

CHAPTER 5

THE WARSAW INSURRECTION

As the war dragged on, the Polish fighters were beginning to tire of living on promises that never materialized. Rumors abounded that hostilities would end in a few months and the Allies would come to their aid with airlifts of weapons and supplies. But that did not happen.

The Germans controlled most of Warsaw, and food was scarce. At first, people had what they squirreled away in anticipation of a siege. Halina and her fellow soldiers could count on at least one meal a day of kasha soup. But then the food supply dwindled, and finding something to eat became much more difficult.

One day as Halina was cleaning up after a sparse meal of tomato soup, she gained insight on how little the outside world really knew about what was going on in Poland. She had shared the soup with a soldier from England who was dropped in behind enemy lines. Dismayed that the utensils were not being washed, only scraped off and wiped with a rag, he asked Halina, “Why do you not wash these dishes properly? Aren’t you aware that serious health problems can be caused by this?”

“You see,” said Halina as she continued to wipe, “we have little water—only some for drinking. The Germans have cut off water to the city, and so we make do the best we can.”

It was then she realized how little information about their dire circumstances had made it to the Allies. Later, that incident and other information she received forced her to

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conclude the troops in the Polish Home Army had been left to fight on their own. At least for the time being, they could expect little help from others, who were occupied with their own problems.



The burden of being mostly alone was beginning to take its toll on Halina. Occasionally, some small act of defiant patriotism temporarily lifted her spirits. When she saw anchors shaped like the letters “P” and “W” on a wall in chalk or black paint, she knew they had been put there by boys or girls from the Scouting movement who were risking their lives to encourage their countrymen. The Scouts knew the price they would pay if caught. “P” stood for Poland and “W” for *walczy*, meaning “fighting.” Together, the message was “Poland is fighting.” To Halina and her friends in the Resistance, the words sparked the hope that someday the winter of war would be over and Poland would somehow make it through.

Unfortunately, there was more to discourage her than encourage her. Halina received news from the north of Warsaw where her mother and family were living. Their neighborhood had come under total Nazi control. Halina was now completely cut off from everyone she loved. Surrounded daily by the carnage of battle, she began to wonder if she would ever see her family again. As she moved daily between the flames of burning structures bombed by the Luftwaffe and the foul stench of death, she began to lose faith that there would ever be a successful end to the war.

Then a consuming thought entered her mind. “Why am I alive when so many around me have been killed? Am I better than they? What sins have they committed that I have not committed that has earned death for them and allowed me to escape?”

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It was the same type of question she had been asking herself ever since she had returned home from a visit to the dentist when she was 12 years old. While she sat in the dental chair, the dentist told her of a homicide she had read about in the newspaper. A mother had been found guilty of murdering her own child. Obviously upset, the dentist related the story in lengthy detail. Halina became so profoundly preoccupied with it that she couldn't sleep.

"Why aren't you asleep, child?" her mother asked when she looked in on her.

"Because when I was at the dentist's office today, she told me a story that I cannot get out of my mind." She then related the details.

"Well, it is a terrible story; and she should not have told it to you. There must have been something terribly wrong with the mother's mind to prompt her to do such a thing to her own child. I can tell you that such a thing could never happen to you. You are God's child. He is watching over you. I'll get my Bible and show you why I can say this." Halina's mum quickly returned to the room with the Bible opened to Psalm 91. Slowly, she read the entire passage, which speaks about the protection God promises to His people.

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. . . . A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. . . . For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands (vv. 1-2, 7, 11-12).

After her mother tucked her in, turned off the light, and

left the room, Halina lay awake, going over the words of the psalm in her mind.

“But how can I believe this?” she asked herself? “How is it possible that one thousand people may fall, be killed or wounded, and somebody can still be alive? Why wouldn’t I be among the thousands who fell, rather than the one who escaped death?” That question had never been answered to her satisfaction.

These troubling thoughts seemed to have merit in her current state of mind. All she could think about were instances where she had escaped death when those around her had not. A round from a tank had killed someone walking directly in front of her, and she was untouched. A man and a woman between whom she was standing were both hit by a bomb and gunfire, and she was unhurt. In an instant, the woman stood with half of her face shot away, while the man lay writhing on the ground, both of his legs blown off.

Such thoughts plagued Halina, sending her into a severe depression. One day she left the underground hideout she shared with Resistance fighters and sat alone in the darkness. “Maybe,” she thought, “it would be better if I ended it all myself, here and now. It would be better than going on without enough weapons or food and with no hope of this ordeal ending without being killed like the others.”

Distraught and almost in a daze, she decided to end her life. The only weapon she had was a knife. With guns in such short supply, a knife was all a fighter was issued. As she began to take measures to accomplish the deed, she became conscious of a deep spiritual darkness. Though she had thought of her loved ones, she had given no thought to God. She had forgotten the Savior.

But He had not forgotten her. Suddenly, in her mind’s

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eye, Halina found herself wrapped in a light as bright as a brilliant sunrise. Then she became aware of someone in the light. She was convinced the Person was the Lord. And though she didn't actually see Him, she was certain of His presence. Then His voice seemed to invade her mind and repeat words she had said when she was only 16: "My life is not mine, it is Thine."

Then the words came back to her, "Your life is not yours. It is Mine."

Suddenly, Halina was awakened by the realization of what she was trying to do. She knew the Lord had not forgotten that she had promised to serve Him, and He was there to save her from herself. Engulfed in a torrent of inner pain, she burst into a prayer of commitment: "Dear Lord, my beloved Savior, please forgive me. I am so ashamed. Please, Lord, give me understanding of what is right and what is not. Let me not sin against Thee. Let me understand Thy will. Teach me Thy will, that I do not make mistakes. I want to follow Thee. I want always to remember that my life is not mine. It is Thine."

During the traumatic encounter in the midst of a cruel and bloody war, this child of God learned something of great value. She would never fully understand why she was still alive while thousands around her were dying. But it became overwhelmingly important to her to accept the fact that, whether she understood it or not, God had plans for her future. And until His plans were complete, she would live.

After spending a long time alone, pondering what had happened and what she had learned about herself and her imperishable relationship to her Savior, Halina was His. Never again would she question or forget that fact. With a peace that had previously eluded her, she slipped back into the shelter and fell sleep.



The year that passed after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising exacted a heavy toll on Halina, both physically and emotionally. The daily struggle against the Germans and the torment of watching helplessly as the Ghetto burned became more stress than she could handle.

About one month after the Ghetto's destruction, Halina found herself slipping out of consciousness. Her head was bursting with pain, and she knew something was desperately wrong. At only 24, she was in the throes of a debilitating stroke. When she regained consciousness, the army doctors attending her gave her the bad news. "You have had a serious stroke that has impaired your ability to walk, and we cannot be certain how this will turn out. What we know now is that you must have a complete rest away from the work of the Resistance."

For one so totally committed to the war effort, the diagnosis was devastating. Even worse was the uncertainty of whether she would ever be well enough to help battle the Nazis who had destroyed her country.

It was an immense relief when she started to regain some strength in her legs and take the few small steps that began the long process of rehabilitation. It would be nearly a full year before she was able to resume her duties as a lieutenant in the Home Army. Her reentry into active service came none too soon. Within the month, the Resistance began a heroic struggle against insurmountable odds to drive the Nazis out.

From 1939 to 1945, the only viable options for the Polish people were to flee or fight. For most, fleeing was impossible. And though fighting seemed a hopeless folly, it was worth a try. Whether due to bravado or overconfidence, the Polish Resistance was overly optimistic about how soon the war

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would end. Gen. Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, commander of the Polish Home Army, timed an uprising for August 1, 1944. He speculated the fighting would be over in two days or a week at most, an estimate based partly on the supply of weapons available.

He was wrong. Neither he nor anyone on his staff was aware the Nazis had decided to defend Warsaw. They intended to make a stand that would buoy up the spirits of Germans who were beginning to despair over the Allied forces' June invasion of France and Germany's losses to the Russians in the East.

The German garrison contained about 15,000 soldiers. On the surface, the Poles seemed to outnumber the Nazis. They had some 40,000 insurgents, including Halina and 4,000 other women, and counted heavily on their numerical superiority. Early on, it enabled them to achieve success. But that didn't last long. The ill-supplied Poles were no match for the Germans, who soon brought in reinforcements, including tanks, planes, and artillery.

Halina's brother, Zygmund, was in the north of Warsaw, which the Germans subdued quickly. Halina was in another part of the city, where the Home Army was stronger and could sustain the fight longer. The demands of war had prevented her from seeing her brother for quite some time. She missed him terribly, but knowing Zygmund as she did, she knew he was doing everything he could to help the war effort. Eventually, word reached her that Zygmund had been in the street during a bombing. As he was running for cover, he spotted a badly wounded Polish man lying in the debris. Unwilling to leave him there to die, Zygmund picked the man up and managed to carry him all the way to a hospital.

Then he ran to his mother's flat to warn her the Gestapo was on its way. "Mother, you must leave quickly! The Gestapo

is coming, and we may be picked up. Hurry! They will be here in less than an hour!”

But Mrs. Peszke could not go anywhere. Her older sister and brother-in-law were in her home because her brother-in-law had just been hit on the head by bricks from a building that had been bombed, and Mrs. Peszke was tending to the wound. As Zygmund predicted, the Germans swarmed into the building within the hour, rounding up everyone who appeared strong enough to be shipped off to labor camps.

However, they left Halina’s mother, sister, and brother-in-law alone, probably because of their age and their poor health. But Zygmund, who had run back down to the street, was arrested and shipped off to Auschwitz. It would be a long time before Halina and her mother would learn what happened to him.



The battle that Gen. Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski said would last only two days dragged on for more than two grueling months—from August 1 to October 2. Before it was over, the extent of the atrocities against the Polish fighters and innocent civilians astonished everyone. An order issued by Hitler’s right-hand man, Heinrich Himmler, was intended to send a message to all Europeans under Nazi control. The order was to kill all of Warsaw’s residents, take no prisoners, and level the city.

What started as an organized battle plan evolved into a vicious, monumental street fight—block by block, building by building. Many years later, Halina described what it was like to move through the fog of the war:

A day or two before the insurrection started, we already knew that it was about to begin and only

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awaited orders from General Komorowski. The young people were in their underground shelters, ready with a meager supply of small arms. [Of the estimated 40,000 fighters, only 2,500 had weapons.]

For weeks women had been gathering food to provide for the people who were ready to take the fight to the Germans. It was interesting to see these women storing enough food, not for the two-day engagement they were told it would be, but for at least a month.

When I looked at the “army” of combatants gathered in the cellars waiting the order to commence, I saw young faces, boys and girls really, which made me wonder how prepared we were to go up in battle against hardened professional soldiers.

While I was packing my rucksack with a change of clothing, soap, toiletries, a cup, all of the bandages and medical supplies I had gathered, I did a very foolish thing. I left my precious Bible behind. My thinking at the time was that when the fighting begins, I will be fighting and running and hiding from the enemy; so it's very unlikely I will have time for reading. And if we are victorious, there will be many places where I can find Bibles. The best outcome will allow me to come back home and retrieve my Bible and books.

Time would tell just how wrong I was to think like this. It would be a long wait before I ever again held a Bible. And after my capture and internment as a prisoner of war, the one possession that I needed desperately to sustain hope and comfort was my Bible. It was a hard, actually bitter, lesson that affected my conduct for the rest of my life. Whatever else was left behind, I would never again be apart from the Word of God.

At the outset of the fighting, the Polish Resistance pushed the Germans out of many areas of the city and recaptured the gas, electric, and water plants, enabling hospitals to resume services with power restored. Armament and printing facilities also were recaptured, allowing communication to resume through newspapers the occupiers had shut down.

A highpoint of the insurrection came when the Poles took the large Wehrmacht warehouse in the Wola district where the Germans stored food, military supplies, and uniforms. The Resistance fighters promptly dressed in some of the uniforms, leaving only the red and white armbands of the Polish Home Army visible. The ruse allowed fighters to pass some German outposts without being detected.

But the Germans began sending in more troops, tanks, and heavy weapons. Moving about in the open then became treacherous:

We decided that there was a way to get around in the city without showing our faces. As most of the houses were connected, it was possible to break through cellar basement walls and open doors to move from one place to another undetected. This saved a lot of lives because the enemy had begun placing tanks at the end of streets where their guns could reach anyone who happened to be caught in the open. When we were blocked by sewers or other obstacles, we worked side by side to make barricades from paving blocks.

The fighting during the day was terrible because the enemy had tanks placed at the end of every major street. These barricades were put up during the night when the tanks were not shelling us. During the day, the shooting was almost constant, which made crossing, even with the barricades, very dangerous. On one

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occasion I was crossing a street, the Alley of Jerusalem, which ran through the whole of Warsaw. I was with a number of others. As we moved across, the tank at the end of the street began shooting, and a shell exploded nearly in our faces. Miraculously, I was not hit; but the woman immediately in front of me was killed.

While we were paying the price in blood to make gains, there was, especially in the first days, a feeling of near euphoria when we would see lines of German prisoners walking with hands raised in surrender to our men. Courtyards were used as dressing stations where our girl nurses worked to bandage and aid the wounded. It didn't matter whether victims wore a German uniform or were one of our own. Everyone was treated with the same respect and level of care. We were careful to do everything according to the Geneva Convention, even though the same courtesy was not given to us. We were treated as renegades. If we were caught or wounded, we would be killed immediately.

When the tide turned and the Nazis gained the upper hand, the slaughter was unrelenting. In the Wola district, where the Germans had been humiliated, they held mass executions of Polish fighters and civilians. When the massacre ended, 40,000 Polish people had been systematically killed. Germany intended to let the Poles know they would break their will to resist and force them to surrender. Yet the result was the opposite. For Halina and everyone who participated in the uprising, surrender meant death. To die fighting was preferable to being executed.

Some in the Resistance, however, could not keep going. Their wounds crippled them, forcing their compatriots to leave them behind. In the case of civilians, many had nowhere to hide. Their fates were sealed. In one district, the

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Nazis used Polish women as human shields while attacking insurgent positions.

In the Wola and St. Lazarus hospitals, the Germans murdered 1,360 patients and staff. In some of the field hospitals, they burned the wounded alive in their beds. Mass executions took place in districts occupied by the Wehrmacht; and death squads moved from house to house, killing everyone inside.

In a strange way, the worst of times sometimes create inexplicable contradictions. For the people of Poland, the war aroused their love of country and triumphantly displayed their determination to survive against all odds. For the Jewish people, whose excruciating suffering the world will never fully realize, the war increased their love for their homeland in the Middle East, which had been under foreign occupation for 2,000 years.

For Halina, it led to a love story that united her in marriage in 1944 to a man she fought beside as a soldier at the barricades, on the streets, and through the tunnels. Samuel had become the love of her life. Despite the war, they dared to dream of a life together, unaware they would soon be separated and not know when, where, or if they would see each other again.

In late September 1944, American planes delivered a huge airdrop of food and supplies. Insurgents were able to retrieve about 16 tons, a mere 20 percent of the cargo. The rest was captured by the Germans. Although the airdrop briefly lifted Polish spirits, it was too little too late. The Polish fighters were falling to superior firepower and larger numbers of troops. Halina and her friends were not willing to give up. But by the end of September, it became clear their time was running out.