

LIFT-OFF 1

NAVIGATION CHART

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FLIGHT-PATH 1

BEING FULLY ALIVE NO MATTER WHAT

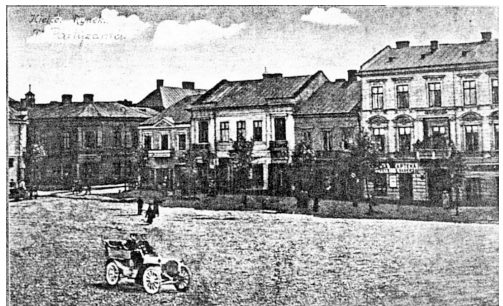
The greatest challenge of life is to be fully alive in every moment, no matter what's happening. This can seem hard, when everything overwhelms us at once. Life has taught me that no matter how horrible or happy a situation, the situation has no power to decide how I'm going to feel about it. I alone have that power. It is the definition I give *to* the situation that determines my feeling. At weddings I have seen sadness; among the street people I have witnessed grace, peace and love. There are no rules, except those you make yourself. If you decide something is really bad, it will get worse. If you look for *something positive behind* what you perceive as negative, you *will* find it, every single time. When you choose to look, you'll be amazed at what you see.

I further discovered that to honour one's own choice in these matters of emotions and feelings, takes courage. Someone might criticize you, call you stupid, insensitive, crazy or anything else for the choice you have made. You might have the support of your family or friends, or not. You have to have courage to stick with the choice you truly are convinced is right, because what you are experiencing is unique to you. No one can really know what you are feeling, except you. It is important to your inner strength to be loyal to yourself. You have the right to your choice. It may not be necessary to stand up to others, but it is to stand up for yourself.

I was born in Poland, and attended school there in a little town called Kielce, about 150 kilometers south of Warsaw. Whether life when you're little is "good" or "bad", there are always some moments of magic from those years which you keep forever. In return they keep you – from falling down. Nothing and no one can steal that magic. It's part of your personal power, your foundation.

I was like most kids. Had great parents – a Mom with super-human vitality and motivational skills – while Dad was the organizer, administrator, and attorney of some note in the district of Kielce. Only kids know how to really play. They are play experts. So the first thing I mastered in addition to serious study, was serious play. Poland is rich in ancient history pre-

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KIELCE

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dating the Vikings, followed by centuries of royal kings and queens. Their castles though crumbled through time, still haunt my mind. Luck placed one of them not far from Kielce. That's where I wove my magic moments. That's where I slew dragons and rescued fair maidens. I was in love among the ruins.

Life progressed. I did all the other normal stuff – wrote essays, debated hefty subjects, laughed and ate heartily with friends and family, studied and passed exams, joined the Boy Scouts, even got involved in our student magazine and academic experiments in political self-governance. Deep within me something else stirred: the desire to put my magic on paper. My kaleidoscope of life tumbled into view. I wrote a bunch of poems. That surprised everyone, including me. I was in my glory. I was immortal, invincible, king of the universe, omnipotent. Then my world collapsed.

We had finished finals in May '39. I wanted to enter Cavalry Officers School for which I had qualified. It offered two years of military service to highschool graduates plus four weeks' training camp on the Slovakian border. That's where I was stationed when August arrived, not knowing the Officers School was not in my stars. In early morning September 1, the Germans attacked. Forget the School. Immediately I was made Corporal.

The Germans were advancing quickly. The most logical thing was to increase our numbers by joining with a group of our comrades we knew were stationed at Kraków to the north. We broke camp at dawn, starting out across the fields at quick-march. I was invaded, shocked – but a part of me suspected I could handle it. Destiny had pushed me toward something I didn't want – or did I? I was being forced into full combat unprepared – but maybe not. Four weeks had been barely enough to toughen me ... but maybe not. In the panic, fear and confusion, one thing stood out. If I chose to give in to fear, it would immobilize me and I'd get killed for sure. There was no choice but to march right through it. Literally. This was my training continuing, only now, just like Coca Cola, it was the real thing.

As we marched, so did the Germans, it seemed, from all sides at once, rolling in on foot and in Panzers. We had one eye on the path ahead, another watching our back, with all fingers on our triggers. We ran, fought few battles, walked, ducked, hid, and shot our way through enemy encounters to steal some relative safety, we hoped, in the next few kilometres

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ahead. We slept when and where we could, if we could, finally managing to sneak into Kraków.

Having rejoined our group there, hope was somewhat restored. But the city was so overrun with Germans, we were impossibly outnumbered. It would have been suicide to confront them. We decided instead to relocate several hundred kilometres east to Kovel. Intelligence reports informed us it was still fairly free from invading forces. From that vantage point we'd have a better chance for victory, even if small. Once more "into the breach" we set out, but the nightmare had just begun. We were about 30 (close friends from high school) in our company, heading straight for a death-trap.

When you can walk no farther; your boots shredded, legs like deadwood, and you're convinced there's no energy left for anything anymore and the next step will be your last, that's when lightning can strike out of the blue. It happened to us, literally. One afternoon we were staggering along an old country road totally exposed in an open field with no place to hide. Suddenly out of a clear blue sky a lone Luftwaffe gunner-pilot zoomed in for the kill. When it was over, more than half of us lay dead.

I was among the lucky handful still alive. If I had wanted more combat training, I was sure getting it real and raw: how suddenly new energy can arise inside us when emergency strikes: how it's possible to be living, yet be fully incapable of feeling fully alive. The horror of feeling only half alive and fearing I'd never be able to feel fully alive again, was stronger than my feelings of relief and gratitude that I had not died. Like you're in some space between two sliding doors.

When a war's on, you don't have the luxury of retreat to some local bar to ponder what's just happened over mint juleps. You pick yourself up, soldier, you bury your pals, soldier, you dust yourself off, turn away and you keep right on marching, soldier! Cry with anguish and rage if you want but the merciless incessant northerlies will dry that up soon enough and you will survive, you will, you will. And when you've stuffed your feelings down and the count comes home, you might be better for all that, my son, for today a boy has become a man.

Next, rations began running low. Kovel was still days away. With luck we'd land in some farm for the night, get some bread or cabbages from the local farmer. Almost impossible to sleep, as enemy soldiers were everywhere. Not all farms were safe either, as many had Germans practically hiding in the hay

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waiting for poor saps like us. Then on the road again, hitting the dirt and shooting; running again, hiding and praying for nightfall and a fresh country brook or stream.

About midnight on the 9th day after leaving Kraków, our remnant made it to Kovel, God knows how. But the glory of battle had long gone to gorey, buried in the ground with our dead comrades. We thought we could re-group, re-charge, and go out into battle stronger with better chance of some small victory. We had marched all this way for a chance to fight to win. How wrong we were.

The sea of Germans behind us from the west had become a tidal wave. Meanwhile, endless columns of Russians were advancing from the east. Guess who was sardined in between. We were outflanked on both sides by insurmountable odds. The colonel at Kovel told us we had no option but to break rank. With our unit thus dissolved, I told my men simply to return to their homes and families and “God help you on the way”. We dared not rest longer than two or three days. We patched ourselves up the best we could and started the long journey back. Many under my command were from Kielce, so our group decided we’d go via Lublin. Kielce would be another four or five days from there if we were still alive. Before us lay those several hundred deadly kilometres through hell again. And again no choice but to march right through it. Dare a boy-made-man believe he could suddenly become superman? How else to survive but to become greater than the greatest you think you can be?

What had happened to my life? My country? What could have possibly motivated ordinary people to arm and go kill thousands of other ordinary people? What for? If today the world’s precious slaughtered millions could comment on this, what would they say to their killers? Something like “never was absolutely nothing owed by so many to so few?” My magic world of wonders like my beloved castle, was a rubble-heap of ruins in a dungeon of despair.

On the road we had little time to rest or recuperate. Hesitate or linger a little too long, and you’re dead. This time we moved only under cover of night to elude German patrols scooping up young Polish soldiers for their POW camps. Most of us could have died anytime or been discovered and picked up. Many did, and were. Worn to jelly, they collapsed, begging to be left behind, knowing we could not carry them. Before the rest of us moved on, we made sure we left ammunition and some rations. But how long would that have lasted? Did those

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boys ever get home? I do not know. But again only God knows how fate is a razor's edge.

After a gruelling trek of many nights, we made Lublin. Just as hell can happen out of the blue, heaven too gets that chance. When destiny dumped us on the doorstep of a convent, all heaven broke loose. A "Sound of Music" Mother Superior with her nuns in tow, scurried out to the rescue. They took care of us as if we were their own sons. Surely this was divine intercession. Let it never be said that hot soup, homemade bread, fresh clean water, a bath and a good night's sleep in a soft warm bed aren't the closest things to God on this earth. I suspect a magic ingredient was thrown in, not in what they gave us, but how. With passionate, full love. There is no greater healer.

After that, we were more fit for the last leg of our covert journey to Kielce. When the rooftops of Kielce rose over the horizon, it was a most beautiful sight. I hoped it wasn't a mirage. What was the date? October 13. Oh well, if it was the 13th, then it couldn't be a mirage, and it wasn't. Thirteen was my lucky number. Nothing could ever go wrong on a 13. Did God know that?

By the 17th of September I was Platoon Commander. But what did that mean, really? I can't say it did much for me one way or the other. All I knew was that the young officer who had tramped around our camp on the Slovakian border September 1 was not the same person who had just tramped half-way across Poland to Platoon Commander. A few short days earlier I had sat admiring the boots my feet were wearing. Now I had a new pair. But with a difference. It was no longer about the boots I was wearing, but the man who was standing in them.

Having been plunged headlong into circumstances *beyond my control* and *not of my conscious* choosing, life had hit me with sufficient power to destroy me. In a nano-second, I had to make not only a choice, but the right one. Sometimes the right decision is easier to make than you think. When it boils down to live or die, you automatically choose live very very fast. Who is to be destroyed? Me or "it"? I did not want to give "it" the satisfaction of getting me; I'd get "it" first. I did that by converting the energies of my fear into energies of positive action in the name of my precious homeland.

I knew nothing of the complex machinations of evil that mastermind war and death. No power in the universe can ever make me understand what possible joy, benefit or pleasure one

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person can get from the torment, agony, suffering, violation and massacre of another. Yet as a young naive kid of 18 I knew instinctively what was right, and what was wrong. And pre-meditated mass slaughter was not on my “right” list. If I didn’t choose myself first to stay alive and strong, who would stand for the rights of others and my country? I had a duty to stay alive and strong so that I could help others and my country. It was like two decisions facing each other like two twin towers, both interconnected with and dependent upon the other to produce a perfect win-win result. I chose never to give in because that was the right choice. I learned later that “nie dam sie” (pronounced “niyeh dum sheh” meaning “I’ll never surrender”) was the motto of the famous Polish pianist Artur (Arthur) Rubinstein.

Even without knowing the ultimate outcome of my choice never to give in, I knew how I wanted it to feel: I wanted to win. Victory! *Why choose anything less?* To give in to being afraid could only guarantee failure. So I had no choice but to choose not to bow to fear and chaos. And now in Poland there was nothing but more fear and more chaos, mounting by the minute. I could have gone over it, through it, or around it. As it happened, I chose to go under it.

Our unit dissolved, I was free to create my own battle plan. The Polish Army was good at sabotage – on the ground. We had many blown-up bridges and railway lines transporting German cargo to our credit. But I wanted to do my sabotaging secretly. What thrilled me was the idea of causing total chaos without anyone ever knowing where it was coming from. Like a shot in the dark. Or being invisible. You could strike your enemy but he, unable to see you, could never strike back. The ultimate subterfuge. I was cut out for the job. I just *knew* it. I was beginning to come alive again at the mere thought. When you’re on the right track, you don’t have to think twice. When you’re on the right track, all doors fly open.

That same lucky October 13, I acted immediately. I organized a Commando movement called OB (Organizacja Bojowa) to actually execute diversionary sabotage. The underground arm of the Polish Army called TAP had already been operating in Warsaw as a super-secret think-tank for the same reason: come up with ideas diversionary tactics to offset impending attacks. But it stopped just short of actually carrying out acts of sabotage. Its military personnel were used mostly for training purposes. Well, I certainly didn’t want to sit around *planning* sabotage, I wanted to *do* it. I saw OB as a perfect

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extension of TAP. I requested joint identity under their banner. They agreed immediately and officially we became OB TAP, Organizacja Bojowa Tajnej Armii Polskie, the (underground) Fighting Force of the Polish Army. We operated as such up to September, 1941.

To fight your attackers, you must defend yourself. But to defeat your attackers, you must outsmart them. Both tactics are needed to win. Our work suited our common cause to a tee. In the next two years to 1941 I rose quickly through the ranks to Sub-Lieutenant and Lieutenant. In September of '41 our reach and power mushroomed.

When war broke out in '39, the army that had formed quickly in defence was simply called the Polish Army. With so many dying or disappearing into prisons, the commanders and other high-ranking officers went underground and formed the Polish *Home* Army. In order to access allied powers to win the war, they made arrangements through the Polish Government in Exile residing in London to come under British Command. In 1941 the greatest unification of resources in our country's combat clout took place.

TAP, with us already part of them, merged operations with the Polish Home Army, which meant we were all now under British Command – literally thousands of men and women. Our OB group had already performed brilliantly in Poland. Now with this amalgamation, our jurisdiction for action was extended geographically to target every single German encroachment no matter where it was on the continent. We were all jubilant, ecstatic to be on board for this tremendous opportunity. My designation of Commander of OB was changed to Officer of Special Action Team “N” under the direct command of Warsaw. There was no doubt about it. With restored purpose in my life, I was definitely becoming more fully alive.

In the whole history of the war throughout Europe, of all the counter-strike initiatives discovered and disbanded by the Germans, our team which forged ahead as prime saboteur to 1945, never was. This was unprecedented. Not one in our network of 300 was lost, killed, or found out. Neither did we suffer any betrayals. We used various means including liaison officers to infiltrate our targets. One such person was an attractive intelligent young woman called Irene.

Here was another piece of destiny right in the middle of war, as Irene and I fell in love. Our feelings for each other kept growing. We married in 1944. Truly we were life partners. Our work was reason enough to be fully alive. When the gods