educated female graduates of the local Teachers’ Seminar, who had been waiting for employment for years. Mrs. Szypułowa did great harm to the

children because she filled them with disgust with school and effectively discouraged them from further learning.

After the holidays, the authorities sent a young couple, the Jawors, to our school. Jan Jawor became head of the school, and his wife took the position of a teacher. They were well-educated pedagogues and social workers. I believe that Mr. Jawor was the most prominent teacher in the entire, quite a long history of the school in Witkowice. I know that he came from the village, but not from the vicinity of Ropczyce or Dębica. I will make an attempt to name the most important undertakings and innovations that he implemented. He divided a large, neglected and weed-ridden school garden into several dozen plots, and assigned them to students who cultivated them on their own, planted various plants and took care of them. He created the school playground and bought balls for the “piggy in the middle” game. He also established the school library and organized all-day trips to the forest in Czarna or Kamionka. Let me add that the area around Ropczyce was forestless. On hot June days, he took baths with the whole class in the Wielopolka river, which in the area next to school was quite wide but shallow. At that time he taught us swimming which he considered necessary, although he probably did not know that in ancient Greece, a man who could neither read nor swim deserved to be disrespected. Thanks to his efforts, the children’s organization “Orlęta” was established at school, as well as “Strzelec” attracting adolescents. Through the school, we took out subscription to “*Płomyczek*,” a magazine published in Warsaw by the Polish Teachers’ Association. The teacher also prepared us for the approaching war, and taught us e.g. how to quickly put on a gas mask. Mr. Jawor never entered the classroom with a stick in his hand, as his predecessor used to do. However, it happened, albeit rarely, that he was punishing students in the corridor for more vivid offenses, which was usually welcomed and approved by the students. It seems that he did it only during the occupation, when the German pedagogy recommended introducing corporal punishment. Jan Jarosz, a priest, mastered using a stick. He hit children uncontrollably on their hands, on their backs and even heads. Therefore, we were afraid of religious lessons, on which it was necessary to properly recite different parts of the catechism, in order not to “get a slap on the wrist”. I believe that the blame for the widespread application of corporal punishment at school, officially banned by the authorities of revived Poland, was borne by those parents who punished their children in this way believing that a stick was a very effective educational device.

Mr. Jawor paid attention to clean school rooms, as well as personal hygiene and neat appearance of the students. One day he brought a razor and shaved all those students who had too long and rarely washed hair, creating “tracks” on their heads, starting from the forehead and ending at the nape of the neck. The lessons he conducted were usually interesting, as they broadened our knowledge about contemporary Poland. We learned about the main mountain ranges and the highest peaks, about the Polish sea, about Silesia, and finally about new industrial factories in the area of the Central Industrial District that was under



construction at that time. We were proud of our Gdynia, and Polish ships, as well as of the legions achievements and their deeds. We honoured the memory of Marshal Piłsudski who rested in the Wawel Castle. We loved not only our *Grandfather*, but also President Ignacy Mościcki. On the name-day of the President, which fell on February 1, we participated in the morning Holy Mass. I remember that on November 11, 1938, our entire class took part in the great patriotic parade of children and young people in Ropczyce commemorating the Poland's Independence Day.

Some of the lessons taught by Mr. Jawor were very original. The teacher, trying to get to know the social environment in which he worked, or to gather material for the designed school chronicle, asked us about the events that took place in our families, neighbors or in the whole country. I remember that the most reports and testimonies about various accidents regarded the problems which were the closest to children, e.g. cattle and horse diseases. There were also lessons on which we could ask the teacher some questions. I remember one of those lessons that took place in the spring of 1939, when someone asked why peasants had to be subject to serfdom. The answer provided by the teacher did not convince anybody. Our historical knowledge that we had been taught at home, was completely different from the official history taught at school. In his opinion, the nobility defended their homeland, setting off for very long war expeditions, and peasants, exempted from this duty, had to cultivate their lords' land.

In June 1939, I received a school certificate, signed by Jan Jawor which stated that I had attended "the third grade of the first year of study" and that I got to "the second year of study in the third grade with a positive result". In comparison with our class, I was a good student rather than an average one. However, I had only one A in my school certificate, for my good behaviour. In religion and Polish I had Bs, and in science of nature and arithmetic with geometry – Cs. In subjects referred to by students as "trifles" (Pol. *michałki*) I had only B (drawing, practical classes, singing and physical exercise). The school certificate itself cost 8 cents, but in order to receive it, it was still necessary to buy a stamp for the amount of PLN 0.10 which was for the construction of public schools.

The outbreak of the war did not shake the childish faith in the strength of the Polish army and the bravery of our soldier, instilled in us by the school and by official propaganda. The posters with the slogan *Strong, ready and steady* hung on the door of many barns. Soon, however, we were to experience all the horrors of an impending disaster. Witkowice was not a peripheral town, as the most important railway main lines and a cobbled public road in Galicia passed through the middle of the village. A number of military transports and thousands of civilians rushing in panic to the East went through the city. Many trains had – sometimes quite long – stops next to our house. At the beginning of the war, a small group of Polish soldiers came to defend the railway bridge over the Wielopolka river. In response to a call from their officer to help in the construction of trenches almost all young people from the village, not only boys, but also girls led by my sister Marysia,

came with shovels. The soldiers were equipped with three heavy machine guns, but lacked anti-aircraft guns.

During the first days of September 1939, I saw German planes for the first time. Together with some peers of mine, I stayed in Rakowiec, i.e. on vast fields on the border with Borek Wielki and Sędziszów. At the sight of a fighter squadron which rapidly descended, we began waving. They were flying so low that we could see the pilots' faces. However, earlier we had noticed their German signs. As if ordered, we all fell to the ground. We heard a long series from machine guns. Let me add that apart from us, four small boys, there was no one nearby at the time. I still have this terrible moment deep in my memory. If these series had been fired only to frighten us, shooting at children was after all a criminal act. It is known that Hitler, when sending his divisions to the war with Poles, ordered them to have no mercy as well to women and children and kill them. Having returned home and managed to tell the mother about our adventure in Rakowiec, German bombers appeared in a cloudless sky. A military freight train was standing then on the railway track. The soldiers began to hide behind nearby trees, many hid under the cars. None of those several bombs fell on the train or on the railway bridge. They hit the village huts standing next to the tracks. This raid was a classic terrorist act against the civil population. In a few days the railway system and bridges were supposed to be in German hands, so they were not supposed to be destroyed by bombs. Two days later, German bombs turned a huge part of Ropczyce into rubble and ruins. Many inhabitants and soldiers died. The city center suffered the most. The Northern frontage of the Market Square ceased to exist. Today there is some small planted area designated for strolling.

German troops entered Ropczyce on September 8, 1939, and quickly pressed forward pushed to the East. Over the public road, used by tanks and armored vehicles around the clock, there were huge clouds of dust. It seemed to those people who observed it from a distance of one kilometer that Germans had released some toxic gas. Two days later, the Wehrmacht army units took a short break and literally flooded Witkowice. Two off-road vehicles, stuffed with large cartons of cigarettes looted in the city, stood in front of our house, and military tents were put up in the garden. One must keep in mind that these were hot September days. The first Germans I saw at that time did not make a bad impression. They behaved properly. They treated adults with cigarettes and children with chocolates. Keeping the warnings of Mr. Jawor in mind, who told us that German sweets would certainly be poisoned, and fountain pens would start to explode into our hands, I did not want to accept the chocolates I had been offered. Then, this soldier ate a piece of chocolate, patted his stomach and said in Polish: "I had the same". It broke my resistance.

After the outbreak of the war and the occupation of Poland by the Germans, school classes were re-opened only at the end of October 1939. During the first year of German occupation, our school was transformed into a two-class institution, but I do not know if it was a result of the earlier decision of the Polish educational

authorities, or with the consent of the German administration. New teachers came as well. My tutor was Franciszek Kazała, displaced from Bydgoszcz, who lived with his quite affluent family in Witkowiec. The students liked him because he never raised his voice on them, and could also speak in a very interesting way about Poland, Polish cities, especially Bydgoszcz, and finally about cinemas and theaters, or other institutions unknown to us. Mr. Jawor was still headmaster of the school. On the first day of education under the German occupation, he entered our classroom and told Draus (referred to above) to remove the national emblem and the portraits of Piłsudski, Mościcki and Rydz Śmigły from the wall. In December 1939, he ordered us to bring to school and submit all school textbooks, eagerly collected them and promised to return them after the end of the war. However, he never did so. When our Polish textbooks were taken away from us, the lessons became boring, the level of teaching clearly declined and we witnessed mass absenteeism. In order to attract students, Mr. Jawor decided to read entire *Robinson Crusoe* during the lessons. It was an effective remedy for absenteeism. At the headmaster's request, we brought prayer books from home, the fragments of which we read aloud during the Polish language lessons.

After four years of study at the local village school, I received a diploma that stated that I got to "the fourth grade of the second year of study". I usually had quite good notes: 2 As, 6 Bs and only one C (arithmetic with geometry), even though I left as many as 75 lessons. It was my first bilingual, German-Polish school certificate (Schulzeugnis) with the following imprint: *Generalgouverement-Fement Die Besetzten Polnischen Gebiete (The General Government for the occupied Polish areas)*. The next certificates had only one German print: *Generalgouvernement*. In 1940, I finished elementary education in Witkowiec and, like my older siblings, I was enrolled by my parents to the fifth grade out of seven, at proper and complete public school in Ropczyce. Most of the students who finished the fourth grade with me, however, remained at school in Witkowiec with a rather low of education. I could observe it just after the war, when I met many former classmates from my school bench at Gymnasium in Ropczyce.

In September 1940, as a ten-year-old boy, I started to attend co-educational seven-grade Jan Kasproicz elementary school in Ropczyce, which had been a male school before the war. Every day I had to walk about three kilometers from my family home to the school located on unpaved Stawisko Street. Since then, for almost ten years I attended elementary school and high school in this small town in Galicia, the only richness of which was good schools and teachers.

When I started my education in Ropczyce, the town made a very miserable impression. There was no bustle on the streets I had in my memory from the period before the war, all larger Jewish shops were already closed, there were still few small shops open, like the one "Na schodkach" ("On the stairs") where we bought various Christmas tree decorations, especially little angels's heads. Jewish children were banned from entering and accessing schools. They sometimes came to look at the school playground where their Polish friends were playing football.

In 1942, the Jews from Ropczyce and Wielopole were resettled to the ghetto in Sędziszów, and soon sent to Bełżec, a concentration camp.

Before 1939 the school in Ropczyce had been characterised with a high level of teaching. During the occupation, the curriculum it conducted was reduced by the Germans, and not only did it provide students with basic education, but also did not develop deeper aspirations for further education. It was prohibited to teach Polish literature, history and geography. We were also not taught the German language, because the Nazis did not intend to germanize Poles who, regarded as worthless in their opinion from a racial point of view, were to be completely eradicated in the future. "Ster", a monthly magazine published by the Germans in Cracow since the 1940–1941 school year played the role of a textbook for learning the Polish language. We were obliged to subscribe to it. The reading materials issued there were mainly used to glorify the German achievements in terms of civilization. *Antek*, a novel by Bolesław Prus, was the only item from the Polish literature discussed in detail during the lessons.

The school, managed at that time already by Bogusław Sadowski, headmaster, employed several teachers, usually well educated. My memory stores only a few of them. I liked Maria Gątkiewicz the most, a widow of the longtime headmaster of the school in Ropczyce, an honoured teacher already in the Austrian partition. She was famous for recognizing talents among students from the village and sending them to proper schools, mostly artistic schools. Several times she invited me and Staszek to her house, offering us some tea and biscuits. When Santa Claus visited our school to distribute some gifts and presents brought earlier by the parents, Staszek and I received small parcels prepared by Mrs. Gątkiewicz. I also liked my class tutor, Stanisław Jeczenia, who taught, i.a. the Polish language and run the school choir. His son, who died young in 2001, Maciej Jeczeń, a graduate of the Film School in Łódź, was one of the most prominent Polish documentary filmmakers. Franciszek Bączyński also remained engraved well in my memory. During his lessons, we did not discuss the content of articles included in the monthly magazine called *Ster*, but we listened to the works by famous Polish writers being read out loud by our friends, especially the novels of Henryk Sienkiewicz (*Janko Muzykant*, *Stary sługa*, *Hania*, *Organista z Ponikły*) (*Janko, the musician; An old servant; Hania; An organist from Ponikla*) and others. Taking this opportunity, we learnt who Adam Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz were. However, the school could not give us any systematized information about Polish literature. Even worse was the situation with our historical knowledge, completely absent at school.

In 1943, I received a school-leaving certificate (Schul-Entlassungszeugnis). In the most important subjects, except for religion, I had only Cs. I left 105 lessons, but one year earlier as many as 134. I remember that when I was leaving the school building, on June 30, 1943, I met a group of German soldiers at the entrance preparing to occupy the building for their temporary barracks. One of them snatched my certificate from my hand and after studying its content, he told me

that if he had been my father, he would have killed me. It was a relief to complete this school. I did not have to, often hungry, go to Ropczyce, struggling through the snow and mud, wearing heavy clogs on my feet. My real education began only in 1943 at home.

My memory kept permantly the years of the German occupation. In my family home we discussed quietly about persecution, and then the complete extermination of the Jews from Ropczyce, who constituted over thirty percent of the total city population. At school, however, nothing was said both during the war or after the war. And yet Ropczyce was an important center of the Jewish culture and religious life. The story about a famous tzadik from Ropczyce was presented by Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Nobel prize winning American writer, in his novel *Szosz*. The city clearly turned sad when the bustling Jewish population was nowhere to be found. Then, only a sidewalk in the city center made of Jewish tombstone, matzeva, taken from the devastated cemetery was evidence of their recent presence. I remember the mass Nazi propaganda campaign very well, which was the introduction to the “final solution” to the Jewish question. The entire city was covered with huge, colorful posters, showing Jews as the greatest evil of the world. They appealed to the residents: *Dear viewer, stand and read how the Jews have deceived you*.

My family survived this terrible time of occupation, but experienced poverty. My father still served as a gateman, earning a pittance. More than once he returned home beaten by the Germans. When the action of forced labour was initiated and young people were sent as slave laborers to Germany, my siblings were to become its first victim. I remember well this frosty January evening of 1941, when the village leader of Witkowice, Józef Feret came to our house, and, while addressing my sister Marysia and my brother Janek, he said: *Dear children. It is not your fault, but both of you have to go to Germany* and gave them written requests. Marysia burst into tears, and Janek scolded her, shouting: *Do not cry, as the devil had not come for you yet, it's only his messenger*. However, neither of them, intended to obey the requests. So they started to hide. When the manhunt led by the German police did not bring any results, one day my mum was arrested and placed in the basement of the police building in Dębica. The Germans laid down a condition that she would be released if one of her children volunteered to go to Germany. In this situation, Janek went to the Arbeitsamt, i.e. the occupation Employment Office in Dębica and together with a large group of young people was transported under escort to Cracow, where he escaped and returned home.

In the winter of 1941, German and Polish policemen launched a large night manhunt for people designated to go to Germany, as a result of which my sister Marysia fell into their hands. She was transported to Dębica and temporarily, along with other girls, placed in the Gymnasium building. They were guarded by an old “navy” policeman who at night quickly fell asleep in a chair or just pretended to do so. The girls seized the opportunity, opened the window on the ground floor of the school building and escaped. However, Marysia could not



get home again. So she went to Cracow, where our relatives took care of her, mainly uncle Michał Woźnik, the actor's father. They also found a job for her at a Dutch construction company located on Grzegórzecka Street. She returned home only in August 1944, when the Red Army was approaching the Eastern border of the Kraków province. In November 1943, invited by Marysia, I saw Cracow for the first time. I visited, rather superficially, only the city center, i.e. the St. Mary's church and Sukiennice, the cloth hall. I was struck by numerous groups of German civilians, especially women and children, who were very loud not only in Sukiennice, but also on the Main Market Square. The St. Mary's Church, Sukiennice and horse-drawn carriages, which I had traveled for the first time in my life, were instilled in my memory. Since then, Cracow has been the most beautiful and beloved Polish city for me. Sometimes I reckon that it is a pity that it was impossible for me to take up university studies in this city.

The last year of occupation, which I spent at my family home, completely not obliged to attend unpopular with me school, was a period of intense home education, which undoubtedly had a great impact on my future life path. A book became my best friend, who I never resigned from. This adventure began with a careful reading of textbooks for the first-grade of gymnasium, which my sister had used before the war. In this way, I got acquainted with the history of ancient Greece and Greek myths, I learnt about more important events from the history and culture of Poland, and a bit about the geography of Poland. Neither such information was provided at school in Ropczyce nor reading books was recommended. Among the books I used to read at that time every day, the most important position was taken by belles-lettres, firstly, the Polish prose, especially the works by Henryk Sienkiewicz, Stefan Żeromski and Bolesław Prus. I do not remember the authors of many obligatory reading books, because at that time I paid attention to the content and the title, and not to the authors, about whom I knew very little or nothing at all. I remember only some of them, such as Teodor Tomasz Jeż (actually: Zygmunt Fortunat Miłkowski), whose two novels *Uskoki (Faults)* and *Naręczona Harambaszy (A Harambasza's fiancée)* stuck deep in my memory. They describe the independence movements in the South Slavic countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even today I recall the fragment from *Naręczona Harambaszy (A Harambasza's fiancée)* which said: *The hajduks killed the captain and they did it yesterday morning*. I read many books about Indians, e.g. *Duch Puszczy (The forest's spirit)*, and about the heroes in the Wild West. For sure, the books by Karol May did not escape my notice and attention, however, I cannot name any specific titles. Even today I happen to recall in my mind a noble cowboy *Whistlin' Dan*. I also recalled him in June 1967, when for many hours I traveled by coach through the desert in Nevada.

I received many books from private collections of friendly residents of Ropczyce. I also took advantage of rich collections of the parish library, located at the presbytery in Witkowice. Every Sunday after evening prayers, vespers, our parish priest, Rev. Jan Jarosz, personally lent books. Not only did he give the lives

of the saints, such as St. Theresa or Izydor Oracz, but also publications regarding the mission and civilizational activity of missionaries in various parts of the world. These last publications were especially fascinating for me, because they showed the life in distant countries, about which I had had no idea before.

As a resident of the so-called Księżę Budy, i.e. in close proximity to the parish church, I was at that time, just like my colleagues from the closest neighborhood, an altar boy. My contacts with our priest were generally good. Slowly, my memories regarding the religion lessons at school in Witkowice school, where Rev. Jarosz quite often used a stick or a ruler, were fading. When I moved to the public school in Ropczyce, he was interested in my choices upon the reading material. After completing school education, he often suggested and gave me various books, as he believed that I should read a lot if I did not attend any school. Thanks to him, I got involved as well in various charity events, usually organized under the auspices of the Central Welfare Council, tolerated by the Germans, with its seat in Cracow. We drove around the villages with a single horse-drawn cab driven by the parish priest, where we packed potatoes, various groats, beets, carrots, flour and grain donated by the residents. These gifts were subsequently transferred to the kitchen of the concentration camp in Pustków near Dębica, where apart from Poles, Soviet prisoners were kept.

During the entire German occupation in Witkowice, it was possible to meet almost every day. An important road passed through the village, which was used by a number of motorized units heading to the East. They often stopped for a short break, occupying the school premises, the court and parish buildings for this purpose. I remember the German unit composed of almost all young Bavarians, mainly students, including a Catholic chaplain. On Corpus Christi he celebrated a solemn mass for German soldiers in our church. They had their own altar boys and an organist. The vast majority of the mass participants received the Holy Communion. The chaplain was a simple private, he did not take advantage of any privileges. He was allowed to celebrate the liturgy only four times a year. He told my father about this when he paid us a visit at home. We received from him a souvenir, the German prayer book entitled *Weg zum Himmel (The road to heaven)*.

It was quite often possible to meet German soldiers transported to the East by freight trains. Sometimes they were forced to take a break next to our home. Many boys, me too, traded with them, swapping eggs for cigarettes and selling mouth small harmonicas called the Jew's harp. At that time, I did something nasty, in my opinion, that I am ashamed of until today. Well, on some summer day in 1942, a German train from the Red Cross stopped. It was going from the East and was composed of only Pullman cars transporting wounded Germans. My older colleagues noticed a long and thick leather belt under one car, which was propelling an electric generator while driving. They gave me a very sharp pocket knife and told me to cut this belt. I was a small boy then. So I crawled without any difficulty under the car and did what they told me to do. When the train started, the belt was left on the railway track. I got a piece of leather skin I had obtained

in this way, but it was not suitable for soles. The car carrying the wounded was deprived of electricity.

In the spring of 1944, one could already feel the approaching end of the German rule. Trains traveling from the East and trucks were overloaded not only with damaged military equipment, but also stolen goods. In the last months of the occupation, the Germans commandeered thousands of cows and horses from the Poles, but a large part of these animals was taken away by the Red Army soldiers in the vicinity of Dębica. However, they did not return to their Polish owners. I saw a huge herd of cows driven by Russian shepherds, czabans, to their country along with the horses taken away recently. Many farmers, after completing the front activities, had problems with cultivating their land because they did not have animals providing tractive force. Only after the war, some of them received American horses as a gift.

When the summer of 1944 was close, the inhabitants of Witkowice began to protect themselves against potential military actions. My parents behaved in a similar way. Together with their closest neighbor, Mr. Kuman, they decided to build a shelter on their property in the form of a large basement, which could accommodate two families, a total of twelve people. It was covered with rails and sleepers taken from the railway embankment located next to our house. In this shelter, lined with straw, we spent over two weeks. We survived as we were extremely lucky. At the end of July, the Red Army occupied Sędziszów Małopolski which was less than four kilometers away from Witkowice. At that time, Ropczyce was still in the German hands. Therefore, our village was between two fighting armies. As part of the introduction to the struggle, the Germans blew up the bridge over the Wielopolka river and, with the use of special machines, rails and railway sleepers, completely destroyed it. Having been given an advance notice by the German bridge guards about the planned action, we had escaped to Ropczyce. What we saw the next day when we returned home, terrified us. Our house had neither the roof nor the windows. Thousands of stunned fish flowed along the river. This former beautiful, iron bridge built by the Austrians in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, regarded as a piece of art, turned into small, bent steel construction fragments and piles of stones.

A fairly high railway embankment shielded us from Russian bullets. The Germans who passed this way from the front line, carrying sometimes more wounded soldiers, also took advantage of it. They generally treated us in a proper way, without hiding their anti-war attitudes and views. One of them, a student from Bavaria, did not want to go back to the trenches and spend the whole day and night sitting in our shelter. He showed us his documents, family photos and a Russian flyer, which promised to treat war prisoners who possessed it in a better way. We knew these leaflets because our yard was swamped with them. Soviet Kukuruzniks threw them at night. After spending the whole day with us, the Bavarian decided that he exposed us all to great risk and returned to the front, however, he did not spend much time there. In the evening, with an injured leg,

he was brought by another German. He confessed to my father that he had shot himself in his thigh, shielding it from gunpowder with a loaf of bread. He hoped that he would stay at hospital for three weeks to finally see the end of the war. He was a very naive young man.



Fot. Eugeniusz Kuman

Elementary School in Witkowiec.

Every few days the Russians continued firing the city from cannons and Russian rocket-launchers, katyushas, called by the Germans “Stalin’s harmonicas”. Fortunately, most missiles missed us, but a few houses were burnt, and entire families were killed. At night, the Soviet airplanes dropped bombs. One of them fell on our garden, the second – several meters from the shelter in which we were hiding, leaving a huge, deep crater. After the explosion, it seemed to us that our whole, quite a deep shelter had risen into the air. During one very hot night (August 22), after a violent attack using katyushas, the shooting completely faded away. In the morning, three Red Army soldiers came to our yard. Their leader, an officer, was holding in his hand a huge nagant ready to shoot. They peeped into our shelter, asking about “Germans” and went further, checking house after house. They were followed by more and more plentiful groups of very tired soldiers who asked us where the Germans were and how far it was to Berlin. In the evening, Witkowiec was flooded with entire masses of Russian soldiers. They behaved in a decent way. They played the accordion beautifully and danced on the lawns. I must add in this place that while dancing, German bullets were still being shot.

As I wanted to see the area of battle which had finished at night, my two older brothers, Janek and Staszek, and I walked towards Sędziszów. We saw many killed Germans and Russians. I will not forget the image of a dead, young soldier lying on his back, with his left hand over his forehead as if he wanted to cover his eyes from the sun. We also saw many burnt tanks, mostly Soviet tanks. The whole field of the recent battle was covered with weapons of various types, mainly German ones, rifle and pistol cartridges, as well as hand grenades. I picked up a still warm and well lubricated nine-caliber Vis pistol from the grass. Janek immediately took it from me and put it in his pocket. As a soldier of the Home Army, he knew how to handle such guns. I do not know what happened further to this weapon.

This relatively easy access to weapons lying everywhere affected many representatives of my generation. We were impressed by having them. Some friends of ours died tragically when making attempts to disarm shells. With time, we grew wiser and threw the weapons we possessed into the river. I did the same, but my brother Staszek was hiding it for a long time.

The Germans withdrew in August 1944 only to the Wisłoka river, on the banks of which Dębica is located. The Red Army also stopped there, conducting a trench warfare until the middle of January next year. Thus, Ropczyce became a close base for front-line activities. In order to secure a free battlefield, the Russians displaced several dozen villages adjacent to Dębica. As a result, thousands of people together with their belongings and cattle, came to the Ropczyce land, where they got the welcome. I am sure that people at that time were better than in subsequent years. They were happy that they had survived the occupation and the nightmare of the recently completed battle. They eagerly helped each other. I did not remember any quarrels and conflicts among the neighbours, which used to be common after all in the pre-war Galician villages.

When the dark years of occupation were over, I was only fourteen years old, but I felt I was a mature man. I belonged to the generation that was deprived of childhood. I will not describe the charms of this early period of life, so often praised by the poets and diarists, as I simply have never learnt and experienced them. Already as a teenager, I was aware that I had to take care of my future on my own, i.e. to be the architect of my own fortune.

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### *Engraved in memory. A fragment of autobiography*

#### **Summary**

Józef Miąso – professor emeritus of the Polish Academy of Sciences, born in 1930 in Witkowice in the Ropczyce county. The Ropczyce land (Ziemia Ropczycka) is located on the border of Carpatian Foothills and Sandomierz Basin. Ropczyce was founded in 1362 by King Casimir the Great. The author describes his life in interwar Poland and during German Nazi occupation. He takes emphasis on his family life and home education. From 1936 to 1940 he attended rural elementary school in Witkowice and then for three years continued elementary education in Ropczyce. These schools were the effect of the new School System Act of March 11, 1932, which somehow improved elementary education. In the period of the German occupation, Polish literature, history and geography were excluded from curricula. It provoked Polish people to organize different forms of clandestine education. The author, who completed seven grade elementary school in 1943, continued self-education at his family home. It was for him true education. He fell in love with Polish obligatory reading books, which greatly broadened his liberal education and prepared him to take up further education. In conclusion the author emphasized that he as a 14-year-old boy considered himself as an adult, as he belonged to the generation who was deprived of normal childhood.

**Keywords:** Józef Miąso, Galicja, Ropczyce, Witkowice, Elementary school, Home education, German occupation.