



WINNER
of the
National Seniors
Literary Prize

NO HEIL HITLER!

PAUL CIESLAR

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Proudly published and printed in Australia by
Signs Publishing
Warburton, Victoria.

This book was
Edited by Nathan Brown and Sara Thompson
Proofread by Lindy Schneider
Designed by Kym Jackson
Cover and internal photographs provided by Paul Cieslar
Cover design by Shane Winfield
Typeset in Berkeley Book 11.5/14.5

ISBN 978 1 925044 10 2 (print edition)
ISBN 978 1 925044 11 9 (ebook edition)

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[The Golden Polish Autumn](#)

[Life Before](#)

[The War Begins](#)

[World War II Hits Home](#)

[Under New Management](#)

[The Reich Tightens its Grip](#)

[Our Church Goes Underground](#)

[The History of our Story](#)

[The Story of Our Family](#)

[From Bad to Worse at School](#)

[The Nazis Come to Call](#)

[Sucked into the War](#)

[The Worst Raid](#)

[Ruben Risks His Life](#)

[No Heil Hitler!](#)

[How I Became A Shepherd](#)

[The Winter of My Discontent](#)

[Victory Beyond Belief](#)

[Sheep are Surprisingly Bright](#)

[Toward the Whirlpools of Death](#)

[“Mama, Help Me!”](#)

[The Mystery Woman](#)

[The End of Shepherding](#)

[The Black Wall—and Worse](#)

[Józef Escapes](#)

[The Worst Day for Our Family](#)

[The Mystery Train](#)

[The Axmann Cometh](#)

[In the Service of the Führer](#)

[Those Who Shall be Damned](#)

[Training Becomes More Serious](#)

[The Day of Glory Has Arrived!](#)

[Put Not Thy Trust in Oxen!](#)

[On the Run](#)

[More Leaps of Faith](#)
[Nerves of Rope](#)
[Bravery of the Night](#)
[The Final Casualties of a Senseless War](#)
[The Day the Russians Came](#)
[Ruben's Strange Christmas Gift](#)
[A Visit to Auschwitz](#)
[A Complex of Fear](#)
[Angel of a Ruined Paradise](#)
[Suddenly, the World is Different](#)
[Loved—and Lost](#)
[At the Seminary](#)
[My Early Ministry](#)
[I Learned to Forgive](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Some Important People](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)

PROLOGUE

My only excuse for writing this book is that everything in it happened. I am writing this for my family—but if anyone else would care to look over their shoulder and read about the strange events in my life, they are welcome to do so. This is the story of my family—the family I grew up in—during World War II particularly. I believe it is a story that deserves to be written down.

What I have written is my chronicle of life under the Nominal Church in the pre-war Republic of Poland, the time of the Third Reich and the Communist era. It was a world where defiance led to a quick and unpleasant death; but compliance led to misery. In the middle of all of this evil, for such it was, my own family was the happiest that ever lived. To have been a part of that family was simply a privilege.

Is anything left out? Yes, some things are specifically omitted. This is because some of the material concerns events that—even seven decades later—are so controversial that to raise these points could cause negative feelings. Some names are changed for diplomatic reasons. But, with regard to myself in this book, you have the whole story.

I do want to write it and want to do so very much. The misery and destruction around us was of historic proportions. My homeland of Upper Silesia is very beautiful and yet we who lived there saw some of the worst crimes in the history of humanity. We were ordinary people born in exactly the wrong country at precisely the wrong time. That we survived with our lives, our families and our bodies intact is evidence of God's providential victory—so my family believes.

Like many true stories, you will find that some episodes do not make sense according to any logic. Where these seemingly incomprehensible events occur I have not attempted to explain them. Quite honestly, your guess or interpretation is as good as my own. Perhaps strangest of all, there are four people in this story who bear the name Paweł Cieslar. Two were members of my family, another was my boss when I was a shepherd.

These Paweł Cieslars were delighted and in small part amazed to survive the war. A fourth was taken to the concentration camp in Auschwitz.

I do not seek or accept any pity for the things I lived through. Ultimately the horrors and treachery brought me face to face with a love of such redemptive power that few human beings have ever experienced it. I have had the privilege of seeing with my own eyes the triumph of good over evil.

In part, I was motivated to write this book by a statement of a great writer who had written: “It is for our own benefit to keep every gift of God fresh in our memory. By this means faith is strengthened to claim and to receive more and more. There is greater encouragement for us in the least blessing we ourselves receive from God than in all the accounts we can read of the faith and experience of others” (Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing*, page 100). So this is my story—but I hope there is also benefit and encouragement for those who will read these memories.

My life—including its many difficult experiences—has been a journey. The destination of that journey is a proven and unshakable belief in God’s ultimate goodness and power. That is why—in the final analysis—you should envy me.

Redemption is possible. I have seen it and experienced it!

Paweł (Paul) Cieslar



Our family portrait (circa 1943/44): (seated front, left to right) Marta, Mum, Dad, Maria; (standing back, left to right) Ruth, Jerzy, Paweł, Josef, Jan, Anna; (top right, later added into the photo) Ruben.

THE GOLDEN POLISH AUTUMN

September 1, 1939, was a day that began like any other—except that this day was particularly beautiful. The sun shone brilliantly through the fresh morning air from a clear blue sky. The cutting wind and the flocks of migrating birds above were the only reminders that we had entered into the golden Polish autumn.

I was 10 years old, out watching our cattle as my father had asked me. The mid-morning train had just left the station, so I knew the time was 9.30. It was one of those lovely mornings when God was in heaven and everything around me—the lovely valleys and the streams—looked so beautiful.

But the tranquillity of the morning was suddenly shattered when three German fighter planes appeared from behind the mountain of Kubalonka. They were in strict formation, one slightly in front of the others, as if taking part in a demonstration, barely above ground level. I could see the grey fuselage, the pilots in the cockpits and the ominous black crosses on the wings. The noise was deafening.

The three planes flew toward me at terrifying speed. The noise alone felt like it would shake all my teeth out. I saw the flicker of flames as the first plane fired its guns, and I heard the trees above my head splintering as the stream of bullets hit them. Branches toppled down. Cattle panicked. Leaves and twigs sprayed across the field. The ricocheting bullets whined around the valley.

Terrified, I ran. I forgot about the sharp stones on the rough farm track that might cut my bare feet. I forgot about the cattle. I forgot that my father had shown special trust in me to look after them. I ran and ran as fast as I could from the frightening scene.

Then, as suddenly as the planes had appeared, the mountainside was quiet again. After the noise of the fighters, the stillness was eerie. I wondered for a moment if I had dreamed it. But branches were still falling from the shot-up trees, reminding me of the reality that I had just experienced. I kept running. Arriving breathless at the farmhouse, I hoped

my father would not be angry that I had left the cattle.

My father already stood with the rest of the family in front of our farmhouse. We had been hearing rumours for some time. With growing German aggression, it seemed only a matter of time until something cruel and catastrophic happened. But it was clear that everyone was shocked by the attack.

“Dad, I’m scared!” I shouted, not caring who heard me.

My father remained cool. It was a great comfort to me—to all of us I think—that he remained calm, seeming in control of the situation. He gathered us around a large linden tree. He hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts, then spoke.

“The war has begun. It is going to be a tough time for all of us.”



A view across the valley and town of Wisla.

He opened his Bible, which he had with him, and read, “And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify me” (Psalm 50:15). He then led us in family prayers, in which we all joined with heartfelt energy and seriousness.

I will never forget his face in that moment. It was so drawn. He had fought on the front line with the Austro-Hungarian forces in The Great War (as we then called it). He told us that this war would have a terrible impact on our family.

The morning was still so beautiful. The sky seemed infinitely blue. But the world we knew had ended with a broadside of bullets from three fighter planes.

On that lovely morning, my father could not have imagined just how long the war would go on or how terrible it would be. He did not yet know that it was extremely unlikely all of his family would survive.

In the following hours of that golden Polish autumn day, Germany

invaded Poland. Our hard but pleasant way of life was about to be swept away into uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and an all-pervading atmosphere of threat, brutality and death.



The beautiful River Wisla, which rises in the Mountain of Barania.

Normally on a sunny morning, our farmyard was a happy place, echoing with the lovely sound of children playing. Now it was silent. We knew that an ending had come to life as we knew it. In the same way, that ending was to come to thousands of lives in Silesia, millions of lives in Poland, and many millions more lives across Europe and the world.

LIFE BEFORE

My name is Paweł Cieslar (pronounced Tseshlar) and I am from Wisła (pronounced Viswa), a town located at the foot of Barania Mountain in the Beskid Mountains, the source of the mighty Vistula River. Wisła is an area of outstanding natural beauty. To me, mention of the area conjures up pictures of beautiful rolling hills, romantic castles, and a family that was materially poor, but emotional and spiritual millionaires.

Our farm was known locally as “Breniok.” The farm had been in the family for generations, but one ancestor had come from Brenna, all of 15 miles (25 kilometres) away. It was so unusual to have such a foreigner living in our closed community that the farm had taken its name—meaning “home of the man from Brenna”—from this outsider and the name had stuck.

In rural Upper Silesia—as in most of rural Europe—you were born into a farming community and rarely went outside it. You might go to the local market town for shopping or to sell produce, but that was all. There was no opportunity to visit Kraków, our nearest major city. Warsaw, the capital of Poland, might as well have been in a different galaxy.

We were subsistence farmers who made enough to support our lives—and little more. Electricity and gas were only available to wealthier people living in the centre of Wisła. Our country roads were still the medieval cart tracks, dusty in summer and frozen like concrete in the winter. Those tracks had been there when Upper Silesia belonged to Bohemia (1339–1526), then to Austria, Austria-Hungary and then to Poland followed by the Third Reich, then to Poland again. Had there been any road signs, the language on them would have changed every 50 years on average. But there were no road signs.

Our water came from the well in the farmyard and was wonderfully pure. The water was cold but so very refreshing. In winter, the water was so cold it was painful to wash. I remember the screams of the children when our mother would wash them with the freezing water that had been brought from the well. Admittedly, she added a cup or two of boiling

water to make it more bearable, but it did little good. This was doubtlessly character-forming—but we would have preferred warm baths. I especially came to this conclusion when I had my first warm shower at 17 years of age.

We wore traditional dress, and almost all of our clothes were homemade. My parents and other neighbours grew flax in their fields. Mr Troszok, a great friend and neighbour, was a naturally talented weaver, and his cloth made beautiful linen and woollen clothes for wintertime. My brothers had two or three pairs of trousers and two or three shirts and jackets. To maximise our limited clothes, as each child grew older the clothes would be handed down to the next eldest of the same gender until they crumbled into tatters. As my parents had nine children, they certainly got value out of those clothes!

Our shoes were moccasins, homemade from wool or rawhide, purchased from a local farmer or taken from one of our own cows that had been slaughtered. During the summer months from April to October, we children went barefoot.

Whatever possessions a farmer had on his farm were homemade. My father made his own wheelbarrow, as well as all of his tools and ploughs. He made all the plates, knives and forks in our house from Jasien wood, and also fashioned cups from a particular species of fir tree whose trunk was tube-like in the middle.

My mother made washing powder from burning hardwood and adding fat to the cold ashes. The chemical equation eludes me but it did produce an effective cleaning agent. At certain stages of this process, the material is highly corrosive. My mother's hands were rough and a pale white colour from making this mixture. The existence of gloves to wear in the kitchen remained as unsuspected as the future existence of television.

We did approximately five things in life. We worked, we ate, we slept, we worshipped daily, we went to church and, as children, we also went to school and would sometimes play. In summer, we boys rose at 4 am to cut the grass on our farm and also to help out neighbouring farmers' wives, whose men had been called into the German army. At 8 am, we ran to school.

The farm was an excellent place to grow up in. We loved playing around the farm and we loved our farm animals, especially our great big horse. Living on the farm taught us responsibility from an early age. Our

“deprived” situation left us fit, both physically and mentally. We were neither sophisticated nor highly educated, but we knew the clear difference between right and wrong.



Open-air meeting around 1935 My oldest brother Jan is seen with a sousaphone around his shoulders.

Fridays were particularly treasured, as Mother would bake bread. We loved the rough barley bread she baked. Two of us boys would grind the grain by hand between two stones. We would do it again and again until the grain was fine enough for cooking. Then we would give it to her to make into dough. It tasted so wonderful, particularly when it was fresh out of the oven.

When we took the bread to school some of the children from wealthier families would have bread that was resplendently white. We would look at this white bread and envy those rich children. Our barley bread stamped us as “poor people.” I found out later, of course, that our brown bread had vastly better nutritional value but in the back blocks of 1930s rural Upper Silesia there were no nutritionists to explain this.

The milk we had was fabulous, coming straight from the cow. It bore little resemblance to the bland varieties we now buy in the supermarket. There was no chemical content in it and it was very good to drink. The cream was taken away for my mother to make butter, which she then sold. We only ever had butter during spring and autumn when we sowed the seed and harvested the corn. Mum was strict about that but sometimes when she wasn’t looking we would help ourselves to a forbidden treat. It was so tasty!

Our simple life was, in fact, abundantly blessed. My father, mother and siblings were devoted to each other. No family could have been happier. Our inner needs as human beings were met wonderfully. We had human contact of the best kind in our family. We had love, respect and regard,

and were so much the better for it.

My parents were also very wise. They devised ways to keep their children detached from the nastier aspects of small-town life in the late 1930s. They used their considerable abilities to keep us away from drinking, although alcoholism was endemic in the area, smoking—they were decades ahead of their time—and any kind of political involvement, because it usually led to violence of some sort. Their solution was to involve us in music. There were strong traditions of music in the area, especially brass bands. We all took to this readily and I discovered that I could be quite a handy trumpeter!



The initial Adventist church orchestra in Wisla, of which four members were from the Cieslar family.

The problem was how to pay for expensive instruments. My mother sold a cow to raise the down-payment for my trumpet. My father cut down some trees and sold the timber to purchase a second instrument. I believe that some other church members also helped with the purchase. The instruments were purchased from the music shop in Cieszyn and took two years to pay off.

For my parents, this was such an important priority that they were more than happy to put up with whatever cost. As they expressed it, they wanted us to be engaged in something “profitable,” developing our talents through mastering the instruments. They also wanted us to use our talents to glorify God as members of the local church choir and orchestra.

As children we were always taught to be respectful to people older than ourselves. If we met an adult or a woman in the street, it was customary to raise one’s hat and to bow. It was a lovely custom that created a good atmosphere between people and helped to build firm friendships between people of different generations. In return for the respectful behaviour, adults would often give presents to the children such as cherries or apples.



Pawel Cieslar Senior with Pawel Cieslar Junior (me) around 1929.

As a Christian family, we conducted regular morning and evening family worship. The morning worship was predominately about placing ourselves in dependence on the protective care of God. Our father often prayed: “O Lord, take us as wholly Thine. We lay all our plans at Thy feet. Use us today according to Thy will. Abide with us, and let all our work be done by Thy grace.” This was our family’s daily commitment.

At evening family worship, we prepared ourselves for a peaceful rest by acknowledging our faults. As the head of the family, my father began the process of reconciliation and we children would follow his example. If one of us had disobeyed our mother or father or spoken unkind words to one of our siblings, he or she had to bring a basin, pour water and wash the feet of the person we had offended. There were always warm hugs and kisses after this. We then sang an evening song and the whole family went happily to the night’s rest.

In my memory, we had an idyllic life in many ways and in a naturally beautiful place. The local Protestant people were so affectionately attached to our region, giving rise to this haunting and moving song:

Father’s home like paradise
The gift of heavenly father’s grace
The length and breadth of the earth thou mightst travel
Only to find that no place will equal this marvel.

But the natural riches of our region also had a darker side. My homeland of Upper Silesia had massive mineral wealth and sits at an important crossroad of Europe. It seemed our paradise was doomed to be lost. Every neighbouring country was prepared to kill to possess it. And, throughout history, they did so with great gusto.

End of product sample

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