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**World War II Through Polish Eyes: In the Nazi-Soviet Grip by M. B. Szonert, 2002, East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 399 pages.**



Maria Szonert-Binienda discovered that a major public library in Cleveland (Ohio) had only one English title about the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, written by a German with an anti-Polish bias. This is what sparked the idea for **World War II Through Polish Eyes** (*Nowy Dziennik*, February 21, 2003). Last year saw the publication in English of two major books about Poland in World War II: **A Question of Honor** by American journalists Olson and Cloud, and **Rising '44** by British historian Norman Davies (published in UK, the book will be reviewed in the next edition of *Wiadomości*). Szonert's book, though modest by comparison, is effective in what it sets out to do. It is a synthesis of Poland's fate at the hands of the Nazis and Soviets as exemplified by the true story of one young woman and her family. The title is somewhat misleading as it implies a broader focus than the book provides.

Szonert, an attorney living in Akron, Ohio, was brought up in Poland. Danuta Binienda, her "protagonist," was Szonert's mother-in-law. The book evolved over many years as she set down Danuta's recollections. Each episode of Danuta's life is set in the broader context of events. Danuta's story is told in the third person and intertwined with the author's historical narratives. The format works well. Szonert shows a novelist's skill in providing a richly detailed account of the war's devastating impact on the family. We see what happens not only to Danuta and her family but also to their friends and the people they encounter during the war years. This makes the book highly readable.

The author provides a substantive bibliography of English-language and Polish sources, including documents, photographs and maps. Each chapter is carefully annotated. An index would have been useful. The book begins with the elderly Danuta living in Ohio in 2002, talking with her grandson, Konrad, about the war. The information he receives at school about Poland's history is often inaccurate. A TV program about the sixtieth anniversary of the Katyń Massacre reminds Danuta of the death of her first love, a young Polish officer murdered in Katyń. Szonert expounds on Katyń in the first chapter and the subject reappears frequently in her book. When asked about this in an interview with *Nowy Dziennik* (February 21, 2003), Szonert said that when she was growing up in Poland much was known about Nazi crimes but very little was said about Soviet crimes against the population of eastern Poland. The subject did not exist.

Danuta recalls her carefree life in pre-war Warsaw with her parents and brother. Her father, Alek Karpowicz, worked at the State Mint. Danuta, born in the 1920's, dreamed of going to a film school. September 1939 ended the family's aspirations as the country was plunged into horror and chaos. The historical narrative provides a clear explanation of the German-Russian Friendship Treaty signed on September 28, 1939 in which the Soviet Union took over 51.6% of Polish territory. In the Secret Supplementary Protocol both sides pledged to cooperate to destroy "the Polish underground, Polish resistance, Polish intelligentsia and all signs of Polish identity." (p. 120). Szonert cites Allen Paul's *Katyń* which describes the cooperation between the Gestapo and NKVD.

The chapters dealing with the family's life under German occupation will be of particular interest to Americans. Most of them don't know the extent to which the Polish population (Christians as well as Jews) was persecuted. Danusia's school does not reopen--the Nazi regime allows for the reopening of only a limited number of elementary and vocational schools. Food is scarce. Each day brings news of arrests, executions. People are sent to labor camps or newly formed concentration camps. In Krakow, eminent scholars from the Jagiellonian University are taken to a concentration camp. In Warsaw a 100 men and boys are shot in reprisal for the death of one German soldier. Danusia's father, Alek, narrowly escapes being taken into custody at the State Mint (now under German management) and sent to Dachau. Zbyszek, Danusia's younger brother, joins the Home Army and attends classes at the Polish Underground School.

Danusia is upset at the lack of news from her uncle and cousins in eastern Poland. What she doesn't yet know is that in February 1940 her uncle was shot by the NKVD and her cousins were deported to Siberia. Eighteen-year old Danusia is determined to get on with her life and marries Józef Fijałkowski in the summer of 1940. Six weeks after the wedding, Józef is caught in the first mass round-up in Warsaw, one of a thousand men. He is taken to Auschwitz, where he struggles to survive. Danusia emerges as a resourceful, courageous young woman, determined to achieve her husband's release. When she sends a photograph of herself with her newborn son to the camp commander (to be shown to Józef), her husband is unexpectedly set free. There are several examples in the book when Danusia is able to save family members and friends through her interventions with the Gestapo and NKVD, often appealing to some shred of humanity in the hardened officials.

Hungry for some positive news about the Allies' progress, the family reads--at great risk--the underground press.

Family life deteriorates as Alek's pay is cut and he begins to drink heavily. Józef is tormented by memories of Auschwitz. He has to report to the Gestapo every week and fears that they will try to force him to collaborate. It is implied that he works for the resistance but he does not tell Danusia anything for her protection. Józef decides to go into hiding and the family moves to the village of Czemierniki. They have no money and use their possessions as barter. The family is shocked by the news that Alek (who stayed in Warsaw) has been arrested by the Gestapo. They retreat to the town of Międzyrzec, where they will stay till the end of the war. Danusia and her mother open a beauty salon and manage quite well. However, they are dealt another blow--Józef is tracked down and shot by Germans on his way to Warsaw in February 1943. Danusia is devastated. She gives birth to her second child, a girl, that summer. Alek is released from prison and joins the family in Międzyrzec.

The family agonizes as they listen to radio reports on the Warsaw Uprising. Szonert provides a cogent commentary focusing on Stalin's tactics to withhold assistance to the Home Army. As she points out, the Soviets entered Warsaw in January 1945, after the Germans had time to reduce the city to rubble. The Soviets take over Międzyrzec, bringing with them the "new order." Zbyszek is arrested by the NKVD and released through Danusia's intervention. Alek is asked by a Soviet to join the local security forces and help build up the Communist Party. When he angrily refuses, he is shot.

We find out from the Epilogue that Danusia completed her education and married Karol Binienda in 1951. They came to the United States in the 1970's. Danusia died several months before the book was published.

The book should attract readers interested in recent Polish history, including young people.

***Monika Mieroszewska***