

Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 6) – Surviving Regime Transition

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I want to tell a little story from the war - not everything was dark. My brother and I had been alone in the Bromberg apartment for at least a week. We survived on boiled potatoes. I had never cooked before in my life. But I boiled potatoes. None of the neighbors came and asked, "How are you doing" or "Can I help you?" They had nothing to eat themselves. After about two weeks, word got out that there was a bakery open. So the lady from the lower apartment, Mieta Piek, she came up and brought us some soup and bread. Was that ever good! So we ate that. And she told me, "Now let's go and find the bakery, and you stand in line - I'll give you some money." I had no money. "You stand in line for some bread." So I did. I stood in line from 7 AM, but by the time I got to the door the bread was gone. The next day I went to the bakery at 5 AM - I barely made it before the bread ran out. The next day I went at 4:30 AM and made it easily - I brought bread home. But when you stand every day in a line - which I did just about every day - people start asking you questions. Now, me not speaking Polish, what was I to do? They were going to kick me out of the line if I spoke German – they may or they may not. So I started to intentionally stutter. So the people thought, Well, he's a little bit "off." That was fine with me, because as long as they thought that, it gave me a chance to get through. It helped me survive the Polish time, because I couldn't speak Polish! But the stuttering worked!

During your time in Bromberg, you told me about a Russian supply train that came through. Tell me a little more about that.

Actually, that was a very important time for us, and very helpful. What happened was, I went down the street a short ways from our apartment to where there was a main street going through town. As I walked down the street, I saw this supply train with horses and wagons. Some wagons had a booth on them, and some just had just a tarp over. So I walked over to them, because I was always interested in horses. I noticed there was one wagon where there was an old man sitting in the driver's seat. I remember his face very well, as he was cross-eyed. And he was smiling. But what I really noticed were his horses with such shiny skin! This told me that the man took good care of his horses - he brushed and rake-stroked them. The other horses looked rather greyish and tired. But those horses were standing there and he had a canvas bag to feed his horses. So I went over and looked around, and stroked one horse on his neck. The driver saw me do that and said, Idjesuda - in Russian that means, "Come over here." Now, I don't speak Russian but I know a few words from my grandfather Zacher. I was not afraid of him, so I went over to the old man. He had lunch, and he took a knife and gave me a slice of bread. And then I said, Sbosiba - that is "Thank you" in Russian. His eyes lit up, and he looked at me. He said, Karashow. I shrugged and said, Nyada borusky - I don't speak Russian. So he said, Stoja - or something like that. Then he went to the back of his cart and lifted the tarp and brought out a loaf of bread. Now the loaf of bread he had was kind of small, because every soldier got a loaf of bread like that. So he didn't give me anything big - just what lasts for a day. So he gave me that! Oh, boy! I said, Sbosiba, Papa, Sbosiba, Papa! and left. I was so hungry,

and I could take it home to my brother. That was such a kind man. I thought, "I will always remember him" and that's why I wanted to mention it here. Sbosiba, Papa - that's what I said.

So the supply trains that you talked about, that came through town –

Well, that actually was what the Russians used to haul small goods. For heavy equipment they used trucks. I have to tell about those trucks. They looked like they were all Model A trucks. They had wooden benches in them - nothing upholstered. No inner trim panels - nothing. I think I may have seen one or two gauges on the dash. So the guys used these trucks.

But what these supply trains were mainly used for was to supply food for the men and supplies for horses - grain or hay or things like that. But don't forget that the front line of the war was only about 15-20 km or so to the west of Bromberg - you could hear shots day and night sounding in the distance. So we were quite safe where we were. We did hear the odd shot in town - there was a lot of aggravation going on - people shooting each other - but not as much where we were. So that's about the supply train.

On the same street, I saw a train with POW's (Germans) going the other way. And they were all guarded by women. I want to tell you about those Russian women. They are tough! I'd rather meet a Russian soldier than a Russian woman. They were looking after security, traffic control - they were assigned to many things. None that I saw wore pants - they all wore skirts, with a blouse over the waist, and a machine gun hanging over their back. The machine guns were only about 2 feet long, with a drum on it to hold the bullet coil. These guns were known by the Germans and by everybody else to be very good. Those guns were slow at firing, and maybe not as accurate as the machine guns Americans had, but if there was a bit of mud in the barrel they would still fire. So that's what they had hanging on their backs. And on their heads they wore nice caps. But they were quite tough, I've been told.

So during this time in Bromberg, the Russians were taking care of their own injured very close to where all the fighting was going on. How did you and your brother, as just children and now you're alone, how did you fend for yourselves?

Well, it was very hard. It was very, very difficult. As a matter of fact, we had potatoes, we had preserves, like compote - fruit. We had some flour, but I had never cooked in my life - I hadn't even boiled an egg. But you know, when your back is against the wall, you learn fast. And did I ever learn fast! So I boiled potatoes. I boiled potatoes into a soup, and I made a little dough. I tried to make Riebele soup like my mom did with little bits of the dough in the soup. I put them in with salt and pepper. But mostly we lived on boiled potatoes and compote.

The Polish people were not allowed to even talk to the Germans. The Poles would even beat up on their own people if they would do that. But the people in our complex were not afraid of that, thank God. So Mieta Piek, who was living right below us with her husband and daughter - she came up and gave us bread and soup, and I stood in line for her, to get bread; which, as I said before, I had to stutter to get my way through.

One other thing I want to tell you is how the Russians felt at that time. A lot of people don't know this. I tried to get out in the street one time - I was looking for something - there was always something that I hoped to find to help us survive. So this one time Mieta Piek said, "Alfred, come over here – I have to tell you something." She said, "Whenever you go out there, don't go near a dead person to see what is in their pockets, because the

Russians shoot at anyone who does this." I never thought much of it at the time. Shooting was like nothing to me. But later on it dawned on me - Why? Mieta said the dead people are holy to some Russians, and disturbing them is a sin. You know, believe it or not, they're all Communists, but I have to say the Russians always believed in their religion and Russia - most of them. The young ones are not religious. But they always trusted their mother - their father not so much. But when you say, "My mother" (or Babuschka - grandmother) - that's like when you talk about Jesus. That's the way the Russians held close together in the family.

So naturally, I wouldn't go into the pockets of those dead people! I would never do that. But that was a good warning.

But the other thing was, we were so down on ourselves, we thought, "Well, we'll go to a church. In a church the people will have a heart - they have a soul. They will look at us, two kids - and will say, "Come here, I'll give you some soup." So we went into a church that was known to us. My gosh - what I saw! All the benches were pushed aside - the Russian army had used the church to sleep in. The altar was in one piece, and the crucifix was on it. They had used the pages from some of the songbooks to go to the toilet. The area behind the altar was full of human excrement - it had been used for a toilet. Well, that was another moment that my brother Oskar and I felt lost. So we looked around and saw there was a little booklet sticking out of the debris, and a spoon-like thing about 15 inches long, with a cross on it. I think it was for the holy sacrament that they used to give something. It was a Protestant church, by the way. So we took the little booklet home and also that spoon, and believe it or not, every time that we knelt down by our bed for our prayer, I would hold that little booklet - which I still have - and my brother would hold that spoon. And we felt like we were in church. Truly, we felt that Jesus was with us, holding His hand over us, saying, "Don't worry, children, I'll guide you through safely." And He did.

So from Bromberg, what happened next?

The people in our complex did not report us. But about 3 1/2 weeks later, the Polish Militz – what they called Militz (police) – came around. They were Freedom Fighters turned police, but they had no uniforms. They made a routine check and went from door to door or from house to house to see if there were any Germans left. They came to our door and saw that we were there. So the guy said, "Well, get ready. You'll come with me." But my brother and I were ready, because the people in the apartment across the hall, Mrs. Kaminsky, had said to me, "There will be someone coming - there is nothing we can do - but they will pick you up." So I had packed a little suitcase - a little wooden suitcase. I had a lot of documents in it, and pictures. And I had a bag - for my little brother I had a bag, and I also had a packsack. So I had the little suitcase and the packsack, and my brother had the other bag. All I had packed in it were socks, shirts, and such things. But the only mistake I made - it never dawned on me - I didn't take any spoons or bowls or anything like that, in case we were put in a camp. We certainly didn't go to a hotel, that's for sure! So how do we get the food? It never dawned on me. So anyway, a guy picked us up, and we walked, oh maybe three blocks or four blocks, to a place beside the canal where there was an open field that was used for a fairground at one time. And there were stables; administration buildings were there; and the whole field was surfaced with sand dredged from the Canal and the Brahe river. They took the sand and spread it out there. We had played there a lot - I knew that field like my back pocket. So we were put in there. They had fenced the place in with four wires - barbed wire - they didn't need any more. You just stayed in there, because if you went out you got shot. That's exactly what would have happened. So nobody was foolish enough to go under or over the wires and get out. There were four or six floodlights on this fence - they

were dimmed down at night a little bit, but not much, after midnight. A person might go out there and sneak out, but where are they going to run? So that's where we were.

So when we were in that place, there was crying going on day and night because some people had been in there about three weeks, and the kids were crying, hungry. They wanted something to eat, and all they got was soup once a day - literally, a watery soup. My brother and I were lucky. We got into where the animals used to be. Oh, that was very comfortable. From wall to wall, all around, it had straw on the floor to sleep on. But everyone was laying down like sardines. There was no room left. So the guard came in and said to this old man, "Move" -- "MOVE" and threatened to hit him. So the old man moved. So he squeezed me in there. And down a bit again, it was "MOVE" and he said a swear word. So that woman with two children, she moved a little bit, so my brother was there. So between him and me there were two people. We weren't given anything to eat, but I had packed a couple of sandwiches in my pack, so we were OK.

So the next day about noon, they announced lunch - for soup. So everybody was lining up. So as the old man left, he told me, "I'll pick my stuff up and when I come back you can take my bowl and you go." And the lady with the two kids said the same thing to Oskar. So when I went, I was actually lucky that they were serving the bottom part of the soup where all the solid food had settled - I got the thick stuff, and so did my brother. It wasn't bad!

Now, I want to tell you about the outhouse. My God, it was only a ditch with a bar across to sit on and another bar to hold onto. And there was the ditch. Regardless of woman, man or children, that's where you did your thing. And if you went out there at night twice or three times - and some people had diarrhea - next thing you knew the guard came around - not all the time but every once in a while, especially the ones who had too much to drink - and they were beating up on people because they were going out in the middle of the night. It was awful. Human dignity was absolutely written off. And as far as a religious feeling, or a human feeling, or a brotherly love, or a sisterly love, anything of humanity did not exist.

A week later a farmer - a guy came around. Now don't forget, I was not yet 15. I was the oldest male in that camp except for very old men who could hardly walk anymore. The Polish and Russian authorities sent all the German men as prisoners to Russia or beat them up - they made them responsible for what Hitler did. They said, "You could have voted him out, or done something about him." That's what the old man told me, so I believe it. But this farmer came around and he was half-drunk. So he came in with the guards, and a guard said, "Here" and pointed his finger at me. He said, "Come over here." So I went over there and the farmer said in perfect German, "You come with me. You'll work for me." And I said, "Well, I have my little brother here." He said, "I don't want your brother, I want you." Now I was not going to leave without my brother! And I was not afraid one bit! They could beat me to death. I was that close to the end. I couldn't care less. So then farmer said, "No, no - I could use him - he can be of help." Oskar was only eight years old. I was almost fifteen.