

Stories of a Dollhouse

Exploring our Family
Memory and Traditions

Bitwa Warszawska 1920



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1920

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Celebrating the victory of Poland
against the Bolshevik invasion



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Summer 1920 remains a memory landmark for many Polish families. One century ago, in just a few weeks, our great grandparents have experienced a succession of contradictory feelings, from certainty to fear, from desperation to enthusiasm, from shame to pride. Our dollhouse pictures the memory of a Książyk boy aged 10 and living in Warsaw.

Post-war Hardship

Poland had recovered independence after 130 years of partition in November 1918. All across the country, the Poles had celebrated the event with much pomp, forgetting for a short while the hardship of their post-war environment. In Warsaw, the population had to make do with rationing cards for food and basic goods. There was a massive unemployment and the inflation was pressuring households' budgets.

At this time, there were only few Książyk Families were living in Warsaw. Some had established in this town in the late 18th century. Others, originating from Greater Poland, had arrived in the years 1900. Walenty Książyk and his family was living in the centre of Warsaw. Małgorzata, his only

daughter had married three years earlier. The house was blessed with the turbulent presence of three boys aged 10, 9 and 7.

Bolshevik Hordes

In 1920, the borders of Poland were not secured. In Russia, the Bolshevik government was planning to extend revolution to Europe. In June, reacting to the extension of the Polish presence in Lithuania and Ukraine, Russian troops had pushed back the Polish army and crossed the provisional borders of Poland. Bolshevik hordes were now rolling into the country, bringing with them violence, destruction, rapes and looting. In Warsaw, newspapers reported the red terror unfold by the *konarmia*, the cavalry led by General Budionny. The general mobilization was launched.

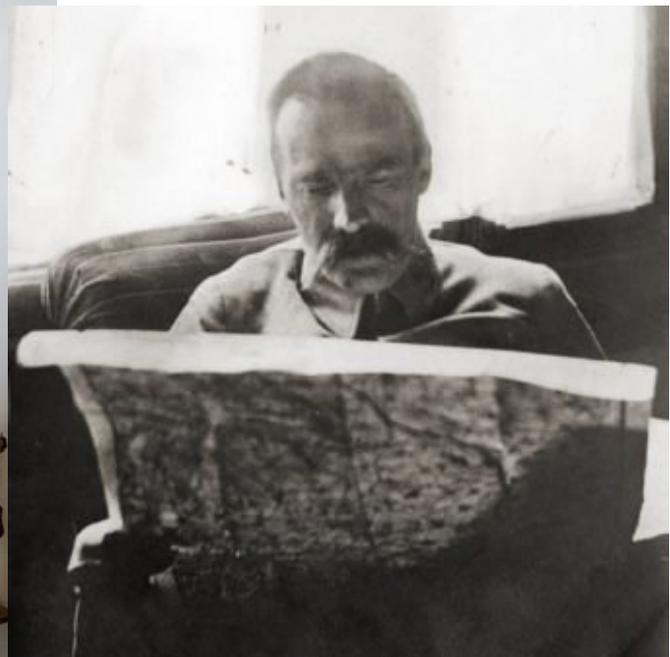
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Since mid-July, the Polish Army was retreating. Early August, the situation deteriorated further. News from the front were alarming. After losing the strategic line of the Bug River, the Polish Army had crossed the Narew River. The front was coming closer on the right bank of the Vistula River. Warsaw was now preparing for a likely siege.

In 1920, there was no radio but the population was amazingly well informed. Street vendors shouted the cover stories of *Kurjer Warszawski* or *Gazeta Warszawska*. The war was in all minds. People tried to position the front on whatever map they could find. They knew that the Bolsheviks had already appointed a communist "government" in Bialystok. They also knew that the Vistula River was the last line of defence of Warsaw.



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Collective Mobilization

As soon as 8 July, the Polish government had launched a massive enrolment of volunteers (*ochotniki*). All men aged 17 to 42 were invited to join the armed forces, whatever their skills and capacities. *Ochotniki* came from all over the country, bringing with them guns, long scythes and forks. Aged 57, Walenty was not concerned. Still, as many other civilians, he was engaged in activities related to the logistics support of the Army.

Women of all ages were also mobilized as volunteers. Some were committed to helping

the thousands of refugees arriving from Eastern invaded territories. Other joined the medical training of *sanitariuszka* that would be sent the front after a few days of basic preparation. The iconic pictures of Polish women dressed in improvised military uniforms remain the symbol of this collective enthusiasm.

To get a military look, magazines suggested adding pockets to an old jacket before dyeing this homemade uniform into a mixture of coffee, thyme and green leaves to get an approximate kaki green color.



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Church on the Frontline

Walenty and his family attended the Church of All Saints (*Kościół Wszystkich Świętych*) in the centre of Warsaw.

Father Marcel Godlewski was the leading Priest of the Church of All Saints. He was also a social activist with ideas close to Walenty who had been a moderate Socialist in his youth. In 1915, Father Godlewski had begun his ministry with a series of initiatives to help the impoverished population of Warsaw. During the war, he had emerged as an influential profile in the diocese.

Since the beginning of his priesthood, Father Godlewski had encouraged the scouts of *Wszystkich Świętych* to engage in social activities. He was now supporting the massive mobilization effort in support to civilian defence and to the refugees flocking from Eastern invaded regions. Many parishioners answered his call to become "soldiers of the Christ", serving their country away from the battlefield.



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National Collect

Very early in the conflict, many newspapers launched a campaign to collect weapons or anything similar. In Warsaw, many families answered this patriotic call by giving relics from the past: swords, sabres, and even fake precious *karabela* used for decoration. However, this generosity proved useless. Antic weapons were not reliable for a military service. Poorly maintained guns had no ammunitions. Antic sabers were not properly sharpened. Many disappointed families went back home with their patriotic but useless contribution.



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This effort was remarkable but far from addressing the needs. Marshall Pilsudski himself spoke out against the outrageous conditions of some *ochotniki* battalions. Shoes were the weakest link of the supply chain. So were the linen bands that many Poles used as socks at this time. Whenever possible, bed sheets were sacrificed to make "Polish socks".



The conflict had begun in June. Two months later in August, combats on the battlefields were so intense that nobody could say how long it would be. The *mot d'ordre* was to prepare for a possible confrontation during the next Winter.

In parallel, newspapers and local committees had launched the collect of anything valuable for the front. The Polish Army was properly equipped but the thousands of volunteers needed almost everything. Useful item included clothing, blankets, cutlery, and tools. Local committees organized the production of "war bread" and homemade preserves. At home, ladies also organized workshops to sew clothing.



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During a few weeks, the dining room of the Książyk house was transformed into a workshop. There, ladies from the Parish gathered there sew clothing for soldiers. Several bed linen were converted into pyjamas. Wool covers became sweaters.

This was very exciting for the three boys who got their own "uniform". But after several days little catastrophes caused by their presence into the workshop, they were banned from entering by exasperated ladies.



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The contribution to the war effort included a support to the moral of soldiers. The Książek boys collected books, newspapers and magazines.

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At the peak of the conflict, more than 200,000 soldiers were engaged in the battlefields. They were waging a war on several battlefields at the same time.

The Polish population was invited to supplement the military rations with some "comfort food": (sweets, cakes, jams) and "colonial products" (chocolate, coffee and tea).



The Książek boys decided to forego desserts in support of combatting troops. The money saved from this little sacrifice was spent to send parcels.

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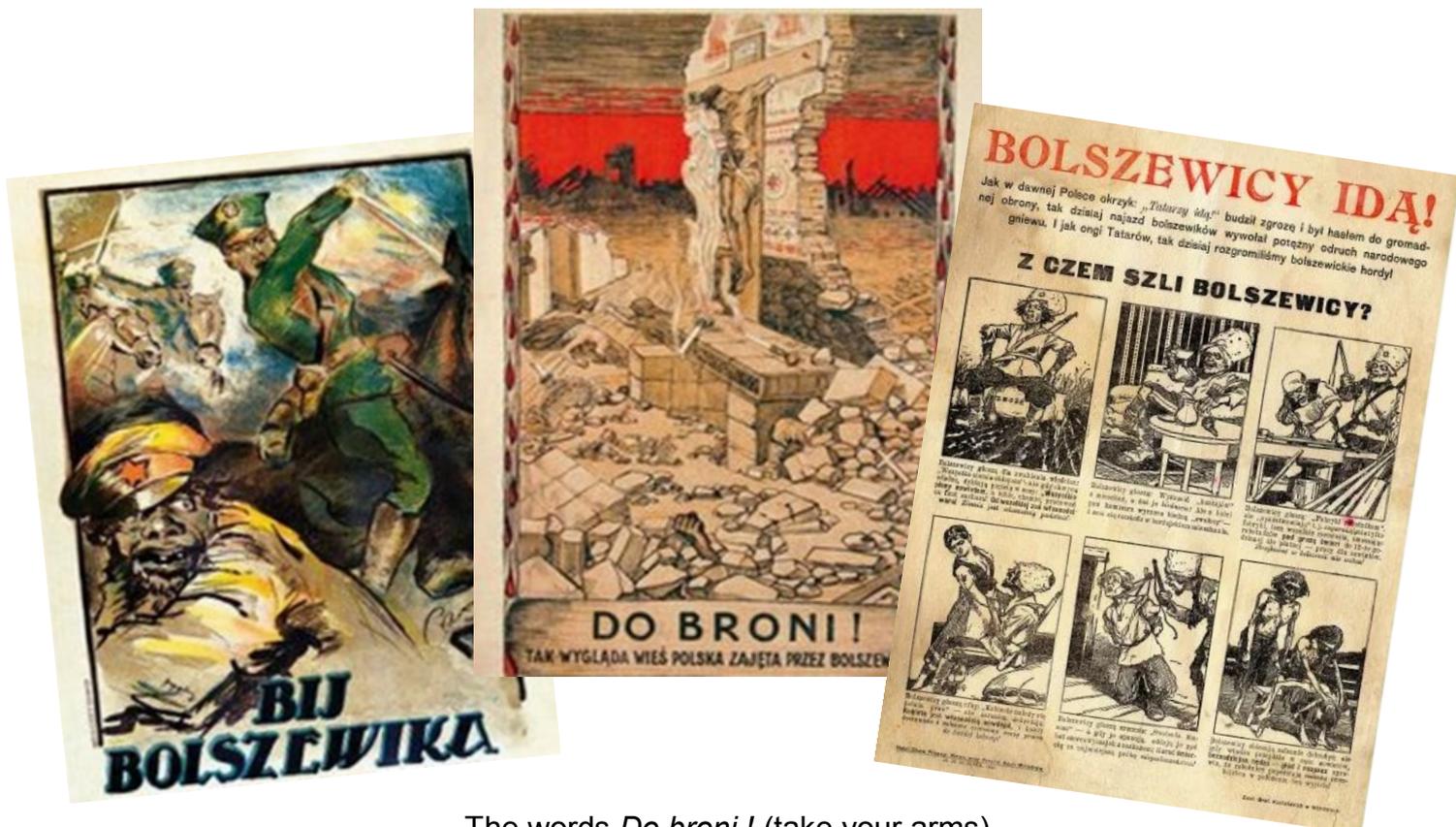
Forceful Propaganda

For the three Książyk boys, the war was a cause of great excitement. The enemy was clearly identified. Newspapers described the Bolshevik troops as a foul-smelling crowd of inebriated ogres.

The memory of the Russian rule during the partition was vivid. During several generations, the population of Warsaw had paid a heavy toll with permanent harassment,

arrests and deportations. The new Communist regime in Moscow was just another expression of the Russian grip.

Moreover, the streets of Warsaw displayed a forceful propaganda, served by the talent of Polish artists. Posters highlighted a long list of *czerwony* crimes: blazed villages, destroyed churches, abused women, slaughtered cattle, and poisoned well. Stories of Bolsheviks eating little children were circulating. The three Książyk boys had no doubt about this.



The words *Do broni!* (take your arms) was a call to fight until the last drop of blood.

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The infamous *Budienovka* and the red star became the visual symbol of the enemy. All the kids wanted one. With scraps of fabric, the three Boys made some kind of Bolshevik scarecrow. They had great fun chasing with this mock (and peaceful) enemy across the house. Two vases were broken and a chandelier fell down.

The Three Książyk Boys were proud of their homemade "uniforms" embellished by red and white paper ribbons. They had endless discussion about the right way to make a Polish cockade: red inside or outside? The debate ended with the decision to opt for a stream of ribbons. Interestingly, 100 years later,



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Strategic Contribution

For the three Książyk brothers, the war was also a great frustration. Early August, the enemy was some 12 km away from Warsaw. According to a persistent street rumour, *Bolszewicy* were “on the other side of the river”. Some boastful kids were even reporting the heroic action of showing their asses to the enemy. Aware of a possible plot to perform such a feat, the anxious parents decided to locked the boys at home.

After the 12 of August, the population of Warsaw was anticipating a massive onslaught with cavalry assaults. Trenches and barricades were supposed to stop the enemy at strategic points such as crossings and bridges. Boys and girls aged 10 and beyond got the permission to join their Sunday school for a strategic contribution to the war: dig trenches to stop the invasion that now seemed certain.

The mission of the kids aged 10 to 12 was to help adults in the trenches work. Armed with shovels (when strong enough) and buckets, the children were dispatched in the neighbourhood under close adult supervision.



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War Heroes

The official propaganda also emphasized the role of heroes. After the recent recovery of Independence, the young Republic needed consensual causes to stimulate patriotism and build cohesion. Within days, two profiles emerged to become the providential war heroes.

A young hero was a role model for Książk boys. Engaged in the Scout brigade of Płock, **Tadeusz Jeziorowski** (aged 12) joined the Polish Army. On 18 and 19 August, he displayed remarkable courage during the defence of Płock, a town strategically located on the right bank of the Vistula River. Becoming the youngest combatant, Tadeusz survived the war and received the Cross of Valour from Marshall Pilsudski in 1921.



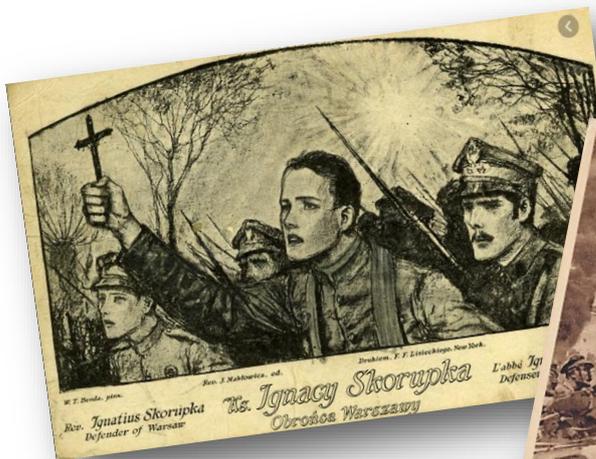
Chaplain **Ignacy Skorupka** (aged 27) died in the Ossów battlefield, leading a charge with the Holy Cross in hand. On 17 August, his funerals were celebrated in Warsaw with much pomp and emotion.

After his heroic death, Chaplain Ignacy Skorupka got a special place in our family. During his sermons, Father Godlewski emphasized the heroic sacrifice of this young army chaplain who had been a parishioner of his church.

Indeed, just as the three Książk brothers, Ignacy Skorupka had been christened in the All Saints church (*Wszystkich Świętych*). Later, he had been altar boy in this same church. Moreover, Ignacy Skorupka had also attended the same school as the boys. The proximity of this war hero was very impressive for the three kids.

Our little dollhouse scenery pictures the Książk brothers paying tribute to Ignacy Skorupka during the Ossów Battle.

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One of the most precious items in the Książyk Collection,
this cockade was made during Summer 1920.

A Nation in Prayer

Since August 12, Warsaw had been holding breath. Reportedly, some elderly women were already wearing black mourning dresses. Across the city, churches were organizing prayer vigils and processions. Across the streets of the city, the words of *Boże! Coś Polskę* (May God Save Poland) were resonating a heart-breaking significance:

*Boże! Coś Polskę przez tak liczne wieki
Otaczał blaskiem potęgi i chwały
I tarczą swojej zasłaniał opieki
Od nieszczęść, które przywalić ją miały.*

*Przed Twe ołtarze zanosim błaganie,
Naszego Króla zachowaj nam Panie!*

On August 15, the Assumption Day was an opportunity to remind *Matka Boska*, Saint Mary, that She had been the Holy Queen of Poland since 1656: “*Królowo Korony Polskiej, módl się za nami*”.

In the Książyk house, the portrait of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa had fresh flowers everyday. There was a strong certitude that after centuries of adversity and grief, *Matka Boska* would never let down Poland.

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Miracle on the Vistula

The Bolshevik blitzkrieg offensive was part of the plan of Marshall Pilsudski. He expected the concentration of Russian armies to break the front, encircle them and launch a major offensive. On 16 August, this plan proved successful. The counterattack of Polish forces was rapid and decisive. The population welcomed the victories in Ossów and Radzymin with eruptions of joy.

In the immediate aftermaths of this military success, the Bolshevik hordes withdrew and began a disorganized retreat eastward. The Red Army left the Polish territory on 25

August and took refuge in Eastern Prussia, a region of Germany. The war was over. The Treaty of Riga signed in 1921 consolidated the recovered Polish territories and stabilized the Eastern borders.

The victory of Poland was celebrated across the world. The Miracle on the Vistula (*Cud nad Wisłą*) still resonates today as one of the most important battle in History. Once again, the Poles had confirmed their exclusive position of saviour of Europe. They had stopped the Turkish invasion in 1683. They were now protecting the continent from a Bolshevik contagion.



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War Booty

The Red Army fled Poland in chaos, leaving behind looted items and many equipment. Months after the war, thrift markets in Warsaw were proposing all kind of war booties collected on the battlefield.

Leather items (belts, bags), were the most sought after. The boots of Red Army officers were expensive but they had much success. Same interest for the black leather coats of political commissars, the dreadful rulers of Russian regiments.

During the darkest hours of the Bolshevik offensive, two distinctive hats of the Red Army had been the fascinating and repulsive symbol of the enemy. One was the *budienovka* of the infantry, a grey wool pointed beanie. The other was the Cossack *papachka* of the *konarmia*, made from black astrakhan. For every children, the possession of these items was the equivalent of receiving a medal from Marshall Pilsudski.

In the KParents were horrified to have such smelly devil in the house.



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Find this story in our Dollhouse

