

A Story of a House

Attachment 4

Group No 1

Time: 1942

Place: Dubno, a town in the Volhynia poviat, before World War II inhabited by Poles, Jews and Ukrainians (then in Poland, now in Ukraine)

Polish family: Maria and Piotr Kwarciak with sons Alfred (b. 1932), Anatoliusz and Feliks

Jewish family: Jakow and Malka Fiszer, their children Michal and Leila, and Mosze and Adela Fiszer with daughters Ester and Sima

From the account by Alfred Kwarciak:

We did all our shopping at Mr. Fisher's, he had a store, and it had everything. This and that. It was a big store, with a forecourt, because in those times you used horses, so farmers could buy what was needed for their carts, grease and other stuff... They bought jams and butter and bread and sugar, Mr. Fiszer, he had everything. You could get everything in one store. Our mum would often tell us: "Dash off to Fiszer's, buy such and such". We paid him or sometimes we didn't, and then father would go and pay him up. I went on for years. They came here, and we went to them.

Everyone knew our father, because he had been a policeman for nearly 20 years. Poles knew him, and Ukrainians knew him, and Jews, and Czechs. They all knew him and they all knew us. We always did

our shopping at Mr. Fiszer's; when father was coming home from duty he bought tobacco in that store.

One evening, it was already dark, those people, who knew our father, came to us and asked to be taken in because if father didn't take them they would perish. Father wondered: "What should we do, we've got a cow, so there's milk..." Nobody knew how long the war would last – a month or years? So father called us all together, we sat down, we covered the windows so nobody could see us. What to do? How are we to \ feed everyone. And they started crying. All their family came to us. Mosze Fiszer, that one who had the store where we bought things, his wife Adela. There were also his son Michal and his daughter Leila. And then there was Jakub Fiszer, Mosze's brother, with his wife Malka and children – Ester and Sima.

They brought nothing with them, nothing. They came just as they were. They didn't even take a change of clothes because they were afraid people might guess they were running away. So they came just like that, not one handbag, no food, not one loaf of bread...

QUESTIONS:

Imagine a discussion between members of a Polish family about taking in a Jewish family or refusing to do it. Write down arguments for and against it.

What do you think happened afterwards with the Polish family?

What do you think were the fortunes of the Jewish family?

Group No 2

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From the account by the Righteous Alfred Kwarciak

So we agreed that they should stay, but where? We had three rooms and a kitchen. Two rooms were all finished, but in the third one there was no plaster and no floor. So father and other men decided to dig a hole in that third room, in the very corner, there was the entrance. And they would go down the ladder.

The hole had to be dug a few metres deep and then there were horizontal galleries. Fifteen people were hiding there. They could hardly sit on the bare ground, so we gave them straw. They couldn't even sit properly, everyone was hunched down.

How did they relieve themselves? Up there in the corner there was a bucket and when one of them used it our cow would stand across the door. I don't know if it was trained this way, but if somebody came they wouldn't see anything.

At night they came up, but only at night. We covered the windows so that light wouldn't show. We ate in the kitchen, also at night.

Twice a week my mum gave them baths, in the kitchen, because it was warm there. First she brought water, she undressed them... We liked to peep in. Sometimes we got an earful. There was water and a tub; the clothes had to be washed but we dried them at the attic, not outside. Nobody ever left home. Only once, Malka, Mosze's wife, she was sick and mother took her to a doctor in town.

They knew about the executions in the woods. They even looked through the window when people were led out of the ghetto, they recognized some of them. They saw their fellows and they were crying.

From an interview with Rescued Michal Fiszer

We lay there waiting to survive one more day, and then one more. It didn't pass like it does today: Sunday, Monday, Sunday, Monday. That's the way time goes by. But there? It's so slow, it doesn't fly, oh, no. Every seven days were like the whole year.

There were moments when we wanted to come out and say: "We are Jews, kill us if you want or tell us to run away. Do whatever you want with us. But we knew one must not die. And that we had to live and stay in good shape. And that's all.

QUESTIONS:

What were the living conditions of the Jewish families sheltered by the Kwarciaks?

What could the people in hiding occupy themselves with?

Why does Michal Fiszer talk about an impulse to leave the shelter and disclose oneself?

Group No 3

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Jewish family: Jakow and Malka Fiszer, their children Michal and Leila, and Mosze and Adela Fiszer with daughters Ester and Sima

From the account by the Righteous Alfred Kwarciak

Once we took them in we had to feed them. We used to go to town with schoolbags on our shoulders. They were kind of wooden backpacks. And it was very important when mum and dad told us: "You mustn't come back the same way you went! Never! You must not use the same path! You must go there one road and come back another".

We had only one cow at home, so there was milk but nothing else. Chicken were soon gone. We had to bring everything from town. We went one way and came back another. And our house was situated in such a way that there was cemetery on both sides of it...

Sometimes we brought some food and sometimes we didn't. And our neighbors said: "Your boys are such good students, they carry so many books and notebooks on their backs". Even though there were no schools opened then.

We used to go to town and bring some food, this way and that. I wasn't that bad. Sometimes fresh bread, because there was an army bakery. Only black bread, for the German army, for the front. Bread. No civilian was supposed to get it. But we had friends in that bakery. At first father went there with us. After a while he stopped, because he was afraid he would be sent to forced labors. But he

told them earlier that the kids would be coming for bread. “Whenever you can, give them some”. Sometimes we got it, sometimes we didn’t. But that bakery saved us. Sometimes we got one loaf, sometimes two or even three. So we brought that black bread from that bakery and we ate it. And as for potatoes and other stuff, we bought it at the open market, usually we managed to get those things. And so we ran to and fro, bringing stuff.

QUESTIONS:

What danger were people sheltering Jews exposed to? How did they manage to get some additional food?

Was it necessary to conceal from the neighbors that one had more food than the family would seem to need? Why?

Group No 4

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Jewish family: Jakow and Malka Fiszer, their children Michal and Leila, and Mosze and Adela Fiszer with daughters Ester and Sima

From the account by the Righteous Alfred Kwarciak

It was a small town, a village, really. Our house stood at the outskirts, near the main road. That road wasn't paved, just a country road. It led to another, big town. It was 15 meters away from our house. And from our house we could see who leaves Dubno and follows that main road.

When someone was coming from those villages, from Kleszcze or from Łuck, we could see who it was. A whole crowd would be going to church. Catholic or Orthodox church, they would all pass by our house. Fifteen meters away. There was a well, so as they passed by they would come close, to the bench, because there was a big bench there. Men and women, and kids, they would come, sit on that bench, wash their feet, draw some water, sometimes we would draw water for them and they sat there. They just would drink some water, have some rest, put on their shoes and went on to church, just took some rest and went on.

As long as they stayed there, we were on guard. Every moment, somebody always stood at the window and watched whether someone is coming. Because there was a huge pot on the kitchen stove, we had to cook food for 20 people. This is a lot of food. And all that time, nearly 20 months, only once a neighbour came, to get some water, because we had a well and she had no water. She

would come every now and then, she would get water but didn't come in. But that one time we didn't see her coming, later we got a good dressing down from our mum and dad: "How come you missed her?!" Because she could be spotted from a distance, she had to walk 500 metres, with two buckets on her back. And when she walked into the house, into the kitchen: "Why do you have such a big pot?" And right away she picks up the covers. "Why do you need so much food?" A nosy old bag that she was. When she was coming and we saw her from afar, then mother would at once close the door and go to work in the garden, they would chat for a while and she went away. We never let anybody inside. Only once we were caught like that, when she walked in.

They never left the house. Only once, when Malka got sick, mother took her to the doctor in town. The Germans didn't bother us but we feared nosy people.

QUESTIONS:

What do you think was the end of the neighbor's visit? In what other way could it have ended?

What made it easier for the Kwarciak family to hide Jews, and what made it more difficult? Was their farmstead a good hiding place?

What – in your opinion – was the outcome of Malka's visit to the doctor? How else could it have ended?

Why didn't Maria Kwarciak tell her relatives that she was hiding some Jewish friends? What could have happened if she did tell them? Was it difficult to live with the secret that you were hiding Jews?

How could the Nazis find out that someone was of Jewish origin?