
Ministerstwo Kultury
i Dziedzictwa Narodowego

„Dofinansowano ze środków Ministra Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej”
"Co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland"

out of print.

I Have Been There

by

Wanda Stachiewicz

1941

MONTREAL 1942.

I Have Been There

By Wanda S.

It has been a beautiful, rainless, hot summer in Poland before the war in 1939. The sun has never shone more brightly, to make one forget the menacing shadow of Germany. Warsaw, the capital of Poland, a large city of nearly two million of inhabitants, a very attractive, modern town full of gaiety and wit, was now completely changed. War was in the air. Every week increased the tension.

Little by little men were being called to the colors, and when they went away, full of optimism and spirit, their wives were proud that their husbands were going to serve their beloved country. For, a fact that strikes each ones eyes in Poland is that every Pole, man and woman, old and young is full of personal passionate love for his country and of devotion to the very ground upon which he lives.

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The Polish woman cooperated always with the man, when her country was in need or danger. She has a splendid tradition of heorism and sacrifice. The woman as well as the girl, during the whole year we were preparing ourselves for war. The Women's Auxiliary Service, which was a widespread organization all over Poland, redoubled its work, organizing courses. We got antigas as well as rifle training and various kinds of instructions. Before the outbreak of the war women were told to prepare their husband's or son's knapsacks in case they should be called up unexpectedly; to prepare her own, and her chilrden's things, so as to be ready to leave abruptly in case of bombing, a basket with food for 24 hours.

Each family must have provisions for one month.

Each child must have a label with its name and address stitched on its clothes—in case of being lost. I remember how depressing it was, when we sat in silence and sewed those labels.

Everybody offered one day of work in digging shelters in the parks.

Each woman and girl, trained in antigas defence, had 10 blocks to look after in case of bombing.

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I had been through a course of Liason Service and in July 1939 I started my work in the General Headquarters, happy to be useful and to work near my husband.

I had sent my little daughter, the dearest recreation of her overworked father, to a small cottage, just outside Warsaw, so as to see her sometimes. The place, hidden in the forest, seemed to me very safe in case of war, because I did not realize then, what actual war was like. Now I know. There is no safe area in modern warfare.

My twin boys, then 14, were active in a group of Boy Scouts.

September, the first, 1939, I was awakened by the shrilling of the telephone. I was told briefly that the Germans were furiously attacking our country, without any declaration of war. It was 5 o'clock in the morning. I was ordered instantly to my service. As soon as I arrived at my office, I was drawn into the whirl of work. From that moment we hardly had time to breathe. Two hours later there was the first unheralded air raid on Warsaw. In a few hours the city was trans-

formed into an armed fortress. Trucks and lorries carried troops to the front, anti-air craft guns were set up everywhere. The whole population joined in the task of defence, in digging shelters or some other work. Women were taking over the jobs of men.

I worked and lived in the basement of a large building, especially built against bombs. It was hard to get used to staying all the surface, without any fresh air.

When free, I used to dash home, to my disolate home, once so happy and full of gaiety—to have day and often more, deep under a bath, to change my clothes. I never had time nor thought to gather and pack my things, even my small treasures my favorite books, pictures and photographs. With a sad last farewell glance, I took leave of them and rushed to my service. When I returned a few days later—I found it entirely smashed, only the old trees stood deserted in the charming garden. The air raids became more and more frequent, until there were intervals of only one hour or even less between them.

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Poland was the first nation which resisted with honor Hitler's demands. Like centuries ago, she had to defend herself against Germany, her battlefield soaked in the blood of her sons and daughters.

Fate gave us a hard service to perform at a difficult post in Europe, to be the rampart of western civilization, the centre of culture and moral force against the Barbars from east and west. It forged in Poland an unbreakable spirit, and the conviction of her mission among the nations. If you could know Poland and travel throughout the countryside, towns and villages, you would perceive behind the sunny healthy smiles of the people, an underlying of seriousness, traces of past centuries of struggle.

Beginning the second world war, Hitler unleashed on Poland 90 per cent of his ground and all his air force, leaving on the French front, with apparent non-challenge, only six divisions. They soon gained air mastery over us, in spite of the fact, that our pilots fought with fanatical courage and our troops with desperate heroism and unshakable determination, awaiting the offensive of France and England.

On Sunday, the 3 of September the radio announced, that England had declared war on Germany. Enthusiastically cheering crowds gathered outside the British Embassy, paying no attention to the air raids, which kept on for days and nights. Mr. Kennard the Ambassador of Great Britain, and the Polish Foreign Minister come out into the balcony together and made speeches applauded by the crowds. Hope was in our hearts.

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It was only the sixth day of the war, that I found time at dawn, to go to see my child. I arrived at the usually quiet place nearly at the moment, when the Germans were bombing the farm. Two buildings were already ablaze. I only had time to pick up my little daughter, cover her head with a scarf, so that she would not see the flames and the image would not be impressed on her memory.

I rushed with her to the shelter, which had been dug in the garden a day before. It was rather a hard moment to me. As soon as daylight came, I sent my daughter off to my parents country house estate and my sons to a Boy Scout group in the south of Poland, a 16 hours drive from Warsaw. And then I went back to my work.

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The lightning war, with a huge multitude of planes, tanks, followed by motorized troops, plunged into the Polish lines, never giving us a breathing space and advanced deep into our territory.

The whole nation rose against the invader, but it was the war of brave hearts against a ceiling and walls of steel. Poland wounded to death found alone against the full strength of Germany.

Time marched on. Warsaw was besieged and for three weeks continued its heroic stand against the full blast of German attacks.

Men, women and children fell in the streets. One after another the monuments of our glorious past were smashed. The old royal castle, churches, palaces, buildings. The squares, one month ago bright with flowers, became cemeteries.

Women, girls and boys of tender age fighting with guns in their frail hands, side by side with the army for the liberty of their country.

We saw them throwing heroically heavy sand bags over fire bombs, digging graves in the squares.

We saw them carrying wounded soldiers from burning or collapsngi hospitals, bringing every available piece of linen, pillows, blankets to supply the burned-out patients.

We saw them distributing food in the streets, warning, helping, cheering up. There was no light, no water. The whole world knows the story of courage displayed and sacrifice made by the people of Warsaw, side by side with the army and the role of Mayor Starzynski, the soul of the defence of Warsaw. It gained in indelible place in the history.

In looking back I sometime wonder, how we lived through the nightmare of those days. After a few hours of bewildering horror, you get used to the dreadful ear-splitting, inhuman sound of exploding bombs, to the drone of motors, you grow to find them familiar, so unimpressive, that you would not look up from your work, unless a very heavy bombardment. People are drawn together by common danger and pain. It was no place for unselfishness. It was the hour for feeling close to your neighbors, whose sorrow became your own. Their unity was wonderful, precious and comforting.

I don't know, whether in times to come there will be another generation, who will live through so many trials, each of them enriching soul and mind—as my generation. To live under the menace of death is to learn the real sense of life.

Time marched on.

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One day I was ordered to carry a message to a military centre in the south of Poland. I was happy and proud to be trusted with this important mission, but at the same time I had to part with my husband. A sad feeling oppressed me. It was justified—I had not seen him again.

I drove out from Warsaw during an air raid interval. When we were well out of the city, several German planes attacked us. The bombs were falling on either side of us. Huge clouds of smoke covered the countryside as the bombs fell. A splinter wounded my driver in his hand. We had no time to bind it up, when one plane, flying very low, directly above us machine-gunned our truck.

I heard the sharp crackle of the gun, the frightful roar of the plane, not knowing if the bullets came near to me, or not—when suddenly I felt something warm running down my cheeck and neck. The shattered window glass had cut me and my chauffeur was wounded in his second hand. As he could not use his hands, we changed places, still going on full speed, and I was obliged to drive the truck in spite of the fact that I am a very poor driver. I was terrified that I should have an accident. I drove in zigzags, skidding all over the road, trying to get out of the sight of the Germans. After a certain time, which seemed to me interminable, we fortunately succeeded in escaping and reached the place of our destination.

When exhausted and worn out I was longing for rest, I learned that the Germans were now advancing from the south and the place, where my boys were staying with the Scouts, was exposed to danger. My throat closed with anxiety. All my physical fatigue vanished. I decided to go at once, taking leave of 3 days, to gather my children, so as to put them into a safe place—the house of my parents, where I had sent my children, being no longer a refuge.

I hurried by day ignoring the air raid warnings, I drove at night without lights all the way. I passed the well known town, where I had spent my school years, now partly in flames. At several points we were stopped and had to argue and ask and beg to be allowed to pass into the zone of operation. I was in uniform, which helped a lot. The way seemed to me endless. When at last I reached the place, I found to my horror,that the whole village was evacuated and the boys moved to an unspecified place.

I searched for them in the grilling heat of the day and the whole night. I shall never forget my relief, when I finally found them, among a company of soldiers busy and merry, cleaning guns with them and where the German artillery sounded, singing a joyous soldiers' song.

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I tried to laugh with them. I think they never guessed, what I went through during these days.

Now we had to collect my daughter from her grandparents. We arrived there at night, to find the big old house of my youth lit up by moon beams. The smell of the roses, which climbed all over the walls was almost suffocating.

. Everybody seemed to be asleep. I entered the side door of the library, my favorite room. The glittering, polished oak floor, the well known pictures of Italian and known masters, the gilded backs of books in every language—looked at me as usual and seemed to welcome me. I heard a noise. In front of me, emerging from the shadows, my mother appeared. Sorrowful but calm, forseeing the misfortune, the nightmare of separation. For how long - nobody knew?

The picture of my home and of my mother, as I saw her—a few hours later for the last time is imprinted on my memory and is very characteristic of Poland. Tall and proud she stood framed in the door way, like grown into the house and soil, bidding us farewell with the sign of the cross. The journey was very difficult, roads were overcrowded, the heat was unbearable—we scarcely could move.

I saw women and old men and little children dropping from fatigue and terror, as they fled in terror from burning villages and oncoming armies. I bent over a woman on the road, who was giving birth to a child, begrimed with dust and sweat.

On my way I passed small burning villages, undefended towns, swollen by refugees, where the raiders could come by day dropping poisoned chocolates for Polish children, poisoned cigarettes or—bombs.

I have seen defenceless children —a group of girls and boys playing football—machine-gunned from German planes. I have seen with my own eyes the fruit of hate and evil.

It was Sunday morning, a beautiful bright day, when we approached the manor house of my friends, close to the borders of Russia and Rumania, where I intended to leave my children and come back to my service. All seemed so much more quiet and safe. We heard the loudspeaker telling about a successful battle, which should allow our armies to resist more effectivey, awaiting the offensive of France and England. In a small wooded country church the bells were rung for mass. Hope rose again in our hearts.

But two hours later, I was told the terrible news. The Bolsheviks had attacked our country, traecherously, without any declaration of war, striking a dagger in Poland's back.

I sat in the garden for several hours shattered with the horrible truth. Now I knew it was the death-blow. My country defeated, my personal destiny meant so little to me. But I had three children—I must go—but where? We were in a trap. I could not return home, I could not get get in touch with my husband, who was somewhere with the army. I was alone to decide. As far as I can see in my life, it was the only moment, when I felt totally frustrated, when I lost for an instant all my energy and vitality. We could not believe in our heart of hearts, that the heroism of our army was in vain, that it was the end.

In the evening it has been rumored that the Bolsheviks, coming in countless thousands, were already in the neighboring town. We sat far in the night scarcely talking to each other, undecided and unhappy, at every noise awaiting the enemy. Then, on another day they came, vulgar, noisy, giving off a special smell of boots, loudly shouting, they expelled my friends from their property, giving one hour to pack and leave. All refugees had to return to the place of their birth, I read the dreadful poster over and over again and could not bring myself to realize it. Each of my children and myself were born in different place, so it meant to us—separatio.n

During that sleepless night I decided to leave my country. To rerealize what it meant to us, one must know the people of Poland, one must feel their inherent love of their soil. For, the people and soil of Poland are part of each other.

And so, homeless and crushed I crossed by night the Rumanian frontier, accompanied by my three children. Approaching the border

lines in the forest, we bent over and kissed the dark ground. My sons took a clod of it for the gloomy exile. My little daughter sleepy and tired, but happy in her unconsciousness, clasped in her arms her teddy bear—the last present of her father.

Rumania - Yugoslavia - Bulgaria-

Italy - Switzerland - France-

England - Canada

. . . And then, the mournful refugee life began. . . It is not only lack of everything, material, which makes it so hard.

True you are homeless, uprooted, often cold and hungry, but more than food, you are hungry for warm affection, for the moral atmosphere of your country.

You are restless, inwardly torn—homesick. The slightest rudeness pains.

People of a happy and free country, who never had to live through this tragedy—be warm to a refugee!

We don't want to be a burden to you. We bring with ourselves, as a dowry, the whole baggage of our background, education, culture and tradition. Our own way of thinking, our different reactions, our own ideas. We bring also our experience. We have seen with our own eyes the fruit of hate and evil. And because we have seen it and because we have suffered from it—we have understood, only too well, what it means. Our eyes are open. Maybe, it would be useful to exchange those spiritual gifts between ourselves.

LONGED FOR REST

When we arrived at Bucharest, the capital of Rumania, I longed for rest and comfort—but I could not afford the luxury of relaxing. I had to hold on.

I was full of anxiety of what happened to my husband. A stream of refugees arrived, our soldiers, who after having heroically fought to the end, crossed the frontier hoping to reach France and continue the fight. I had deep in my memory his image, as I saw him the last time. He looked haggard, with his face contracted and tired, thinner than ever—a heavy worry in his eyes. I knew what it was to him the defeat of Poland. I knew how much he had given to his country. I remembered well the last year before the war, how very hard he had driven himself, the nights he had not slept, the days of work and worry. Everything has been in vain. What was happening now? One week later I got the message. He was in the internment camp with soldiers and officers and he wanted me to leave Rumania as soon as possible.

With the feeling of helpless injustice in my heart I started to prepare our journey.

SECURED PAPERS

Ater a lot of troubles and miseries, standing in line for hours and hours, to exchange money, to get a stay permit, or exit permit, I finally got the necessary passport, visas and tickets, to cross the whole of Europe, on the way to France. Paris was the aim of our journey, Paris where I have lived the happy joyour years of study and then the happiness of my honeymoon. Paris, whose beauty and mellow charm could be a comfort for my distressed soul.

Reaching, through Switzerland, the French frontier, I was told, that the capital was evacuated and, no women or children were admitted. But I was already trained in overcoming adversities. I obtained at last the permission from a chivalrous official. "At your risk, Madame, but don't expect any assistance in evacuation, when bombing begins." It was the moment, when, France expected the German offensive at any time.

I was not frightened. We arrived in Paris and settled there for winter. Before I could look round, my small rooms became the meeting place of refugees, arriving little by little, and of my French friends. Anybody who liked could bring newcomers. I think it was its unpretentiousness and the Polish traditional friendliness, that they liked it. I could not seat more than ten people—so the rest sat on the floor,

on cushions and we talked and talked, eating some nice Polish cake, with not enough plates and no forks.We all needed human contact and to be closer each other in this exile.

The children went to school, which was not easy to arrange as all schools were evacuated, only two working. My boys found attraction in the atmosphere of some danger and excitement, which reigned in Paris only for a few weeks. Then, when time marched on and nothing happened. the idleness demoralized the French people.

POLES RE-FORMED ARMY

The Poles re-reformed during the winter their army was in France. Polish men and boys escaped from Poland in greatest danger, to join the Polish troops and about 100,000 men went in with the fight in the French war. But France did not profit by Polish experience. Our troops fought on the fjords of Norway, in Greece, in Egypt. They are also in Scotland. Our navy and our airmen are fighting wing to wing with their Allies, faithful for ever. In Russia a new Polish army is formed.

I spent many hours with my boys in reading the finest writers of French literature, to make it easier at school and I was running a work room for the soldiers, which the Ambassadress of U. S. A., Mrs. Biddle supported. At the end of May when the French lines broke under the German offensive, I sent my chidren off and kept on working. The miitary situation grew more and more grave. The 12th of June one of my friends rang me up. "Heavens, what do you do staying in Paris! You must leave this evening." It was easy to say, but hard to do—I had no car there was no human possibility to get into the train. Yet I succeeded! When we were well out of the town, the train was under fire. We stopped on the road and were told to hide ourselves in the bushes. Bombs dropped harmlessly, I don't know it happened that simething damaged the engine. Now we were left to our own invention. Among the hurrying crowds, I climbed into a truck, jammed with soldiers and when they changed the direction, I bumped on an artillery ammunition supply wagon along the road, until I caught another train. I went to Arcachon, the lovely watering place at the Atlantic Ocean to fetch my daughter and then I wanted to join my boys in the summer camp.

DEPRESSING COLLAPSE

In Bordeaux I saw the most depressing collapes of a country. Paris was wonderfully calm and dignified in comparison with Bordeaux, which was a mad house. Fear, confusion, turmoil, crowds of refugee people in cars crowded with mattresses, in trucks, with no gasoline. Planes circled overhead, a few bombs fell somewhere afar, the artillery sounded. The road to the harbor was jammed with valuable cars, topheavy with packages, which were later abandoned on the shore. An atmosphere of excitement, personal selfishness, no spirit of common resistance and determination to fight to death, which was so striking in Poland.

I began to grow uneasy about my boys away in the Pyrenees camp. First, I did not think it would be difficult to join them. Now, I realized the grave situation.

The trains were not running, or very irregular, no car, no truck to drive you. No telegram to be sent. I spent the day on restless running all through the city to find means of communication. A woman I met by chance, who had a son in the same camp and a car, promised me to take us with her, next morning at 7 o'clock.

When. after a sleepless night of bombing, I arrived at her home one hour earlier, I found her room empty! She had left without us. I lost only much of my precious time. Bitter sadness overwhelmed me, as always, when I had to face human selfishness. I walked heavily out of her house, kept on thinking; I must keep cool, I must hold on, by all means I must reach my sons in time!

From one garage to another I walked in, asking people to drive me out. Everybody was busy, excited, they did not even listen to me. After two hours of such circuit, I heard the air raid warning and saw the morning papers come out. On the first page big headlines jumped to my weary eyes. "Nobody will be permitted to leave Bordeaux! No more refugees on the roads." . . . My heart sank. I stood silent, stiffly blinking, my head became giddy . . When I opened my eyes, I saw a young workman raising me up. "Come, have a cognac, young lady. Don't be afraid, the bombs are falling far from us." . . . The kind man thought, that I fainted, because I was afraid of bombs.

NO TIME FOR WEAKNESS

I was ashamed of myself—such a silly thing. It was not the time for weakness. When I sat with him in the small "cafe," drinking brandy, my brain began again to turn over plans. All my efforts had been in vain. I was helpless, my only hope was to ask the assistance of Mrs. Margaret B, the Ambassadress of U.S.A., the most warm hearted, kindest person I ever knew, with whom I was very friendly in Warsaw. I knew she would help me, if I could get in touch with her. I was not deceived. Late in the evening, she gave me the car, to drive me out of Bordeaux. I am sure she never realized how much she had done for me and how deeply I remember the kindness shown me when I was down and out. Far longer than all benefits of the world received when I was up. I will always keep for her my warmest, thankful feelings.

It was night and pouring rain, when I left the car with my daughter. There was to be a train next morning. The little town was already struck with panic. The waiting room of the station was filled with people, soldiers sleeping everywhere on the floor. I asked for a refugee hut or canteen—it was crowded too, but nice nurses seemed to be so comforting. I think we both looked queer—somebody led us to a couch in the corner and talked to us, we fell asleep as she talked.

PECULIAR TRAIN

Next morning we climbed into a very peculiar train. Two freight cars were serving a whole district in all directions. The passengers going south, as I was, had to get out, at a siding and wait several hours until it returned from having served the east and west regions. It took us 14 hours to cover the distance of 100 miles.

TRAIN CROWDED

The train was crowded with sweaty men and dismissed soldiers. I was the only woman with my child. It was stuffy and smoky, some slept in the corners, some were fervently discussing politics. One of the men, who was just released from prison for politics or murder—I don't know—was loudly shouting, others agreed with him. "The people of France had been betrayed by the top-men, who led the nation to the gulf. The English, the Poles were guilty too . . . Now was the hour of bloody revenge. Better be the butcher than the beef!" And truly, he look like a butcher. The French temper was swelling and it seemed to me to assist to a political meeting of the French Revolution and see Robespierre in person.

I am not easy to be frightened, but I began to grow uneasy. Outside the sky darkened, there were no lights in the train. The "blood-thirsty" man sat next to my daughter, I drew her closer and closer to me. I tried to make ourselves invisible, whispering to her not to talk Polish to me. She was sleepy, hungry, worn out. Now, they were talking economics, what scarcity of food will shortly be in this country, having no coal, no corn, no sugar. As a foreigner, I will be surely the last to get anything, if I stay here. My mind was working—what shall I do? Where should we go? Again I was at a loss. I was lost in my thoughts, when an unfamiliar touch made me shiver. I looked dizzily and saw in the glimmering light of the cigarette the "blood-thirsty" man, friendly smiling to me, show-

ing the head of my little daughter, leaning on his arm, calmly asleep. "How sweet," he said in a mild voice, "aren't you hungry, Madame?" No, I was not hungry, although we hardly ate anything since breakfast, but I made the quick decision to catch the glimpse of human sympathy, and asked him to help. I needed badly a car to drive me and my three children to the Atlantic sea shore. I will pay what I am asked. "A car?" he burst in laughter—"a car, with gasoline shortage to drive you across South France? Now, when the Germans are on our tracks? You shall find the Germans already in Biarritz, Madame, as they are coming down, along the coast, to take all our harbors. You better stay with us. I will look after you!" But once decided, I was firm. My instinct told me to seek rescue on the sea. After a long argument—he had a daughter like mine, whom he had missed very much in prison—he promised me to come or to send me a friend with the car, if only possible. We took leave like friends, he did not guess I was a stranger, he even complimented me on my Parisian French . . . And so unbelievable, it was the truth, that my children and my own destiny was in the hands of this French rogue, whom I called the "bloodthirsty" man and who had made me shiver a few hours before.

It was night, when we arrived at the place of our destination and had two miles more to walk. We sat in the cool night, pressed one to another at a bench, awaiting the dawn. As soon as daylight came, we walked on, weary and desperately tired. Upon arrival at the camp, we found only a few boys, they were ready to escape through the Pyrenees to Spain, at any moment. If I had come a few hours later I would not have found them. I never will forget the look of relief of my sons. "We knew, mother would come!"

As far as I remember, I slept the whole day. When it darkened I began to be anxious about my rogueman. Would he come? Mightn't he have deceived me? My intuition, which hardly ever betrays me, gave me confidence. At night, I heard a knock at the door. He was standing against the car, "hurry up,' he said harshly, "I am busy."

Driving across the south of France I was wondering, what I would do next. The Germans were coming and there was very little hope of finding a boat going to England or to America. And even I had not enough money for tickets. Wasn't I a fool spending the last francs on this car? The blue sea appeared, my anxiety rose. The contrast between the beautiful, calm nature and the horrors of war was too striking. How unreal my former happy home-life seemed to me!

The loud shout of my boy drew my attention. "Look mother, a train with Polish soldiers crossing our road! Oh mother, let us follow them!" And so we did. They were fragments of the Polish troops, who having fought fiercely until the end, withdrew themselves, with the whole equipment and were on their way to England.

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Providence took compassion on my distress and sent me savlation. The captain of the military boat, which was awaiting them, did not know what to do with us. He apparently did not want to take us. He tried to discourage me warning, that there is only 20 per cent safety in crossing, as we shall be heavily bombed.

To be bombed among our soldiers, seemed to me a party in comparison to being left alone, abandoned on the French shore!

And so after a long and hard crossing, staying for hours in life belts on the deck at night, when bombs fell, we finally arrived in England and one month later we landed on the hospitable Canadian soil.

Fortunate enough, to succeed in saving my children, kindly welcomed in this peaceful, charming country of yours, where we have no hunger, cold or bombing—I have only one thought: to hand down to my children, with the love of their country, the Polish traditions, the strength and abnegation of their fathers, the scorn of gain in life and the aptitude of continuous strain and effort, which would harden their character, so as to make them worthy and fit to rebuild a new delivered Poland.

Published by