

# UNFORGETTING POLAND'S FORGOTTEN VICTIMS: CRITICAL REFLECTION ON SURVIVOR NARRATIVES

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## Abstract

Memory is considered to be an imperfect source of historical knowledge, yet narrative recollections may provide intimate details that could be forever lost.

This project is a collection of first-person narratives in a web-folio format that captures previously unrecorded stories of Polish Holocaust survivors.

The purpose of the digital collection is that it offers these stories to a new generation of readers who may not have been introduced to information about all the victims and survivors of World War II in Europe. The memory web-folio contributes primary research with a digital humanities delivery system.

The creative non-fiction web-folio contributes hitherto lost/unfound stories of Polish non-Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Readers for this memoir include World War II scholars and historians, students of Holocaust history, and those interested in creating a web-folio.

My primary sources include personal recollections from my parents and their family members; a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration camp in May 2018; research in literary texts and articles, as well as research at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in March 2019.

Preserving their narratives in digital web-folio is a significant and timely contribution of primary narratives to the current discussion of Polish people and their complex and varied roles in the Holocaust

## History

POLISH VICTIMS OF WORLD WAR II UNDER OCCUPATION BY TWO INVADERS NAZI GERMANY & THE SOVIET UNION



Polish Forced/slave labor patch



Polish political prisoner patch

My parents, Kazimiera Kamelska, Tadeusz Brewczynski Bad Saulgau, Germany July, 1945

"Kill without pity or mercy all men, women or children of Polish descent or language.

Only this way can we obtain the living space (Lebensraum) we need.

The destruction of Poland is our primary task.

The aim is...annihilation of living forces."

--Adolf Hitler, August 22, 1939

Obersalzberg, Germany

On August 23, 1939 in Moscow, Soviet Union Germans and Soviets sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to invade and partition Poland.

### INVASION OF POLAND

Germany invades from the west - September 1, 1939

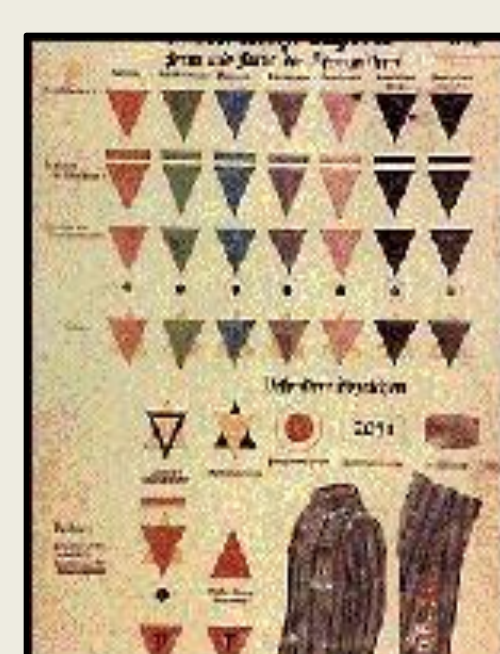
Soviets invade from the east - September 17, 1939



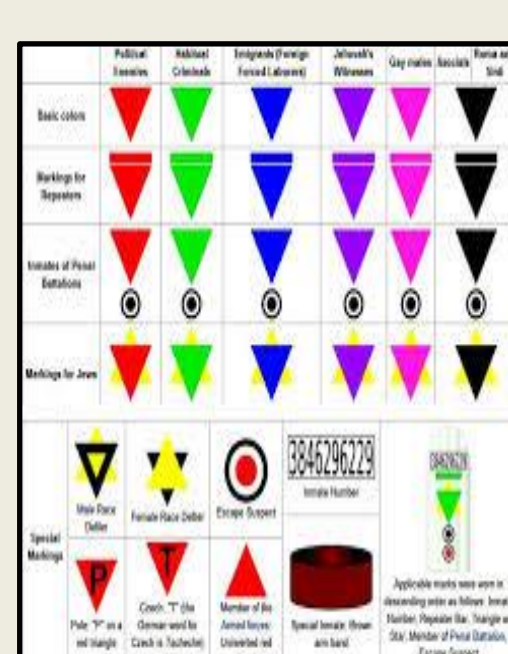
My father's Warsaw, 1945 www.goodfreephotos.com



My mother's Lublin, 1944 Lublin\_Krakauer\_Tor\_1944, Wikipedia.org



Prisoner Markings Germany ca. 1938-1942 U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum



Nazi concentration camp badges Commons.Wikimedia.org

German-Soviet Partition 1939 en.Wikipedia.org World\_War\_II\_casualties\_of\_Poland

## Introduction

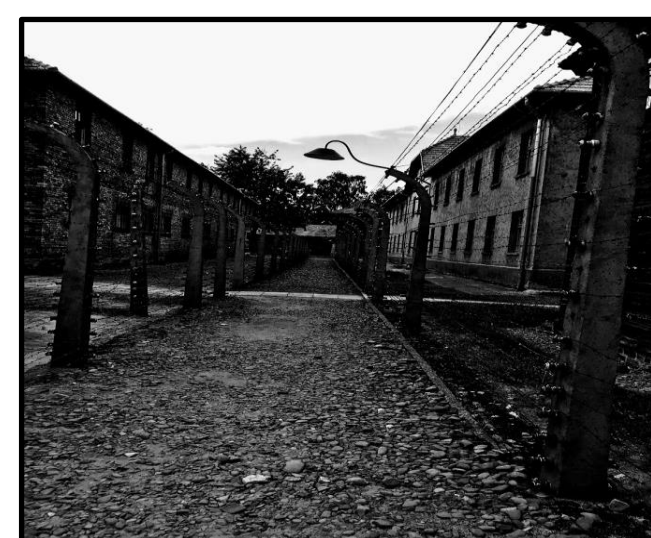
139554 – I cannot quite recall when I first noticed this starkly visible and unique tattoo on my father's left inner arm, or noticed a drab blue and white broad-striped jacket and trousers in a trunk. I was in my teens when the puzzle began to take shape. My father was a political prisoner for his work in the Polish Underground. He was sentenced to Pawiak Prison in Warsaw; concentration camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau, Poland; Mauthausen, Austria; Natzweiler-Struthof, France; and Schomberg, Germany where he endured brutal interrogation, beatings, torture, hard labor, and starvation.

My mother's 'signs' were less visible but told in brief stories of her ordeals of war - the end of her formal education at age fifteen; the escapes to bomb shelters; the smoldering smells of destroyed buildings; the loss of family and friends through disease, imprisonment in concentration camps and labor camps; the hunger resulting in sickness and death. There was always the fear of death for hiding a Jewish neighbor girl in their apartment, or defying the Gestapo who came looking for my mother's brothers.

In a dragnet my mother was kidnapped by the Gestapo, loaded in a cattle car and transported to Sigmaringen province in southern Germany to work as a forced/slave laborer in a sawmill. At this camp she became involved in the French Resistance movement. Sometime later my grandmother was evicted and sent to the same area where they were reunited after the war.

My parents' reluctance to tell their stories became the purpose of my project. My pursuit has been slowed by the lack of academic literature on the topic of Poles as victims and survivors in World War II.

My research asks: In what ways can I reach the contemporary audience to arouse interest in Learning the intimate stories of people like my parents.

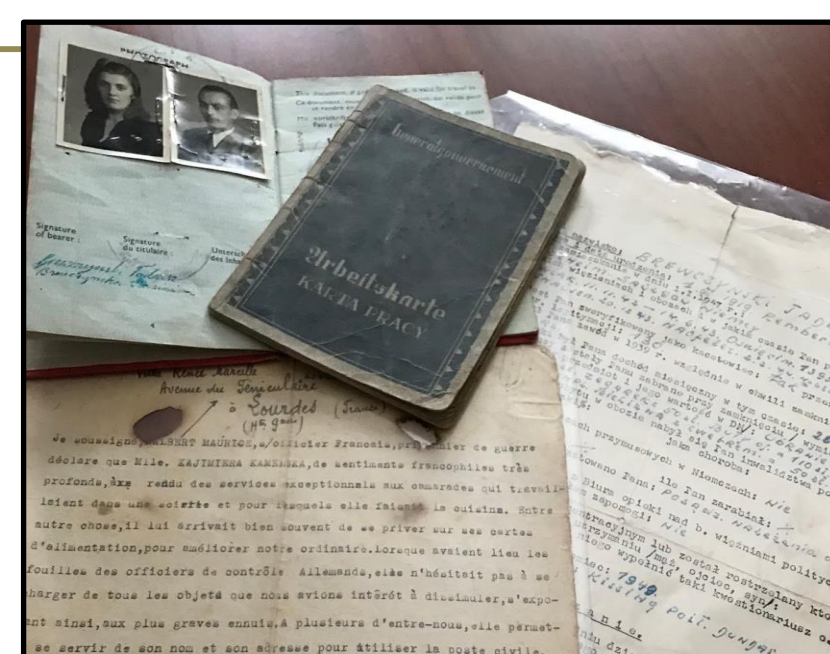


Tracing my father's steps in Auschwitz, May 2018



Ettlinger & Weber sawmill, Krauchenwies, Germany where my mother was a forced/slave laborer. www.deutsche-digital-bibliothek.

## Materials and Methods



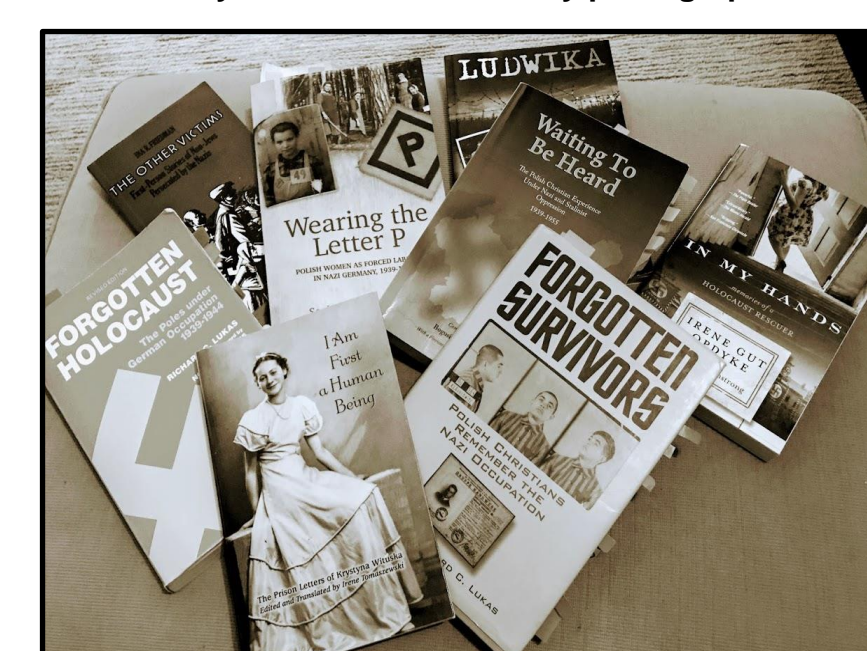
My mother's wartime documents



Brewczynski & Kamelski family photographs



My mother & niece, 1945 Labor camp, Krauchenwies, Germany



My collection of resource books for my research on my parents.

My primary sources for my digital memoir has been my informal conversations with my parents about their experiences. Their recollections, photos, and relevant documents have provided me with the cornerstone of their memoirs.

Included in this collection is my mother's Arbeitskarte booklet that she was mandated to carry with her at all times during the occupation.

An important document written by a French POW officer in the French Resistance group in the labor camp describes her actions to help him and others, including many French women, escape from the Gestapo.

A large portion of my father's concentration camps' documentation was destroyed by the Nazis.

In May 2018, I visited my father's family in Warsaw, Poland and they shared their personal wartime memories. They showed me the poignant places of imprisonment, and especially my paternal grandparents' property now honored with a memorial plaque where Polish patriots hid and died.

In May 2018, I walked the grounds of Auschwitz and Birkenau racing my father's footsteps. At Auschwitz I established a contact with Marta Olko, a guide and museum associate, to provide me with future findings.

In June 2018, I visited Sigmaringen, Saulgau, and Krauchenwies, Germany, where my mother was transported for forced/slave labor.

Academic literature and material has been limited on the victimization of Poles. The books in my collection are referrals for suggested readings, including those authored by survivors or family members of survivors.

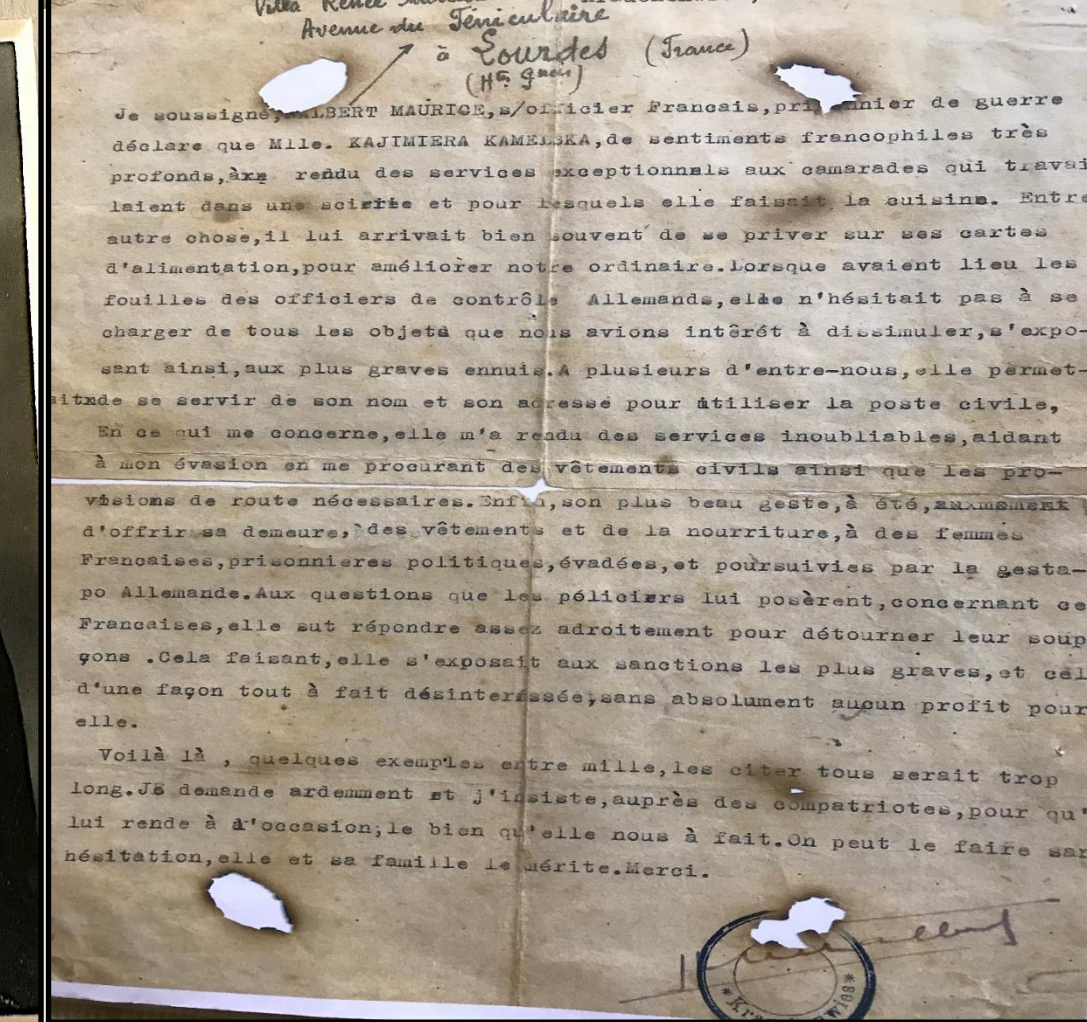
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum research in Washington, D.C., March 2019

International Tracing Service, its-arolsen.org For victims of Nazi persecution and their family members.

My Facebook membership in "The Sons and Daughters of Displaced Persons of World War II and Communism" and "Silent Heroes of the Forgotten Holocaust" are sites where similar family experiences are shared.

My blog – "Kazimiera and Tadeusz: World War II Survivors" was encouraged by my mentor, K.Wills. https://elzbidwell.wixsite.com/website

## Conclusions



World War II ended May 8, 1948 in Europe. Kazimiera & Tadeusz met in July 1945 in a Displaced Persons camp for war refugees in Bad Saulgau, Germany. Six weeks later they were married. The French government paid for the wedding and celebration which lasted a week for her actions to save people at her forced/slave labor camp. Document to the right is a copy of her meritorious heroism.

### "IF NOT ME, THEN WHO?"

- This was my mother's reply when I asked her why she dared to risk her life in many of her actions of saving lives without thought of her own.

"I CRAWLED FROM THE SEWER AND THE GESTAPO WAS WAITING. I RAN TO A BUILDING AND THEN JUMPED FROM ROOF TO ROOF – BUT THEY CAUGHT ME. - A memory flashback from my father.

So-called "positivist" theories of history have insisted on a stable recollection of the discussion of memory. History is a narration of objective facts, dates, and data information. However, memory in the form of narratives often conflict with, or at least complicate, historical.....as Irene Sywenky notes, "postmodern and post structuralist revisions of history, however gave agency to individual subjectivities and multi-perspective approaches to the study of the past" (25)

I discovered that writers of history do not give readers the untold intimate memories of feeling fear, defiance, love, hate, anger, indifference, humiliation, devastation, determination, hopelessness, total resignation, joy, and all the human emotions in time of war that gave the victims the will to live or die.

I found my parents' silence did not mean that the horrors of war vanished. Instead the scars were within as long as they lived, often triggered by these examples:

- scenes in a WW2 movie
- photographs of family and their former homes
- booming sounds reliving the gunfire and bombs
- handfuls of grass, field mice, fallen fruit was a reminder of forbidden food and the hunger
- the scent of lilacs, and the sights of nature gave them hope in their tragedy
- a prayer book that once faith was not allowed to be practiced
- a bathroom shower was a reminder of death for my father

Country	Military	Civilian	Total Deaths
USSR	12 million	17 million	29 million
Poland	597,000	5.86 million	6.27 million
Germany	3.25 million	2.44 million	5.69 million
Yugoslavia	305,000	1.35 million	1.66 million
Romania	450,000	465,000	915,000
Hungary	200,000	600,000	800,000
France	245,000	350,000	595,000
Italy	380,000	153,000	533,000
Great Britain	403,000	92,700	495,000
United States	407,000	6,000	413,000
Czechoslovakia	7,000	315,000	322,000
Holland	13,700	236,000	249,000
Greece	19,000	140,000	159,000
Belgium	76,000	23,000	99,000

These numbers include ethnic groups and Jews.

www. World-war-2.info/statistics/

These numbers may not be accurate because each set of statistics do not agree.

These numbers do not include the survivors of concentration camps, labor camps, etc.

Another discovery in my research has been the difficulty in finding information about the tragedy of Poland and her people despite the fact that Poland was devastated with destruction and loss of 21% of her citizens under Nazi and Soviet persecution.

An astonishing survey in the Washington Post by Julie Zauzmer, April 12, 2018 writes that "two-thirds of millennials and many adults cannot identify what Auschwitz is...and haven't heard of, or not sure whether they have heard about the Holocaust."

In my research for the missing puzzle pieces I have been disappointed in the lack of information about Poles in World War II. In many cases, academic literature and articles refer to the Polish people as "others" or group them as "Slavs". There is so little written about the contributions Poles had made during the war, and the trauma of concentration and slave labor camps, and the Displaced Labor camps and migration to foreign lands.

Nor is there significant information about the Soviet persecution of the Polish families sent to Siberia for slave labor or the mass killings of by Soviets and Nazi of Polish people in all demographics.

It is for these reasons I am determined and passionate to tell my parents' stories in my creative writing web-folio and other memoir formats so that their stories are not forgotten or ignored. The chart above illustrates how many millions of personal and intimate stories cannot be lost forever. I want my parents' stories, and so many other victims and survivors to be forever remembered.

### "IF NOT ME, THEN WHO?"



Elzbieta Antonina Bidwell, daughter of victims and survivors of the forgotten Holocaust.

## References

Family Interviews  
 Knab-Hodowicz, S. (2016). *Wearing the Letter P: Polish Women as Forced Laborers in Nazi Germany, 1939-1945*. New York, NY: Hippocrene Books.  
 Lukas, R. (2005). *Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation 1939-1944*. New York, NY: Hippocrene Books.  
 Sywenky, I. (2015). *Memories of Displacement and Unhomely Spaces: History, Trauma, and the Politics of Spatial Imagination in Ukraine and Poland*. S. Mitroiu (ed). *Life Writing and the Politics of Eastern Europe*, 25-44. London: Palgrave MacMillan.