

The Tarnow Train Station Bombing by Ruth Chevion

In my dad's home before the war, they had a radio.

On Friday August 25, 1939, that radio broadcast the news that Russia and Germany had reached a nonaggression pact, meaning that Russia would not come to Poland's defense in the event of a German invasion. Worse news for Poland, and for the Jews of Poland, could not be imagined. Three and a half million Jews were living in Poland. It was the largest Jewish population in the world except for the United States. Poland had only a small army. Powerful Russia had been the only realistic hope to stop Hitler.

Weeks earlier, anticipating the possibility that Germany would invade Poland, my grandfather had bought a bus in preparation to flee to Russia with his sons and fellow Kehila members. The only question that remained after hearing the shocking news of a pact between Russia and Germany was when: when would Germany invade, and when should the bus depart.

On Monday August 28, 1939, three days after the pact was announced, my dad was arrested for bombing the Tarnów train station. He didn't do it.

My dad had taken the train from Kraków to Tarnów, a trip of about 60 miles that usually took about 45 minutes.

The train was late that night. It had been scheduled to come in at 11:00 pm, but it didn't come in until 11:15 pm. Perhaps for that reason, the engineer did not linger. The train stayed in the station for exactly one minute, and only one single passenger disembarked - my father, Pelek Fessel.

Minutes after the train pulled out, a huge explosion rocked the station, blowing bricks and debris in every direction, making a noise heard throughout the city, and destroying one third of the train station. The explosion killed 20 people and injured 35 more.

Though it was dark, Pelek was spotted by the station guards hurrying to leave the station. His haste, on top of the fact that he was the only passenger to get off the train, was seen as evidence of guilt. He was immediately arrested and charged with the bombing. They grabbed his arms, handcuffed him, took his suitcase, and pushed him up against a wall. My father would later say they were going to shoot him right there, firing squad style.

But they didn't shoot him. They summoned the Tarnów police. This was a great stroke of luck, because when the Chief of Police arrived at the station, he recognized my father immediately. This was not my dad's first brush with the law. The Chief recognized him as the leader of the melée at the Tarnów swimming pool a few months before, when a bunch of Jewish boys had started a fight for the right to swim in the municipal pool.

The Chief summoned dad's father Elchanan Fessel to the station. Some conversation ensued. Dad's papers were inspected. He was questioned. My father was released.

I don't know what the Chief and my grandfather said to each other, but interestingly, the Chief of Police promptly left Tarnów for Russia right about the same time grandfather left with his bus, and also re-appeared later in the same town where the bus landed.

The true perpetrator of the bombing turned out to be a German agent named Antonin Guzy. It was one of a series of similar attacks done by German agents inside Poland, to disrupt communications as a prelude to the invasion.

Did you wonder at all, dear reader, while reading this story, what a 17-year-old boy was doing by himself on a train, late at night, and what he was doing in Kraków, some 60 miles away? Why wasn't he home preparing for school like his brother and sister? The answer is that my dad had been expelled from high school. He had gone on a three-day kayaking trip with his friend Benek Lipiner without permission from his parents, and without informing his school. As a consequence, he was sent to live with relatives in Kraków. Elchahan must have called him home that night because they were preparing to leave town.

It used to be a joke in my family that my father almost started WWII. But it's no joke to say that one thing leads to another. Who knows what part this strange incident of the Tarnów train station bombing played in Elchahan's decision as to when to leave. As it turned out, they left just in time. The Germans invaded with tanks and planes four days later.



Photo of the Tarnów train station right after the bombing, courtesy of Artur Stasiek.

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