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Footnotes have been added to the English translation
The names of characters of the movie are written in *italic*.

Wajda’s ‘Katyn’ — Very Personal Remarks

Andrzej Jajszczyk

My participation in Krakow’s premiere of Andrzej Wajda’s ‘Katyn’ was a very special event for me. It let me know how the history of my family and country is deeply rooted in me, and it also showed me how strangely human lives could intertwine. The Katyn tragedy and knowledge about its consequences have touched me throughout my entire conscious life.

My grandfather, a cavalry officer, captain Bohdan Dobrzanski of the 2nd Mounted Rifles Regiment (2. PSK) from Hrubieszow, was murdered in Kharkov¹, similarly as the father of Andrzej Wajda. My grandfather’s brother, Zygmunt, a legionnaire² and a captain in the 15th Uhlan Regiment of Poznan, was killed in Katyn. As soon as a child, I saw, kept by my grandmother, two postcards sent by her husband from the Starobielsk detention center for Polish prisoners of war, as well as a card sent there by my grandmother and mother, that was returned in 1940 with an inscription *adresse inconnue*. The first shots of the movie that take place on a bridge over the Bug river, well reflect the tragedy of Poland partitioned again by its neighbors, as well as the existing chaos and a drama of fugitives deciding which bank of the river should be chosen³. *Anna* and *Nika* have decided to go eastward to look for the husband and father.

My imagination how dramatic was their return the next year, across the same river, is based on the stories told me by my godmother, a daughter of a high-ranked Polish army officer, who as a little girl, along with her mother and sister, crossed the river under Soviet bullets. Such a scene was missing, in my opinion, in the movie, although this probably is a topic for a separate story... “Civilian clothes” — sounds as two ordinary words, but those days it could decide about life or death. This civilian clothing that could facilitate the escape of *Andrzej*, and which he did not accept, choosing, in his view, the honor and the allegiance to the oath. My grandfather wanted a civilian clothing when, after the crashing and dismantling of his regiment, he reached his wife and daughter in Hrubieszow, robbed by local scum and being approached by Soviets. He wanted to break through towards Hungary. Unfortunately, all clothes from apartments of officer families, who escaped from the military barracks, have

¹ About 22 thousand Polish prisoners of war were taken by Soviets in 1939 to three main detention camps: Kozielsk, Starobielsk, and Ostaszkow. Then, almost all of them were executed in early 1940 at the following three execution sites: Katyn, Kharkov, and Tver (Kalinin), respectively. Most of the executed were drafted reserve officers, the elite of pre-war Poland, namely businessmen, lawyers, doctors, engineers, civil servants, teachers, etc.

² Legionnaire refers to members of the first Polish army units formed during WWI, that played an important role in regaining independence by Poland in 1918, after more than a century of foreign occupation.

³ Poland was attacked by Germans on September 1, 1939, followed by a coordinated attack by Soviets on September 17. The Bug river was the demarcation line between the two aggressors. It should be noted that the partition of Poland between Germany and Soviet Union was agreed formally by these two states in August 1939 in a secret annex to the so-called Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty.

disappeared. My grandmother could simply do nothing. The grandfather and a few other officers resumed their journey in military uniforms.

I wonder if my grandmother, similarly as *Anna* and her mother-in-law, *Maria*, did not ask herself if she wasn't able to do something more then? Whether those civilian clothes could not be dug out from somewhere? Buy everything was happening so fast... The question if something more could be done is returning to me when I think about the scene of capturing my grandfather and his colleagues at the courtyard of a monastery in Turkowice. The events were observed by a small window of the monastery's cellar by one of my grandfather's younger reserve officers, lieutenant Jan Dobraczynski⁴. Only for him, because of his pre-war professional contacts with the local nuns, a safe hiding place was found. And here, another scene from the Wajda's movie: *Andrzej*, already imprisoned, walks with a Virtuti Militari cross attached to his uniform. My grandfather, when captured, had the same cross. He got it, as a nineteen year old boy, for a successful brave charge during the Polish-Soviet war⁵. When Soviet soldiers enter the courtyard, my grandfather uncouples the cross and hides it in the gravel. The Soviets arrange the captured officer along the monastery's wall, their faces towards the wall, and form a firing squad. My grandfather turns back and calls them, in Russian, that if they want to shoot them they should do this looking at their faces. The Soviet commander engages in the discussion. Finally, he changes his mind and orders to load Polish officers, as prisoners of war, on a horse-driven carriage.

As a teenager, I tried to find the cross of my grandfather. I started with "Szata Godowa," the first novel of Jan Dobraczynski, written after the war. The novel recounts the combat route of 2. PSK and a considerable space is devoted to the father of my mother. But, of course, the capturing of the officers is not covered at all. My mother tried to learn something from the writer, a few years after the war. It wasn't a pleasant chat. Dobraczynski has already started his affair with the communist authorities and was truly afraid of questions touching events of September 1939. I exchanged some letters with a retired nun from Turkowice as well as with a son, Andrzej, of the chief commander of 2. PSK, col. Jozef Mularczyk. This son authored later a novel entitled "Post Mortem", which was the basis for the screenplay of "Katyn". I have learned that the nuns found my grandfather's cross. It was kept for some time in the monastery, and then, after its closure, its owners kept changing, and, finally, it has disappeared...

The touching movie scene, clearly associated with the "Christmas Eve in Siberia⁶", the beautiful painting by Jacek Malczewski⁷, showing the imprisoned general, sounds to me as the lyrics of Jacek Kaczmarski's⁸ song: "The other hid his face in a plate, The God is to be born tomorrow..." This is a magic scene, as magic is the art of Jacek Malczewski, and as extraordinary is, despite the generation gap, the connectivity of my childhood with the childhood of Andrzej Wajda. We both spent it, as sons of army officers, living in Radom in an apartment building, located within army barracks, at Malczewski street. Moreover, we occupied the same apartment! In this apartment, my mother waited for her father whose trace was lost in Starobielsk. And earlier, a couple of hundred meters apart, Jacek Malczewski spent his childhood. Now, in Krakow, I live at Emaus street, the same street where the director of "Katyn" lived during the period of German occupation. Pretty close, at Salvator, there is the last home of Jacek Malczewski.

⁴ Jan Dobraczynski, a well-known writer, closely related to the catholic church, but also accused of too close links to ruling communists.

⁵ In the war between Poland and Soviet Russia in 1919 and 1920 Polish army stopped Soviets attempting to spread communism throughout Europe.

⁶ Russian Siberia was a place of detention of many Polish patriots fighting for independence in the 19th and 20th centuries. See the picture at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malczewski_wigilia_na_syberii.jpg

⁷ Jacek Malczewski, one of the best known Polish painters, born in Radom in 1854, and died in Krakow in 1929.

⁸ Jacek Kaczmarski, a poet and singer for the "Solidarity" movement.

The scene, in which *Anna* and *Maria* read a daily newspaper containing a fragment of the so called Katyn list⁹, brings to my memory a yellowish copy of a German published daily *Zycie Radomskie*, stored by my mother. It contains the name of my grandfather's brother, cap. Zygmunt Dobrzański. The name apparently blurred during printing. This blurring was not accidental. In 1943, somebody from the editorial office visited my grandmother carrying the news that the list of bodies found by Germans in the Katyn forest contains the name of her husband's brother. She was persuaded to go, along with a group of other Poles, to the place of the crime. To avoid serving the German propaganda, she refused. But she wanted to shield my great-grandmother, who earlier lost one of her sons, from the news of losing two others. The editors refused to remove the name from the list, pointing at possible consequences from Germans. But they blurred somewhat the name and made a "mistake" in the name of the town, changing Garbatka to Parkatka.

The father of the movie director and my father represented two very different generations of army officers. My father "did also not manage to join the Anders army¹⁰", as *Jerzy* from the movie. He did not manage to do so since he was too young that time, and he was on the German side of the Bug river. But he managed to join the Home Army¹¹. When, in 1944, the Soviets reached the Vistula river, he was drafted, as the majority of his friends and colleagues, and was allocated to an army engineers unit. He managed to leave it, by moving to a unit training new air force pilots, fulfilling his long lasting dream. This was not only the fulfillment of the dream but meant simply life — all colleagues from his engineering platoon died in the last days of the war at the heavy battle of Budziszyn. My father finished the air force training, in Zamosc and then Deblin, with the highest marks of all first post-war graduates of the "School of Eagles¹²". He wanted to fly, similarly as the air force lieutenant of "Katyn". Polish pilots returning after the war from Great Britain to Deblin¹³, led by col. Szczepan Scibior, later briefly the chief commander of the Deblin school, also wanted to fly to serve Poland. Col. Scibior was shot in 1952 after false accusations and a manipulated trial.

By the way, *Jerzy* is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting and at the same time most puzzling personalities of the movie. His disillusioned view on the fate of the imprisoned officers, expressed, for example, by his bitter "only our buttons will be left", directly related to "even a button from my uniform I will not relinquish¹⁴," from the pre-war propaganda, makes a considerable impression on every viewer, similarly as his human move of handing a knitted sweater to *Andrzej*, that might make a difference between the death or life. And then shock, when we see him alive and dressed in a uniform of the Soviet controlled Polish army coming

⁹ Germans discovered mass graves of Polish prisoners of war in the Katyn forest in 1943. Some bodies were identified and the list containing the names was printed in newspapers published by Germans in occupied Poland. Germans tried to use this crime as an anti-Soviet propaganda, covering their own crimes committed in Poland.

¹⁰ After German attack against Soviet Union in 1941, a Polish Army was formed in Soviet Union based on released Polish prisoners, and equipped by the British. The Army was led by general Wladyslaw Anders. After long disputes among the Allies, this army was moved from Soviet Union to the Middle East, and then took part in the war in the western front (for example, capturing Monte Cassino in Italy, in 1944).

¹¹ The largest underground army in the occupied Europe, controlled by the Polish Government on exile in London.

¹² "School of Eagles", formally: *The Polish Air Force Academy*, the best known training place for Polish air force pilots.

¹³ Polish pilots, most of them trained in Deblin before WWII, played an important role in the Battle of Britain. The Poles shot down 203 Luftwaffe aircraft which stood for 12% of total German losses in this battle. Some of those pilots returned to Poland after the war; then most of them were persecuted (treatment of those who decided to stay in UK is another sad story).

¹⁴ The sentence associated with the Polish Chief of the Army, Marshal Edward Rydz-Smigly.

from the east. How did he survive the imprisonment in Kozielsk? Did he simply agree to work for NKVD¹⁵, as some did (as a teenager, I read about this with excitement in *Military Historical Review*, still in the communist era), or was he a potential source of important information for Soviets what delayed the fate and allowed him to survive as the prisoner of war until 22nd of June 1941¹⁶? Or maybe, although this is less probable, his life was saved by family intervention using links to German diplomats as in the case of Jozef Czapski¹⁷? For sure this was not the case of being a hero as general Jerzy Wolkowicki¹⁸, famous from the battle of Cuszima. The movie director gives no answer, leaving us alone in reverie about complexities of the human fate...

Fortunately, my father did not have as dramatic options as *Jerzy*. His generation probably had less room for choice. But he chose to vote for senate in the “3 times YES” referendum¹⁹ in 1946, what resulted in his immediate dismissal from the army. After some time he was allowed to return to the military service, although only at less important positions, related to young pilot training, as he was marked as that who did not support communists during the referendum and as that who, for a long time, refused to join the communist party. “Politruks²⁰” did not leave him alone even after his death. When in 1982, according to his will, we refused to have his funeral without a catholic priest, they withdrew the guard of honor, and, at the last minute, they grounded in Deblin the plane that was to carry his colleagues wanting to be at his funeral.

The various stances towards the communist authorities find a considerable space in Wajda’s movie. How different are *Tadeusz* or *Agnieszka* in contrast to the schoolmaster *Irena*. In spite of easy judging, fashionable today, my position is not easy to define. Heroes, or simply daredevils, who died or were imprisoned because of their heart-driven actions were not in short supply after the war. I wonder if *Irena*’s guess that the Soviet occupation was not to end in any predictable timeframe was more rational? Fortunately, the movie director does not give easy answers. I ask myself about the post-war choices of my grandmother, also *Irena*, who “hid” herself in the “West Lands²¹”, where she worked and lived until her late years.

Fair-haired *Agnieszka* brings to my eyes my mother, Aleksandra. Just after the war, they should be of the same age. My mother, during the war was a messenger of the Grey Ranks²², an underground scouting organization, was taught by the new authorities just after the war that being a daughter of a pre-war army officer was something highly wrong. The communists tried to block her studies at the Warsaw University of Technology, she had no chance for a room in students dormitory, she was strangely fired from her first work... A plaque devoted to the

¹⁵ NKVD, Soviet secret police.

¹⁶ That day Germany attacked the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ Jozef Czapski, a well known Polish painter, writer, and critic.

¹⁸ Jerzy Wolkowicki became a Russian national hero after the naval battle of Cuszima in 1905 against the Japanese navy. Wolkowicki was then a young officer (note that in 1905 many Poles were Russian subjects in partitioned Poland). After the lost battle imprisoned for some time in Kyoto. Some believe that in 1940 he was spared personally by Stalin, who as a boy was fascinated with this navy hero (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy_Wolkowicki).

¹⁹ A faked referendum that was to show support for communists in Soviet controlled Poland. There were three rather obvious questions. Anti-communist forces asked Poles to say “no” to the question concerning the dissolution of the upper chamber of Polish Parliament. As voting “no” required entering the cabin, the communists had a complete information who was against them (at least openly). The results were falsified, anyway.

²⁰ “Politruks” refers to “political officers” who practically controlled the army in communist Poland.

²¹ “West Lands” (Ziemie Zachodnie) refers to parts of pre-war Germany attached to Poland after WWII, according to the decision of the winning superpowers, in partial compensation for Polish lands captured by Soviets.

²² In Polish: Szare Szeregi.

memory of her father and uncle, officers killed by Soviets, she managed to attach attached to her mother's tomb only in free Poland²³.

Andrzej Wajda made a movie that is important to all of us. The movie that tries to reveal the crime hidden for so long time and attempts to remove its image from our minds. Its truthfulness is proven by the fact that as in a mirror it shows the history of my own family. I am really grateful for this.

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Translated from Polish by the author.



The wedding photo of my grandparents, Irena and Bohdan Dobrzanski, 1925

²³²³ i.e., after 1989.