

Sława Harasymowicz

In October 1939, in Stryj, my grandmother covered her and her children's faces, pretending to NKVD that they were ill with deadly smallpox. This saved them from deportation to Siberia. Soon, they disappeared again. Fleeing NKVD, Gestapo and Ukrainian police, their five-year exile took them to multiple, often chance locations across Galicia, Podolia and southeast Poland.

I know the names of some of the places along my grandmother's route:

Stryj, Komarno, Lwów, Łosiacz, Iwanie Puste, Borszczów, Czortków, Chrzanów, Rzeszów, Kraków. There were others. Delicate pin punctures outline the route.

Grandfather and grandmother met by chance, on a platform in Kraków railway station, 1930? 1931? In transit, both were travelling in different directions. Grandmother dropped her books, grandfather picked them up for her.

Stryj was their first own home, which lasted a year, maybe two. There is one photograph from Stryj: a fragment of a dark room, a cupboard; someone is standing behind the table. In November 1939 the home in Stryj burned down.

My grandfather, a Polish Army officer of Ukrainian-German origin, spent the entire war in a POW camp in Woldenberg. The cage throws a shadow symbolising the one cubic metre of each prisoner's 'personal space'.

Grandfather's route: from Stryj by military train, fighting near Tarnow, then returning after the war, a pause in Rzeszow, and finally Krakow, in 1947.

This is what I know: grandmother always wore lipstick, she used to say that the lips make the face. She loved books. Grandmother had Tatar roots. Grandfather was a good skier. His riding boots were always polished. He had an assistant, a Hutsul; grandfather treated him well. As a boy, grandfather read Baden-Powell and took part in shooting competitions organised by The Polish Gymnastic Society "Falcon".

These people are not, in fact, present here, in the exhibition.

Grandmother covered her face, and disappeared in order to survive. This is the point of departure for the history retold again.

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