

"They were Heroes Too"

Based on the testimony of Zbigniew Mankowski, a Polish Righteous Among the Nations, 1929-2020.

Wojtek Ziemilski, grandson of Dr. Benedykt Ziemilski who perished in the Holocaust, shared his story on the 2000 March of the Living program.

Edited by Eli Rubenstein



As a teenager during the Second World War, I lived with my parents and two elder brothers in one of the then suburbs of Warsaw called Fort Mokotow, which was then filled with Luftwaffe officers billeted in neighboring Polish houses. Our villa stood in a pretty garden, full of greenery and flowers, surrounded by a fence. In front of the house there were fields and gardens, in which we, and others, planted potatoes and various kinds of vegetables to survive. An almost idyllic scene one would say. However, all around us was raging one of the cruelest wars in history.

Zbigniew Mankowski

For several months the bell used to ring at our front door. First seldom, then more and more often. But looking out of the window we did not see anybody at the gate. Only some invisible hands put on the low fence wall two empty cans, with a length of string fastened to them serving as handles. But in those days, it was easy for us to guess what it meant. They were placed there by starving Jews in the hopes they would be filled up with food by some kind souls.

Whatever extra food we had we shared with a Jewish woman who was concealed for two and a half years in our home and obviously had no ration cards. Still, my mother poured some soup into one of the cans and she filled the other one with rich brown bread and potatoes even though the bread was rationed, and we were very, very short of it all the time during the war.

Replacing the filled tins on the same place on the fence, I first had to look carefully around to make sure no German was watching me. However, we very well knew that from the nearby potato field two anxious pairs of eyes were watching my every movement. Those eyes, serious, alert, frightened yet courageous, belonged to children no more than 6 and 8 years old. Every day they left the bleak and desolate Gesia, Nalewki, Mila, and many other streets of the ghetto, and then, stealing through some breach in the wall which separated them from the world of the living, they crept along the still sunny and seemingly peaceful district of our Mokotow - their daily Golgotha.

Dressed in rags, some oversize coats, much too big for their size and age, with large pockets, barefooted to be able to move noiselessly, crouching almost to the ground, they leaped out of their shelter in the thicket and in a flash snatched the tins and vanished out of sight.

Discreetly observing them through the curtains I noticed that they did not eat what they received; it was meant for others hungrier than them. Despite their tender age they seemed no longer to be mere children, they were mature beyond years, aware of what they were doing. They were very careful as they realized that their presence could bring danger and disaster to our whole family. They did not or could not think of what lay in store for them.

This lasted a few months - not every day - but every few days the boys would come. We had almost become friends, even though we hadn't exchanged a word.

One day they stopped coming...

Sometime later the wind from the northern part of Warsaw brought to our garden with smoke, pieces of partly burnt paper. I noticed on them traces of some strange, at that time unknown to me, letters and signs. Those were Jewish letters, Jewish characters.

The Warsaw Ghetto was on fire. I never saw my two Jewish friends again.

All this took place during the festive days of Osterfest, Passover, Easter of 1943 - holidays that should have brought joy and peace to people of all nations...

[Then Zbigniew Mankowski raised a medal and, holding the medal near his heart, told the students, "Years later I received this medal from Yad Vashem, the most beautiful medal one can imagine. You see, most people receive medals for taking lives, but this medal was given for saving lives.

I have received many awards in my life, but this one is the most precious to me.]

When, after nearly 50 years, I had the honor of receiving the distinction of "Righteous Among the Nations", I shared in my mind a part of that honor with those anonymous Jewish boys, heroes of those years who will forever remain engraved in my memory.

They tried to save people too.

[Based on a letter written by Zbigniew Mankowski and his personal address to Canadian Jewish students visiting Poland in 1999. A version of this story was read during the 2000 March of the Living ceremony in Auschwitz Birkenau by Wojtek Ziemilski, grandson of Dr. Benedykt Ziemilski who was murdered in Majdanek in 1942. For more information on Zbigniew Mankowski see:

<https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/en/news/vale-zbigniew-mankowski-19292020>]



*Wojtek Ziemilski, grandson of
Dr. Benedykt Ziemilski*