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## LILI POHLMANN

(neè STERN)

### HER WARTIME STORY: A BRIEF OUTLINE .....

Born in the city of LVOV (:then South-Eastern Poland, now the Ukraine:) and brought up in KRAKOW (:Poland:), where she lived with her Parents and younger Brother until the outbreak of Second World War.

From 31<sup>st</sup> August 1939 until July 1944, i.e. throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> Russian Occupation (:Sept. '39 – June '41), the German Occupation (:June '41 – July '44:), and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Russian Occupation (:from July '44:), Lili was in LVOV, where her maternal Grandparents had lived before the war and to whom her Father (:FILIP STERN:) had sent her, with her Mother (:CECYLIA STERN:) and her little Brother (:URIEL STERN:), just a few hours before the outbreak of war. He himself was drafted into the Polish Army, fought on the front for over 2 weeks, and after the Army was disbanded made his way, on foot, to join the family in the, by now, Russian-occupied LVOV.

On 21<sup>st</sup> June 1941 the German-Russian pact was broken and on June 30<sup>th</sup> the German forces occupied LVOV. During the time of this tragic occupation, Lili lost her Father, her 6-year old Brother, both Grandparents and an extended family of over 300. Only her Mother and she survived. WHY DID GOD WILL IT THAT WAY??..... HOW DID THEY SURVIVE?.....

After Lili's miraculous escape from the Ghetto on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1942, a German Civil Servant \*Frau IRMGARD WIETH took her and her Mother into hiding. But her Grandparents were still in the Ghetto, and Lili's Mother considered it her duty to return to the Ghetto and to look after them. Frau Wieth promised to look after Lili – even to “adopt her”, should anything happen to her Mother – and so, in the knowledge that she was leaving her child in such kind and relatively SAFE hands, Lili's Mother made her way back to the Ghetto. . .

Fr. Wieth lived in the SS-and-Police District of LVOV, in an elegant 2-room apartment formerly requisitioned by her friend, a high-ranking SS-officer, who meanwhile had been transferred from LVOV to Holland “for other duties” (:to a Jewish Concentration Camp:). The apartment was the peak of luxury: bright, warm and, foremost, a “safe haven”. But Lili was very unhappy, she missed her Mother desperately and felt guilty about the relative luxury she was living in. To deter Lili running away, Fr. Wieth decided to take into hiding a Jewish Couple to provide her with some company.

Very soon afterwards, tragically, Lili's Grandfather was brutally murdered by the Germans and her dear, brave Grandmother committed suicide by throwing herself from a 3<sup>rd</sup> floor window, so that Lili's Mother should be "free" to join her child ..... On 30<sup>th</sup> May 1943, Lili's distraught Mother, in a state of utter despair, miraculously, made her way out of the burning Ghetto and, joined Lili ... Now Fr. Wieth was hiding 4 Jews .....

The SS-"boyfriend" came back unexpectedly; he had been "warned" that while he was away his "girlfriend" was having an affair with a Wehrmacht Officer. He let himself into the apartment (:with his own key:) and in a mad frenzy began to shoot into the thin air and into and under every bed, wardrobe and cupboard, screaming and shouting threats and obscenities. In her despair and utter fear, Fr. Wieth went out on to the balcony (:4<sup>th</sup> floor:) prepared to throw herself down the she hears four shots in the Kitchen, where she knew we were sleeping. She was not going to fall into his hands, in to the hands of the Gestapo. But there were no shots from the direction of the Kitchen: when in his frenzy he ran into the Kitchen, we were already in the Scullery, locked from within, the key still in the door .... He shouted and screamed, touched the door-knob, tried to open .... turned around and left the Kitchen ..... No shots were fired ..... Was he suddenly deaf, not to hear the four panic-stricken heartbeats??? Was he momentarily blinded, not to see the key inside the locked door?? **Was this some kind of a miracle???**

Since no "Wehrmacht Officer" was found, he decided it was all just a hoax ..... and stayed at the apartment for 2 weeks! TWO LONG WEEKS under the same roof with an SS-henchman .... In the lion's den .... Fr. Wieth at work during the day, Lili's Mother pretending to be an Ukranian house-seamstress and the other Jewish lady an Ukranian cook and maid .... Lili and the Jewish man hid in the 3ftx3ft Kitchen-Scullery throughout the day, not able to make a sound all day. At night they all risked sleeping on the Kitchen floor, praying to God that the henchman does not feel like a glass of water in the middle of the night ... It is nothing short of a **miracle** from God that Fr. Wieth and we four survived that visit .....

With the Russian offensive nearing LVOV in 1944, Fr. Wieth was evacuated back to Germany. Lili with her Mother and the Jewish Couple sought and found refuge in the Ukranian Church and then in their Orphanage. Here Lili pretended to be an orphan – Ukrainian, of course – and her Mother was forced to pretend to be deaf and mute, as she did not speak the language.

After the Russian liberation in July 1944, there were very few Jewish people left in LVOV – the Germans saw to that – and a year later, Lili and her Mother left for Krakow. It took them 7 days to reach the city. There, Rabbi Dr KAHANE, then the Chief Rabbi of the Polish Forces, was attempting to trace displaced Jewish children throughout the country, to either reunite them with their families, had any of those survived, or find new lives for them. Rabbi Dr Kahane was working closely with the incredibly courageous and highly charismatic Rabbi Dr SOLOMON SCHONFELD in London, and together they were attempting to give Polish-Jewish surviving children – 99% full orphans – a new life in England. In March 1946, the first group of over 100 children were transported from Poland to London; Lili was among them. The Swedish

boat S.S. RAGNE left the Polish port of Gdynia and took 7 days to reach London, arriving on March 29<sup>th</sup>, Lili's birthday! What a birthday present !!!.... Before the outbreak of war and in the time after, Rabbi Dr. Schonfeld, singlehandedly, organised transports of Jewish children from West Europe to London, and he gave thousands of children new lives ..... Lili was fortunate because she was of school age and was sent to the Grammar school run by Rabbi Dr Schonfeld. Within one year the School had helped Lili to bring her dear Mother to England. She arrived at Lili's school in May 1947. Lili is eternally grateful to Dr Sconfeld – she says:

**“HE RESTORED OUR DIGNITY AS HUMAN BEINGS – AND THANKS TO HIM AND TO THIS WONDERFUL COUNTRY, WHICH ADOPTED US, OUR LIVES OPENED AND WE BEGAN TO BREATHE FREELY” ...**

\* Please refer to p. 2 of the 'Nursing Heroes' - attached here.

(! Written Immediately after seeing  
the film "Schindler's List" !)

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## THE "UNSUNG HEROES"

To whom my Mother and I owe our lives .....  
LVOV (Poland) 1942 - 1944

I made my escape from the Ghetto on a particularly cold November night of 1942. I was 10 years old. My grandparents, a few neighbours and I were hiding under the floor-boards of our one-room "apartment" in the Ghetto. My Mother was not with us on that night; at the special request of her non-jewish friends, who needed her help, she was spending the night with them "on the other side". The penalty for that was death for all. On that very night the news spread within the Ghetto that a "specific selection" was due to start in the early hours of the morning, whereby all those not "usefully" employed by the Military and/or heavy industry would be rounded up at the points of entrance to the Ghetto and subsequently sent to extermination camps. My Mother was not employed by either: she worked for the German Civil Service Authority (forced labour). I knew she would be desperate to get back to the Ghetto, to us – her daughter (myself) and her parents. She had by then already lost her Husband – my father – and her five year old boy – my brother.

At 3 o'clock in the morning, in my pyjamas, a pair of galoshes and a light cardigan on top – having made sure that everyone around me was deep in sleep – I crept up the ladder, lifted the two floor-boards and squeezed through. Nobody heard me, nobody saw me, I was out. The night was beautiful, the virgin, powder-fresh snow was lying deep, the moon was full. To get to the "other side" I would have to climb over the railway embankment, which was not an easy procedure, particularly in full moonlight.... I just about managed to get myself to the top of the embankment, when, suddenly, there were machine-gun shots all around me. I fell flat, deep into the fresh snow, and lay there, motionless. The shots continued for a while and then silence.... Was I wounded? Were they looking for me? Would they find me?

Silence.... silence.... Realising that I was unscathed, I knew that, with the full moonlight above and the dazzling white snow all around, it would not be easy to get over the embankment without being clearly seen by the guards.... I put as much snow over me as possible and, slowly, began to "snowball" over the rail tracks and down to the other side. It was quiet, uncannily so. For another while I lay still in the snow – a snowball myself – and waited; then slowly, very slowly, I began my unforgettable journey to town, to my Mother. Walking along one of the longest streets in town (LVOV – then Poland, now Ukraine), which was the only way of getting there, I knew that on each side of it were enormous military barracks – once Polish, now German – in front of which, day and night, there were soldiers standing guard. I had no other way. I had to keep walking and get past them. Not a soul in the street at 4 am, just me, in my pyjamas, so obviously from the Ghetto. "They are bound to stop me" – I thought – but I kept on walking passing one guard, then the next, on the other side of the street. "Now they'll shoot me, in the back".... but nothing .... quiet

.... only the sound of my own footsteps in the crisp, fresh snow made me feel that the whole town could hear me.

These two soldiers on guard are my first two unknown, “unsung heroes” ..... I wish I could have said “Thank you” to them.

As I reached the tram depot, I managed to creep inside and hide under a bench – at least I was out of the bitter cold!

After some time (which seemed more like an eternity!) the first workers began to show up, then the conductor, the driver, and slowly, slowly the tram began to fill up with people going to work. I decided to squeeze into a corner and make myself “invisible” – what a silly thought! I prayed that noone would denounce me. I hadn’t much hope of that, but still, somehow I knew I would reach my destination – my Mother’s life depended on me. The conductor passed me by countless number of times, pretending not to notice my presence; by now the tram was well on its way and full to capacity. I was seen by many and looked at in silent curiosity, yet noone approached me, noone said a word to me, noone pointed a finger at this, quite obviously, Jewish child on the run – everyone looked the other way. . .

These special people are next on the list of my unknown, “unsung heroes” who, by their silent conspiracy, not only helped to spare my life, but also that of my Mother, whom I reached just in time to prevent her from going back to the Ghetto and to certain death.

Our subsequent saviours – three total strangers who risked their lives for us and a number of others – were:

- 1) Frau IRMGARD WIETH – a German Civil Servant, employed as a secretary by the Nazi Local Government;
- 2) HERR MAX KOHL – a German tanning specialist, brought over from Germany to LVOV by the German Occupying Authorities to open and run a factory making leather coats for the Gestapo;
- 3) The Head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in LVOV, the Metropolitan COUNT ANDREI SZEPTYCKYJ.

Frau Wieth was a remarkable human being, who saved not only my life, but also that of my Mother and two more people – a husband and wife. There was no question of any kind of payment or reward (on the contrary, she shared her own rations with me). She was highly intelligent, shy, rather eccentric. Among her many eccentricities, far and foremost was her absolute obsession with .... garlic! A firm believer in its “medicinal properties”, she’d consume large quantities of it daily, as a prophylactic. Needless to say, this habit did not endear her to her friends, suitors and immediate colleagues at work – yet, she’d rather do without people than without her garlic, and so, slowly-slowly she became a complete recluse, a loner.

Did God will it that this strange fetish of hers should become our salvation??

Fr. Wieth occupied a rather luxurious 2-room apartment in a 4-storey building requisitioned for high ranking SS-officers and their families, within the SS-and Police District of Lvov. This apartment was originally allocated to her friend, an SS-Obersturmführer – but he was soon transferred for other “duties” to a Jewish Concentration Camp in Holland and, before leaving, recommended that she should stay in it.

At one point, while the four of us were being hidden by Fr. Wieth, this – by this time long forgotten friend – suddenly decided to pay her an unannounced visit ..... which turned out to be a 2 weeks' leave ..... A fortnight under the same roof with a henchman, who, had he found us, would have shot us on the spot, Fr. Wieth included ..... Yet, she did not “dispose” of us during this fateful visit, but - inexplicably and miraculously – managed to keep us hidden from sight and sound in the tiny kitchen larder. It is indeed nothing short of a MIRACLE from God that she and we four survived that visit .....

On another occasion, while I was still alone with her, quite unexpectedly she was recalled to Germany for two weeks. Nothing would induce her to let me go to my Mother, to the Ghetto, instead she decided she would take me with her to Germany. “But how?” – I asked. “Simple” – she said; “We shall cut your hair very short, I shall get you a “Lederhosen” outfit and you’ll be a boy”. As by then I spoke German very fluently, without trace of any accent, we travelled to Germany as mother and son and came ~~back to~~ LVOV after two weeks. There were countless “miracles” during that journey, as indeed there were during our stay with Frau Wieth .....

Our ways parted only after Fr. Wieth was ordered back to Germany at the beginning of 1944. After the war I looked for and finally found Mrs Wieth in a Russian Camp in Czechoslovakia, in a pitiful condition. By that time (1946) I was already in London and within two years I was able to bring Mrs Wieth over here. In 1949 Mrs Wieth left London for the USA. She subsequently became an American Citizen, living and working happily in New York, (I lived there, too, for ten years between 1954-1964), refusing ever to speak or write in German. She spent her last days close to us, in England – a country and people she always loved and revered – dying in 1981.

Despite her many protestations (“I have done nothing to deserve it”), Mrs Wieth was a recipient of the highest Israeli honour – the Medal of the Righteous, awarded to her in the 1960's. A photograph of the Ceremony – she, always bearing a remarkable resemblance to Catharine Hepburn, surrounded by Israeli officials, in the Israeli Consulate in New York – is and will remain one of my most precious possessions. She also planted a tree in the Avenue of the Just in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.

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Herr MAX KOHL from Stuttgart (his daughter and family still live there) was brought over by the German Occupation Authorities to LVOV to open and run a leather-coat factory for the Gestapo.

Arriving in LVOV, he insisted that the factory be sited within the walls of the Ghetto. He then employed approximately fifty Jews – my Mother included – as “specialists”. Over and over again he risked his life, bribing high-ranking Gestapo officials with free, high-quality leather coats in order that they would spare “his” Jews. This man was – by any standard – a “MINI-SCHINDLER”. He, too, was honoured by the State of Israel, in the same manner as Mrs Wieth – both on our testimony and recommendation.

When the Ghetto was burned down and destroyed and Mrs Wieth was recalled to Germany, she did not leave LVOV before making sure that we had somewhere else, safe to go to. This time, it was His Holiness, The Metropolitan COUNT ANDREI SZEPTYCKYJ, who gave us (and many others, particularly Jewish children) shelter. At the risk of his life, he first took us into his own Palace, adjacent to the Cathedral in LVOV; after a while, he relocated us to various convents and orphanages within convents. We were kept and sheltered there until liberated by the Russians in 1944. This brave and compassionate man saved approx. 200 Jewish lives – “his” Jews are scattered all over the world and those still alive today can pay testimony to his heroism.

In 1946 I was fortunate to be bought over to London by Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld in the first of the three transports of Jewish children from Poland. My dear Mother – who today is 91 years of age – joined me one year later. We two are the only survivors of an extended family of over 300. I do not know “WHY WE TWO”? – but what I do know is TO WHOM WE OWE OUR LIVES and to whom our gratitude is eternal. They are our “unsung heroes”: in their humanity and compassion, and through their selfless, heroic deeds, they all merit to join the ranks of “WHOSOEVER SAVES ONE LIFE SAVES THE WORLD ENTIRE”.....

NOTE:

Having relocated all of us from his palace St. George Cathedral in Lwow to various convents and orphanages out of Lwow and scattered around the villages and countryside, my mother and I were assigned to the Studite Convent and Children's Home at Ubocz (district of Upper Lyczakow, Lwow) – the residence of the head of all Studite Convents, the very Rev. Abbess Josefa.

This very splendid, highly intelligent and wise lady, assisted by a priest by the name of Kotiv, endeavoured to gather Jewish children from the neighbouring towns and villages and accommodated them, at Ubocz and in various other convents and orphanages, thus ensuring their relative safety.

Despite the enormous risk to which they exposed themselves, they considered it their "Christian Duty" to help as many children as they possible could.

Mother Superior Josefa's name was (is?) Olena Witter, and until approximately 16 years ago my mother and I were still in correspondence with her and did our utmost to help her and the remaining few sisters (Nuns) materially by sending parcels to them from England, which helped them to keep nourished and warm in the city of SKALAT, district of Tarnopol (Ukraine). To our great sorrow we lost contact with Abbess Josefa – by now Witter – when our letters addressed to her kept coming back, marked: "unopened – return to sender". We now know that she died in 1988.

My mother and I feel very strongly that Abbess Josefa, like His Holiness The Metropolitan Count Andrei Szeptycky, is equally deserving of recognition and of this highest of accolades, i.e. being honoured within the frame of "WHOSOEVER SAVES ONE LIFE SAVES THE WORLD ENTIRE"

N.B. Since this was written, Sister Josefa has been recognised by Yad Vashem as a "RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS" and a medal for her is awaiting collection.

London, 1998