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We Were Young and at War

The first-hand story of young lives lived and lost in World War II

Sarah Wallis and
Svetlana Palmer

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We Were Young and at War: The first-hand story of young lives lived and lost in World War Two / S. Wallis — «HarperCollins»,

Never before have the diaries and letters of young people from all sides of World War Two been woven together to provide an account of what it was like to grow up amidst the daily struggles and horrors of this devastating war.We Were Young And At War follows the stories of sixteen teenage boys and girls who write with a disarming directness about their reactions to and experiences of a very adult war. They are British, French, American, Japanese, Polish, German and Russian, each with a unique and heart-rending tale to tell.Only two of them are alive today. Some of them fought and died in the war, others starved to death; many were separated from their families. All were forced to grow up quickly, their lives changed beyond all recognition by their experiences.This is their story.

Содержание

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The first-hand story of young lives lived and lost in World War II
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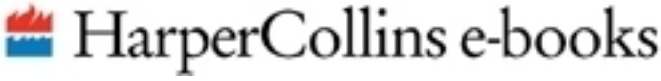

To Miriam, Claude and Hilda
To Ben, Eleanor, Joel, Lukas, Sergei and Tristan

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Preface

While the diary of Anne Frank remains the most famous child's diary the world over, other young people's accounts that survived the Second World War have been largely forgotten, or remain unknown outside their own countries. Yet, written in private, concealed from parental gaze or enemy capture, these faded notebooks and singed papers tell us so much of what it was like to grow up in that war. Intimate and often more direct than those of adults, these diaries were a place to confide and to question, to preserve one's dignity, or maintain independence of spirit and thought.

The diaries and correspondence that follow have been chosen for the uniqueness of the personal narrative and the quality of the writing. Though we initially set out to find diaries that followed the authors through adolescence to the end of the war, we soon realized that, unlike fiction, real diaries couldn't always be made to fit. While some span the entire conflict, others start later, or contain large gaps; a few end abruptly, all too often a measure of the author's short life. Parts of some diaries are missing; it is a miracle some have survived at all. Where we have included letters, many are telling by their omissions, as well as the writer's tone.

Though ordered chronologically, this book does not set out to be a history of the war. Instead, it is driven by the stories of the contributors, framed by historical events and interwoven to bring out the often unexpected parallels and collisions of thoughts, ideas and emotions of those caught up in historic events, sometimes on opposite sides of the conflict, or thousands of miles apart. None of the diarists can be said to be representative of their nation: some succumbed to the ideas they were fed by adults around them or by the state, others confound our expectations; many of them perhaps shed light on why it is that wars are fought by the young.

After years of gathering, translating and researching these stories, we feel very close to our diarists. This is due not only to the length of time we have spent with them but also to the nature of their testimonies, so candid and so often courageous; they tackle the unpalatable, and reveal so much of themselves.

Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, London, 2009

Part One

CHAPTER ONE The German Invasion of Poland September-October 1939

'We'll see what will happen to me…'

Throughout the summer of 1939 governments across Europe hoped war could be prevented, or at least delayed. Though France and Britain did not respond when Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938 and Czech Sudetenland in September, they drew a line at Hitler's claims on Poland. Hoping their alliance would serve as a deterrent, the two countries promised to come to Poland's aid if Germany invaded. Their calculation was proved wrong. At 4:45 a.m. on 1 September 1939, 1.5 million German soldiers and 2,700 tanks began to cross Polish borders.

Having regained its independence at the end of the First World War, Poland was a lasting symbol of Germany's humiliating defeat and territorial losses incurred as a result of the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty. For nearly twenty years Poland had been home to 700,000 ethnic Germans, but animosity was rife, intensified when thousands of Germans were forcibly moved inland in the run up to the war, lest they assist the invader. Now Hitler urged his commanders to liberate their fellow 'Aryans' and send 'every man, woman and child of Polish descent and language to their deaths, without pity or remorse'. Once conquered, Poland would be depopulated and resettled with the 'pure Aryan master race'.

A country made up of many ethnic minorities, Poland was also home to 3 million Jews, the largest Jewish community in Europe. On receiving news of the German invasion, thousands fled their homes, aware of Hitler's threats to 'annihilate the Jewish race in Europe'. While his neighbours fled, fifteen-year-old Polish Jewish teenager Dawid Sierakowiak and his family decided to stay put in their home town of Łódź in central Poland. With no savings to pay for any means of escape, and unsure which way to go, they decided to face their fate in the city.

Sixteen-year-old Polish teenager Edward Niesobski, from the small border town of Ostrów in western Poland, knew war was imminent. As a member of the Polish Scout Movement, which promoted the nation's independent spirit among the young, Edward had been undergoing regular paramilitary training for months, expecting to defend his country when the time came.

Dawid Sierakowiak recorded his thoughts and experiences in a diary he had started earlier that summer, but Edward Niesobski began to write only on the day of the German invasion itself. While waiting for instructions from his scout leader on the plan of action and his own role, Edward recorded the stark contrast between his romantic image of war and the actual events on the day.

1 September 1939

We've been expecting something big to happen all week. People have been gathering in groups all over town, talking; reservists have been called up; soldiers have been confiscating horses and cars. We are not going to let the enemy take us without a fight. Our scout group has been on full alert too. On Wednesday afternoon posters were put up, warning citizens to make sure they're fully prepared. Mobilization began on Thursday. My mother and siblings have already left the city, but I'm staying here with my dad. A siren went off at about 5 a.m. this morning; then came the air raids. It has started. The Germans are trying to take over our Poznań province, Silesia and Pomerania. The whole country is rising up as one today to fight them.

German planes are circling in the sky like black hawks. Their drone is the voice of death. This morning I saw large groups of people crossing over from the other side of the border. They said they'd been attacked last night by their German neighbours! That's why they left their homes and came over to our side of the border, some of them only half-dressed. Some are on bikes, others on horses and carts loaded with their most precious possessions. I'm not all that surprised some people who live along the border are now declaring that they are German. Everyone has the right to say who they are, and if you're German, you're German. But the thing is, these are the same Germans who've been eating our bread for the past 20 years, who have lived in our country all this time. They tried to stop us from rebuilding Poland after the last war, and now they're aiming guns at our chests, guns that they've kept hidden all this time. Well we, the Polish people, are not going to forgive them. They must have had so much anger inside. But I'm not afraid of war because I believe we are going to win and I believe that after a thousand years of fighting with our worst Western enemy we are going to destroy them, once and for all. *'The Germans won't spit in our face, and they won't make our children German,'* as the song goes. No longer shall our brothers on the other side of the border live in pain under the German yoke. So I am actually very happy.

The entire Ostrów administration has been evacuated by train. Most people have left too. Our army is moving to new positions. It looks like Ostrów is going to be surrendered without a fight. I'm not really worried about it though, I am sure it must be part of our military plan…

It's the afternoon now and I have packed most of my things, just in case. I didn't want to leave the city at first, but as soon as Dad got back he got all his stuff together, even his fishing rod, and convinced me that we should catch the last train.

I know we'll never give up, however hard things get. Even so, what happened next made me wonder. In the evening, people were no longer just leaving, they were running for their lives. Around 11 p.m. all remaining soldiers started to retreat, blowing up every bridge behind them. People are fleeing with no idea where they are going. We're told to run away, but where to, and why?…

…We made it onto the last train. From the last carriage, they destroyed the tracks behind us. People are shocked by the amount of guns and ammunition the ethnic Germans had on them. Where did they hide them all? How come our military hadn't spotted them? We were looking for little clues, but missed the big ones, it seems. And now we see the results of our carelessness. The sky behind us is red. We can hear shooting in the distance, and we are nearly in Czekanow. And here we stay until 3 a.m.

As German land and air forces attacked simultaneously from the south, west and north, Edward and his father fled east, in the direction of Warsaw.

2 September 1939

In the morning we pull into Kalisz, but everyone's being evacuated from there as well. Our train is chased by German planes all day long. I wasn't scared of them until I saw what they could do. I saw charred skeletons in burned-out trains—they were people once. I saw people with no arms and legs, I saw a head roll into a ditch, I saw human insides hanging off telephone wires. When you hear the moans of the dying, and children crying, and then just moments later you see a plane right above you drop its bombs, well all you can do is wait for death. You no longer care about the dying, or the orphans. It's them today, but it might be your turn tomorrow. I got very sad thinking I might have to die far away from the people I love. That was the only thing I cared about.

There have been funny scenes today too. Every time we got bombed this young couple jumped off the train and ran into the potato fields, because someone had apparently told them to get at least 300 metres away from the train when there's a raid. So every time the train started moving again, they had to run as fast as they could to get back on. We stayed the night in Sieradz.

3 September 1939

Queues of carts pulled by oxen in the streets, everyone is running from the Germans, the villagers are more afraid of them than of the devil himself, or just as much. In any case, the devil is always dressed up as a German in all the pictures they see. Where are all these people headed? They have no idea. How many will come back to find their family home in ruins?

At a station after Sieradz our train took on the first wounded. These people covered in blood are the first crop of the harvest of war—and to think, all of it caused by just one person, Hitler. When you cut wood, there are always splinters, as the saying goes.

Our train stops on the approach to Łódź. People look up to see if they can spot the bearers of death in the skies, coming to turn our carriages into coffins. And then, there they are. First we hear their engines, then we see them, like black hawks. They are flying towards Łódź airport, it seems. We can see three of our Polish silver birds chasing them. The heavy hawks rise up and up, slowly. There are nine of them. Our birds approach from the sides, two of them sit on the German tails. After a while, two of the German planes fall with smoke pouring out; the rest fly away. We all feel very happy. Hope fills our hearts again as we see what our silver birds can do to their hawks. The train begins to move, but just as we get to Łódź station, we're under attack once again. We run for cover. From our shelter underground we can hear the din of anti-aircraft guns, the sound of airplanes and explosions. This might be our grave, we'll be buried alive if it collapses on our heads. This could be the end.

We hear a radio announcement that England has declared war on Germany, but the news comes as a terrible shock—why only now? The Germans have already crossed the Varta river, thousands of cities have been bombed, thousands of German planes are hovering over the whole of our country. You were supposed to come and help Poland right from the start! The sky is bright red in the north, where the spirit factory is on fire. We sleep at the train station.

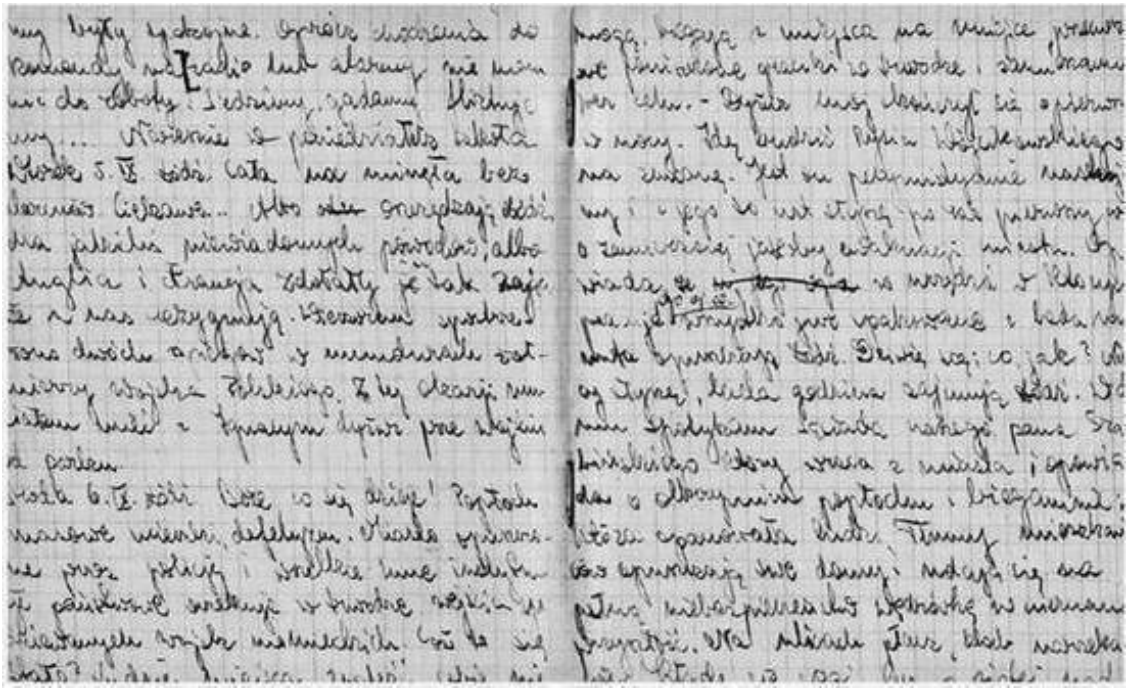
A few blocks away from Łódź railway station, fifteen-year-old Dawid Sierakowiak was also sheltering from the German air raid.

3 September 1939

Half past midnight, an air-raid siren. I curse like a trooper. It's cold, dark and horrible outside. In the shelter we mess around a bit, but as usual the women shriek at us, 'This is war, you know—it's not a party!' We go out onto the street. We'd rather face the cold and the bombs than be with those old hags! Long live humour, down with hysteria!

The siren stops, we go to bed, but at five in the morning another one goes off. I grope for some clothes (it's cold, I'm half asleep) and bolt for the fire point. All quiet until nine, the siren has stopped. After that I'm on duty. It warms up. People everywhere are making piles of earth around their cellars. They're trampling all over the grass, digging it up with spades. The liaisons from our building get together, we chat, tell stupid jokes, then we all chip in. Three of us go out searching and come back with 300 grams of seeds. We share them out equally, offering some to the girls and any small children who are around. Suddenly, a siren sounds. We go downstairs for cover, I read out my comedy sketches. It gets stuffy so we go up to the third floor. Suddenly there's good news. It's reported on the radio that England has declared war on Germany. We shout for joy and run out to share the good news, in spite of the siren. The radio broadcasts 'God save the King', 'The Marseillaise' and 'Poland is not yet lost' [Polish National Anthem]. It feels good.

After dinner—another siren. The first big air raid on Łódź. Twelve planes in triangles of three have broken through the defence lines and are bombing the city. We stand in front of the entrance to our block of



Page from Dawid's diary, September 1939.

flats and watch the battle. Little clouds of smoke appear around the planes from the shots fired by our anti-aircraft artillery. The squadron manages to evade them, then we see clouds of smoke coming from somewhere in the town centre. Incendiary bombs! Soon we can see smoke in other parts too. All of a sudden we see the planes coming towards us. Terrified, fighting the urge to watch, we take cover on the staircase, then come out again, repeating this about twenty times in five minutes. Three planes fly overhead, it looks like we're about to be bombed, but no. We breathe a sigh of relief. The next three pass over and leave us in peace too. The rest of the planes disappear. The danger is

over, for now at least. We tell the terrified, distressed women in the shelter what has happened. Some of them are holding small children in their arms. It's a truly moving scene. Suddenly, a neighbourhood liaison in a gas mask runs in and reports that gas has been thrown in several places in the city. Panic sets in. The lucky owners of gas masks put them on, others take out their gauze pads. Outside it gets cold and windy. We beat the gong as an alarm. Tumult, fear, commotion. At last everything calms down. The gas warning turns out to be a false alarm.

This evening's news is as welcome as this morning's—France and Australia have joined the war! And the Polish soldiers on Westerplatte are still holding on, not letting the Krauts advance a step further, even though there are many more of them. And the station in Zbszyń has been taken back from the Germans! We say goodnight and go to bed full of joy.

4 September 1939

Two sirens during the night. It was bitterly cold. We crowded together in the shelter, warming one another as we slept. This whole war business is starting to get tiring and boring. This morning I slept until ten. It was nice and sunny, after the cold night. After the third siren we got some shocking but good news. The Germans torpedoed an English passenger ship carrying several hundred rich and influential American citizens. Eight hundred people were killed! Roosevelt has already said that the United States will not stay neutral in the war, even before this. What will he say now? All the air raid sirens today were false alarms. I have nothing to do. We sit and talk, we flirt with the girls… School on Monday, at last!

Expecting further news of Allied assistance, Dawid remained in Łódź. However, President Roosevelt responded by reassuring his citizens that America would remain neutral, despite the attack. The next day, Edward Niesobski tried to locate the rest of his family.

4 September 1939

This morning I started looking for my mum. There are twelve villages in the Mazev district, so I have asked around to try and find her address. My dad took a train back to Łódź to join the army. There are checkpoints at every bridge. I couldn't get any information at the first place I was sent. The town hall is struggling to cope with the numbers of refugees who need housing, and they're not working very hard at it either. There was a big poster at the town hall, calling on soldiers to join up. It said our eternal enemy was threatening our right to life and to freedom, and called upon everyone to fight. It made me feel sure we are going to win.

My search for my mum brought no results today. She wasn't in any of the villages I've been to so far, so I decided to stay the night at the fifth one. I am starting to lose all hope of ever seeing her again.

5 September 1939

I went back to Mazev this morning to look for Mum. There were only four villages left to search. In the afternoon I borrowed a bike and cycled towards Leczyca to look for her. I must have been going for about 5 miles when I suddenly heard someone calling my name. I turned around—and there was my mum!!! My search is over at last. How lucky to have found each other again!

Two hours later we got back to Osendowice, where Mum's been staying. The first thing I did was scrub myself clean. I hadn't had a proper wash since September 1st! It was already dark when I heard a voice, not just any voice, it was my dad!!!! He came looking for us, all the way from Łódź, and finally we are all back together again. My sister Krysia was happiest of all. She must have thought the Germans had eaten us all up. She was wrong of course, because Germans wouldn't eat lean meat like ours.

As the German army approached Łódź, the Polish government ordered all fit men between the ages of sixteen and sixty to march to Warsaw's defence. Fifteen-year-old Dawid, just a year too young to be mobilized, stayed behind on air-raid duty.

6 September 1939

God! What's going on! Panic, mass exodus, defeatism. The city has been deserted by police and other state institutions and is just waiting in terror for the entry of German troops. What's happened to people? They just can't stay put, running around in fear and confusion, pointlessly shifting worn out pieces of furniture. My duty ends at one in the morning. I go and wake up Rysiek for the next shift. He's in a pessimistic mood, it's from him I hear the so-called plans to evacuate the city. He says that in the office where his father works everything is packed up and that they'll be leaving Łódź any moment. But how? I'm told the Germans are going to take the city any moment now.

Run, run away, further and further away, step by step, wade, cry, forget—anything to be as far as possible from the danger. My dear, oversensitive mother is showing self-control. She comforts Mrs Grodzieńska and talks her out of her crazy plan to run away, gradually calming down the mass psychosis of a crowd about to be slaughtered. Father's losing his mind, he doesn't know what to do. Other Jewish neighbours come to talk. They talk about the order given to all those fit to carry arms to leave the city so as not be sent by the enemy to labour camps. They don't know what to do. They deliberate, then decide to stay put. People are leaving all the time: hordes of men are walking to a rallying point in Brzeziny. Reservists and conscripts are leaving the city. Behind them, women with bedding, clothing and food in bundles on their backs. There are small children with them. All our commanding officers have left the city and their posts, so we appointed ourselves as a joke and kept up the pretence until noon.

8 September 1939

Łódź has been occupied. It's been quiet all day today, too quiet. This afternoon I'm sitting in the park drawing a portrait of one of the girls when suddenly there's terrifying news. Łódź has surrendered! German patrols are in Piotrkowska Street. Fear, surprise…surrendered without a fight? Perhaps it's just a tactical manoeuvre. We'll see. In the meantime all talk has stopped, the streets are empty, faces and hearts have hardened into stern severity and hatred. Mr Grabiński comes back from town and describes how the local Germans have been greeting their compatriots. The Grand Hotel, where the generals are to stay, is bedecked with garlands of flowers. Civilians—boys and girls—are jumping into military cars with the joyous cry 'Heil Hitler!', speaking German loudly in the streets. People who used to be quiet, patriotic and civil are now showing their true faces. The street lamps have been switched back on in the evening. No danger of air raids now.

That night, as German troops were welcomed with fireworks and dancing in Łódź, hundreds of Jews were burnt to death in a Bedzin synagogue, just over 100 miles south of the city. Dozens of Polish towns were in flames, but despite German 'cleansing measures' against thousands of Poles and Jews, Britain and France ruled out coming to Poland's immediate assistance, themselves under pressure to mobilize for war.

9 September 1939

In the morning an announcement was posted in Polish and German (German first!) calling for calm when the German troops enter the city. Signed: Citizens' Committee of Łódź. Later, I went a bit further out to watch the troops arrive. Lots of cars, the soldiers look quite ordinary, their uniforms different from the Polish ones though—they are steel green. Their faces are self-confident, swashbuckling. The conquerors! A car full of high-ranking officers with severe faces passes by, quick as lightning. People are quiet, they look on impassively. Hush! We go back to our blocks and sit around on benches, talking and joking. What the heck!

13 September 1939

Rosh Hashanah holiday [the day before Jewish New Year] is sad, drab, same as any other day. The same dry bread with a small piece of herring (only the herring makes it different from any other day). The order came today that the shops are to be open tomorrow. For Jews, this is the worst blow for a long time—the shops open on Rosh Hashanah! And the synagogues are to stay closed. Nowhere to pray together for mercy, nothing. All our basic freedoms are being taken away from us. I'm not a traditionalist and I always thought it was liberating to duck out of prayers, but these orders are painful to Jewish people. Now I understand what faith gives to believers—they are at peace, serene. To take away a man's only consolation, his faith, and to forbid a life-affirming religion, it's an unforgivable crime. The Jewish people won't let Hitler get away with it. Our revenge will be terrible.

15 September 1939

This is the first time mum went to buy bread and came back without. She gets up at five a.m. and stands in the queue until seven, when the bakery opens and gives out one-kilo loaves. That's how it's been for a week now. Today there was no more bread when it was her turn. Maybe one has to start queuing at one in the morning. In town, Hitler's agents take Jewish people out of the food queues, so that poor Jews who have no [Polish] maid are condemned to death from starvation. Twentieth-century German humanitarianism! The Rabinowiczes and their neighbours came back today from their wanderings. They look terrible. Their two sons were on another cart and they haven't come back. Nobody knows where they are. They talk of exchanges of fire, searching for places to sleep, going on foot for miles, dangers and so on. It makes my flesh creep. There are funny moments too. Humour can be found anywhere. Laughter in the midst of calamity.

With Warsaw itself under continuous artillery fire and merciless aerial bombing, after two weeks on the road Edward's family decided to head home. Coming across a quiet village south of the capital, they stopped for a few days of rest.

15 September 1939

Last night the Germans occupied all the places we have abandoned. They sent their cars in first, which moved pretty fast along the pavements so as to avoid the sand we put on the roads to slow them down.

They've set up camp next to the forest, surrounded by machine guns and cars. Their uniforms are made out of a greyish-green material. Their helmets are very smooth. They wear swastikas and eagles and they are in black and white, the German national colours.

People in the local villages have changed sides quick as a flash; they've turned German overnight. They bow when they see a German officer in the street. The Germans look down on them with scorn, but they don't seem to mind. German soldiers go round asking for cigarettes and tobacco, and the village girls flirt with them, dressed up in their Sunday best. I try to avoid seeing any of this, so I sleep in the stables.

17 September 1939

We went to bed in our clothes but couldn't sleep because of the shooting. By the morning German planes had pushed our infantry back into the forest. They shot at our soldiers and civilians shot at them too. It's all a complete mess. In the evening I decided I had to get some sleep. I was too tired to care about what might happen.

While Edward missed the events of that day, in Łódź, Dawid recorded what news he could, but admitted to being confused.

17 September 1939

It turned out today that our gymnasium has actually been disbanded. Gymnasium Number 1 is being merged with the girls' school. The buildings have been occupied. I feel despair overtaking me. In the afternoon I was out walking with [my friend] Jadzia when Marek ran up to us with strange, terrifying news. Russia has broken the non-aggression pact with Poland and has occupied our eastern areas. We still don't have the details. I couldn't understand anything at first. Later on, German, Soviet, English and Polish radio gradually clarified the situation. The Soviet government has mobilized its troops as it felt threatened (so much for their non-aggression pact with the Germans). Since there is no Polish government in Warsaw any more, Russia feels obliged to defend Belarus and the Ukraine against Germany. The Polish High Command has declared that it will not fight with Russia (so this act of aggression is clearly convenient in spite of everything) but will concentrate all its forces against the Germans. And the English radio commented that evidently the Russian army will cooperate with the Polish army. So what's going on? Could it be that Russia has remembered that Nazism is its worst enemy, after all?

Contrary to Dawid's hopes, Soviet troops began to occupy eastern Poland in accordance with the secret addendum to the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed in August 1939. As Poland was split into two spheres of influence, all the Polish Army's hopes of regrouping in the east for another offensive were dashed. In occupied Łódź, Dawid enjoyed the return of at least some signs of normality.

19 September 1939

I went to school by tram in a clean uniform (I had to walk back, and will have to walk tomorrow, no money for the tram). There are fifteen girls and eighteen boys—from both gymnasia. We had three lessons, same as yesterday. Revision, mostly. We didn't get any reports. There were a few new teachers, not many. We don't know if we are going to be taught with the girls or separately, because it's a squeeze. If separately, we'll probably be the afternoon shift.

At five in the afternoon, I listened to Hitler on the radio. He spoke from '*die befreite Stadt Danzig*' [German, 'the liberated city of Danzig', or Gdańsk in Polish] after an ovation from the crowd. That speech showed he doesn't deserve his reputation as a great statesman. He threw himself around, screamed, insulted, pleaded, buttered people up, but most of all he lied and lied. He lied that Poland had started the war, he lied about the persecution of Germans in Poland ('*Barbaren!*'). He lied about his good peaceful intentions, etc. Then he came out with a string of insults directed at the Polish authorities, Churchill, Cooper (Duff) and Eden. He talked about his desire for a deal with England and France. He talked about the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles, saying that Poland will never exist in the borders decided by the Treaty. He said that the English effort to overthrow the ruling German government would never succeed—the best proof we've heard that the English are seriously attempting such a thing. At the end, he talked about his good relations with Russia (?…) and the impossibility of a German-Russian conflict. He ended his speech with a few phrases, full of pathos, about Gdańsk.

Three days later, Edward once again passed through Łódź, this time on his way home.

22 September 1939

The city doesn't look like there is a war on; it's back to normal. Schools have been open again since 11 September. There are lots of German posters on the walls and Hitler's flags all over. I feel like a stranger in my own country. There's not much food in Łódź and people spend hours queuing for potatoes. We walk from Łódź to Kalisz.

23 September 1939

We spend the night at the train station with 300 other people, waiting for a train which never comes. It finally arrives at about 3 p.m. It moves very slowly and I can see the wrecks of burned-out trains, and some freshly repaired bridges. We reach Kalisz at 8 p.m., where we wait for an hour. From there, we go straight on to Ostrów. At 3:30 a.m., after three weeks on the move, I am back at home. Everything is just as we left it, because our aunt lived there while we were away. The first thing we do is have a bath. You can imagine what we looked like at the end of our 'adventure'!

Edward's diary breaks off here. Within days, Poland surrendered and his home town of Ostrów was annexed into the Third Reich. As Polish language and culture were banned, all Polish citizens were subject to an intensive programme of Germanization. While the fate of Łódź and its 250,000-strong Jewish community remained undecided, Dawid described the immediate changes in the life of his neighbourhood.

3 October 1939

Though it is just about possible for most clerks, workers and shopkeepers to go back to their work, it's harder for Jews. Business people, shop owners, middlemen, merchants, etc., all are too afraid to go out in case they are picked up for forced labour and so lose their livelihood. They try selling things door-to-door, like most of our neighbours do—stockings, bread, sugar, knitted clothes, etc. Everyone has something to sell, the goods pass though the hands of dozens of middlemen, wholesalers and traders, but none of this can save the Jewish people from a rapid slide into poverty. My father has no work, he is just suffocating at home. We have no money either. A total fiasco!

4 October 1939

Unfortunately, I haven't managed to avoid the miserable fate of other Jewish people—forced labour. Some older people talked me into going to school along Wólczańska Street—a shorter route, and I went that way yesterday: there were swastikas on all the houses, lots of German cars, masses of soldiers and local Germans wearing swastikas. I managed to get through it yesterday, and today, emboldened, I went the same way. Near Andrzeja Street a German pupil ran up to me with a big stick in his hands and shouted;'*Komm arbeiten! In die Schule darfst du nicht gehen!*' [Come to work! You can't go to school!]. I didn't protest—I knew that a student card wouldn't help. He took me to a square where some Jews had been put to work picking leaves off the ground. The sadist wanted to force me to climb some 2-metre high fence, but seeing that I wouldn't do it, he went away. The work in the square was supervised by a soldier, who also had a big stick, and crudely ordered me to fill puddles with sand. I've never been so humiliated, I saw the smiling mugs of passersby laughing, enjoying the misfortune of others. The stupid, abysmally stupid louts! It's they who should be ashamed, our tormentors. Humiliation inflicted by force is not humiliation! But anger, a helpless rage boils inside anyone forced to do this stupid work while being taunted. There is only one answer: revenge! After half an hour's work, the soldier called all the Jews (some of whom had their caps turned back to front 'for fun'), lined us up, ordered one of us to take back the spades and the rest to go home. Playing at being magnanimous!

I arrived at school in the middle of the first lesson, late for the first time in my entire school career. The teachers can't do anything about it: 'for reasons outside the Jews' control'. I went home the old way, through Kilinski Street. At home mum was frightened to hear how I'd been forced to work. In the evening we found out that one of the Germans living in our street 'keeps an eye' on the Jews in our block of flats. This really upset my poor nervous parents. Meanwhile, at school, they've announced that pupils who don't pay a sum of money will be barred. What's going to happen to me?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.