



## MARTA BOCHENEK

### Crime no. 1

When I was summoned to sign the *Volksliste* at the beginning of 1940, in Piotrowice Śląskie, I was well aware of the fate that awaited me upon refusal. My three-bedroom flat in Katowice had already been searched and seized by the Germans. Already then the Gestapo had inquired about my son, Jurek, asking, "Wo ist der Blonder?"

So I took temporary residence in Piotrowice with my husband's relatives who had just signed the *Volksliste*, and now I have four SS-men standing over me, encouraging me with beguiling smiles: "Your husband was from Silesia, you can enjoy all the rights and privileges of a German national, just sign *Volksdeutsch*."

In my mind's eye, I see my husband, an insurgent. "My husband was a Pole," I reply. "And I was born in Warsaw; I have no connection with the German nation." I take the pen and write "Polish" under the heading "nationality". The eyes of the German policemen flash menacingly: "trotzige Polin", they hiss. Soon, I left Upper Silesia and came to Warsaw.

It was in the spring of 1940. At the time, the walls of the Ghetto were being erected and the first round-ups of people were organized. Shortly after my arrival, I had the opportunity to see how they were conducted. I took a tram along Aleje Jerozolimskie and was surprised to see the Germans stopping all the men – 15-year-old boys included – who were passing by, and marching them off in groups. A moment later, I noticed a large crowd of men gathered in a huge railway yard at the end of Marszałkowska Street. One of them held a baby in his arms; the majority were without overcoats, and some were also bareheaded.

"What are the Germans planning to do with these men?" I wondered. Probably they would march them for some farm labor or to dig trenches. Some 30,000 men were caught at that time, and only a few weeks later did Warsaw learn that these were the first victims of Auschwitz.

My son Jurek was 17 years old. He was tall, strongly built – beautiful. And the German juggernaut craved the flower of youth. My heart, the heart of a mother, trembled every day...



In order to obtain an *Ausweis* – the evidence of employment – I arrange for my son to work in a car repair shop. Besides, I recognize the value of the automotive industry for the future of Poland. My son earns 25 zlotys per week for ten–twelve hours of hard work per day, and a loaf of bread costs 20 zlotys. At the time, soup was not yet being distributed at the workplace. Months pass by, and my son's cheeks become sunken and pale. A ragged jacket accentuates thin, protruding shoulder-blades. I have already sold everything I had. We live on dry bread, unsweetened black coffee, and potato soup, and they are a great drain on our pocket. Hunger – we knew it well, the pain and dizziness, the feeling that temples are going to explode, the cramps of empty bowels and the howl of the whole being: food, food!

Then Easter 1942 came along. The Ghetto is burning, the Jews are fighting desperately with the Germans, and the latter organize round-ups of Jewish children who are begging in the streets. These ragged, emaciated children with cadaverous faces are a horrible sight to see. When they come begging, with bags tied to their necks, everyone gives them some soup, a piece of bread, and puts one or two potatoes in the bag. A few days later, the Ghetto falls and Jewish children disappear from the streets of Warsaw.

My son brings a little grey book with a crown of thorns on the cover, entitled *News from the Front Line*. It contains the first news about the camps. I don't believe what I read. Are people really capable of committing such atrocities?

The facial features of my son grow somewhat senile, and his disposition also changes: a youthful boy, so full of life, becomes a serious man. He is very mysterious. Always busy. His friends visit. Sometimes one of them stays overnight. There are meetings, trips...

Oh, the unbearable heart of a mother!

It's been three days since he left. Finally he comes back, but he's changed so much! He is so exhausted that he can barely keep on his feet... And the state of his clothes! They bear marks of fighting. He drops onto the bed and falls asleep immediately. It was the first time I saw that my son had a revolver.

He was involved in the resistance.

How could I forbid him to fight for freedom against the hateful enemy, I, a Polish woman and citizen? My husband fought the Germans in three Silesian Uprisings; join the sacred fight, my son, and may God protect you!



The most dreadful year, 1943, begins.

Persecution of Polish people intensifies. In the middle of January, when it is freezing cold, the Germans carry out round-ups; over 300,000 people are caught. Day in, day out, one after another the open trucks loaded with human cargo drive off; people without overcoats, bareheaded – deported, they disappear into the distance.

But the resistance is also active.

Once in a while one of the most prominent Germans dies, assassinated. Acts of subversion include disarming Germans, attacking trains, blowing up bridges, destroying rolling stock, sabotage, snatching public money from under the Germans' noses. (I know that during one such action a local young seminary student signalled our boys from the porch of the parish house to enter the district Municipal Savings Bank).

My son is the chauffeur of a German car. Besides, he can skilfully ride all sorts of motorcycles. As a man from Silesia, he speaks idiomatic German. He is tall, strong, and courageous. And the Polish Underground State needs such men the most. Dr. Zahn's beautiful limousine is of more service to the conspirators than its owner.

My son receives an order to quit his job with the Germans.

He is to be an instructor of clandestine military training courses, organized every day in a different place. The students don't know his surname and he doesn't know theirs, all for safety reasons – there are many informers.

My son becomes more and more busy. He doesn't have time for anything.

It's Sunday and his beloved Krysia has a day off. She waits for him, but Jurek has more important things to do. Although he does not say a word about his affairs, my intuition tells me everything.

A few more Germans have to be wiped out of Warsaw.

When I beg him, tears in my eyes, he says, "It doesn't matter if I'm killed. A million Poles will perish, mother dear, but there will be Poland."



He hugs me and hums the song,

"When I die, in the yonder fields,  
The trees will send a rustle through the air..."

He was already lost.

Ordered to – he quit his job.

Ordered to – he took part in assaults.

Ordered to – he shot.

He was lost, like so many others. But they were the honor of trampled, oppressed, and battered Poland, as the Germans feared nobody but them; they made the Germans tremble with fear.

Autumn comes.

The Germans are in a tight situation, they are getting whipped on all fronts, and they take out their rage on helpless Polish people: constant arrests, patrols all over the streets of Warsaw, and the first public executions. Huge red posters scream, "Death, Death!" Each day brings a new litany of young martyrs, the best sons of Poland.

My son tells me, "I found three friends on the list yesterday and two more today." A terrible feeling of terror grips my heart: my dearest boy, how can I save you from misfortune?

The Poles answer the German persecution with a still better organized armed action; they collect weapons and ammunition and prepare for a military confrontation, for the outbreak of the Uprising.

My son gets a warning. He is to take the weapons out of the house and spend the night away from home.

Oh my God! The wardrobe is lined with brand new Colts, they have to be removed without delay. I see how my son puts two guns in his trouser pockets and two more in the chest pockets of his jacket and then leaves. I am numbed with fear. I snatch a suitcase, wrap the guns in paper, and place some clothes on top. This has to be taken across the Vistula river, from Praga to Warsaw, as soon as possible. When I get into tram no. 24 by the station, some



railwayman helps me with the suitcase, seeing that I cannot lift it on my own. "Oh, it's so heavy," he says, and my heart is pounding.

I am not aware of the consequences in case of exposure. I focus on one thing: the weapons have to be saved. One gun costs 8,000 zlotys, and one bullet – 25 zlotys. It would be such a loss if they fell into German hands!

Luckily, all went well. An old woman such as I and my battered suitcase didn't arouse suspicion. I went all the way from the station to my destination undisturbed.

The Gestapo again terrorizes Warsaw. Searches are conducted everywhere; they scour the packages and briefcases of all passers-by; they rummage in women's purses. Street corners are dotted with men standing with their arms raised: they are being searched for weapons. The executions car can be seen every day, and each day brings a new list of the executed.

The suitcase is claimed by a young lady, beautiful as a goddess, made-up and elegant as every Warsaw woman. She takes a firm hold of the suitcase and leaves for the streets of Warsaw, swarming with frenzied soldiery. "May God protect you, my dear child," I say and bless her with the Sign of the Cross.

I know only that she reached her destination and the weapons were saved.

She was the wife of Lieutenant J.

On 3 December 1943 we met our fate.

At midnight I heard the sound of rifle butts hammering on our door. The Germans came for Jurek, my beloved child, who was incautiously spending the night at home. I saw his pale face and raised arms. I was brutally thrown out of the flat. I couldn't even say goodbye. I came back home after the search and found the flat completely looted.

A week later I was standing in front of the bloody list, featuring the name and surname of my son. He was hostage no. 46. This was on 10 December 1943. Five days later, on 15 December, a bloody poster announced to Warsaw and the entire world that 270 Polish bandits, working for England and Moscow, were executed that day.

Number 11 – Jerzy Bochenek, born on 28 October 1922 in Katowice.

I began to scream desperately.



Allegedly, the execution took place in Teatralny Square. People who had reportedly watched the execution from the attics of surrounding houses said that one of the hostages, a boy with a crop of blonde hair, although handcuffed, surged forward and head-butted a German in the stomach with all his might just before...

Thus died my son Jurek.

An unrecognized hero soldier of the Polish Underground State.

My eyes flooded with tears, mourning veil covered my head.

I roam the streets of Warsaw, and my eyes search the crowds for the dearest fair head, missing him madly. Where are you, my sunshine, you alone peopled my whole world. I am alone. Alone...

Although I don't eat, I'm not hungry. In the evenings I come back to my freezing cold kitchen. I sit on the bed and listen. Won't I hear the familiar footsteps, quickly coming up, a powerful pull at the handle, and the sweetest of voices, "You have something to eat, mother dear?"

Huge announcement sheets still cover the entire city with bloody news of executions...

There is a little chapel at Skaryszewska Street, with an image painted by Styka of a tormented God-man. Christ's hands rest on the globe: "I redeemed the world." My lips whisper: "Oh, Christ, let the sacrifice of my murdered child and so many others bring freedom to Poland." I pray and utter a most horrific chorale:

With the smoke of fires and the dust of fraternal blood.

To You we outstretch our imploring hands.

The complaint is frightful; it is our last moan.

By now the complaints have stopped... A crown of thorns  
Has grown into our forehead.

A year later I witnessed my dearest home city, Warsaw, being consumed by flames.

Marta Bochenek

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