

STEFANIA DĄMBROWSKA (POLAND)

CLIP 01

My name is Stefania Dąmbrowska. I do not like my name, I am Stenia Dąmbrowska, formally Stefania, my nick name is Stenia. And please call me Stenia. I was born on 12th October 1916 in Petersburg. My father was a military man, Bohdan, Bohdan spelled with `h` Dąmbrowski. At that time in Russia, he was a cavalry captain I guess. My mother, her maiden name was Kościałkowska, was just next to her husband –we just can say it that way. At that time it was already custom that some women worked. And my mum was working somewhere, in some office called `Prodamed`, I have no clue what it means but it was the name of this place.

CLIP 02

When the war broke out, the second one, Wileńszczyzna was captured by the Russian army. And there were different connections than in the Warsaw areas, different connections existed in Wileńszczyzna. As far as fortune is concerned, this one divided, it will have a big significance later with what happened. Fish ponds were nationalized, forests were nationalized, only thirty hectares of land were left. Horses were given to the war, we – me and my mum were left, there were no men, my parents separated much earlier, we were the only ones at the farmhouse. During the whole autumn in 1939 I was ploughing, only I used the plough and I was ploughing. There was one horse left and three colts which were still too little to work but we had to harness them. Then Lithuanians got theoretically power over a big part of Wileńszczyzna from the Soviet Union. We were quite near Vilnius. And Lithuanians were very bad to the Poles, they were oppressing us, we worked without wages. Before the outbreak of war, I was the employee of the National Bank in the department of the National Agriculture Bank in Vilnius. If I had agreed to become Lithuanian then I would have worked longer, but because I did not agree to do so, I was fired in October and came back to Orwidów, then I took up working at the farmstead on the whole, it was a male job. Yes, there were no men, after they came back from the war it was possible to work, but then there was no money. And I was the main worker then. Those were very, very hard times.

And finally we had spring in 1940. In spring 1940 the Lithuanians asked, quote unquote, to include this part of Wileńszczyzna into the Soviet Union as a further republic. So the Soviet power came. The Soviet power wanted to show off that they were better, better for us than the Lithuanians were. And the Soviet power came. Somebody informed me that I can make money in nationalized forests as a cart man. There were one, two horses. One of our workers would go by sleigh, as winter came, there was plenty of snow, so he drove one sleigh, I drove the next one. During the whole winter I worked as a cart man. I mean, when it was still dark outside we used to go to the forest by sleigh, load the timber, firewood, we took it to the station called Bezdany, there we had to unload this firewood and come back to forest, and again load this firewood – we had to go there and come back twice a day. The next spring came in 1941.

In 1941 I went, it was in June I guess, yes it was in June, so I went to Vilnius, I do not know why, I guess I had to meet with somebody, to find out about somebody, I do not remember exactly. There was very little contact then with the city, very little. And I was at my relations.

I found out that the doctor died two days earlier, that his wife and daughter did not have money to pay for the funeral, and they asked me if maybe me and my mum could help them. I came back home, my mum said: your money, you made it, take it. I went to Vilnius and after that I did not see my mum for a couple of years. I came to Vilnius and the Soviets started deporting Poles from this land on a large scale. That day I could evade arrest, this family had a phone – the śebrowski family, and somebody from their relations knew I was in Vilnius, and they informed me that my mum had already been deported from her place and told me not to come back as they were looking for me.

CLIP 03

And I was walking a few kilometres towards Wilia, the Wilia river was a couple of kilometres

Far from us, but I went to one household, where a worker was – Mr. Joseph – he had a home farm as he got married with a rich lady Lachowiczówna, and he was living there in those forests by the river. They took care of me and again I had a place to live. I helped Mrs. Lechowiczówna do some weeding in the garden, we used to go to the riverside and wait for the next day. After three maybe four days we heard bombarding as if from Vilnius. Nobody wanted to leave this farm house as everyone was scared and did not know what The Soviets would do. First, we could see explosions, some kinds of lights were hung so that we could see at night, and we could hear boom, boom, boom, the noise from tanks and armoured vehicles. This farm house was situated between two main routes - one leading to the east, the northern east – black route and Batory's route. We could see that both routes were filled by the army. What? The war broke out? We had no clue what happened. At some moment we heard shots and everything froze. All tanks stopped, I guess it was a kind of signal that when the Germans were coming, the Russians were supposed to stop. And that is how it was. It took two, maybe three days, it is hard to say. One beautiful day I was by the river Wilia, I went downriver, I was coming back and I saw that at the Josephs in front of their house, there was a horse, harnessed, and an open carriage, and the brother of Mrs. Lachowiczówna. I heard: take a horse and your carriage and go – and this carriage and a horse were left exactly at the Josephs so that something could be saved just in case the Soviets took everything from Orwidów. So I took the carriage and left the place. In the new place I reached I found only a girl. She was my age. She was doing whatever, was not paid for her job but could live there for free. It was a daughter of our herdsman. Melania said: I sit here by myself, it is very good you came. All right, but what is going to be next? Agriculture buildings, where the workers lived, where situated like from here to Anders Street, from the house. The house was in an orchard, the orchard was around, far away, and the two of us, Melania and me, were left in this twelve-room house. It was not too nice. But what could we do. There were no dogs so nobody could warn us even if somebody came creeping. After two or three days some people came. They appeared first, the Zambrowicz family, Mrs. Maja Zambrowicz, the mother of Joanna, Mrs. Maja Zambrowicz with her husband and a goat. And she asked if they could live at my place? Well, if they could live at my place, yes, of course, you are welcome. It was good for me that somebody would live there, not only Melania and me. They just escaped from Warsaw, were in Vilnius, I do not know if they stayed with their relatives or where and they moved to the village called Bezdany, as they heard about many little farms there where holidaymakers come. It was June, so they thought that maybe during the summer they could stay there, somewhere in some village at a farm, save some money and come back to Warsaw. They did not have any plans what to do next. And my house was big, as I said twelve rooms there were, so there was enough space to live.

CLIP 04

After the Zambrowicz family, the next people came. The lady was Jewish, she was a friend of my uncle, a friend from school. During the first war at POW, she was at POW, she was baptized, was very catholic, but all people from Orwidów knew she was a person of Jewish origin. She used to come every summer to visit her friend, I mean my uncle's wife.

He was Aryan. And they said, well they wanted to find out, I mean Natka – this lady wanted to find out what happened to my aunt. She thought that maybe my aunt was there, she did not know she was deported. When finally she found out about it they decided to come back to Warsaw.

I wanted them to stay but I knew that I was exposing others. So in this situation I invited all workers to the porch and said: Listen, I would like this family to stay but I do not want to make a decision because I know that you know how much our life is in danger. So if nobody says a word it will be good for this family and for us. If somebody reveals that they live here, he is a bastard, maybe it will be a credit for the Germans but we will all have to suffer.

If somebody reports about it, betrays, then we – all citizens of Orwidów, will be responsible for that. So I do not want to make this decision.

So they stayed. There were some accidents, moments where we got some signals and they had to leave Orwidów for a few days, that there was some danger, but finally they stayed.

We shared everything, ate together, all that we managed to collect, all money was shared. Me, during the German times, it was actually later, I used to go to villages and sell, the house was furnished, so I sold some duvets, linen, place settings, covers. I sold that as we had to live somehow. So only they were there, the Zambrowicz family was there but they lived by themselves. Well, I had known Natka for a long time, since our childhood. Stefan worked a little bit, but he had no idea how to work in the countryside. He also did not know how to harness the horse, he was a city person, a journalist, so he had no clue, but obviously he was trying to do something, tried to help. The wages were not as good as during the Soviets times, we had to do anything, load the wood for the Germans, offer help by lending the horse, carriage and a worker. So we did not make any money. The forests were somehow ours but we had to steal wood from our own forest, some dry trees we used to cut down and take to Vilnius – there we sold it to make some money.

CLIP 05

Probably in August I went to Vilnius. I needed to meet people who had some contacts, knew more about the world around, it was easier with them, to find out something from them. And I found out from them, that on their balcony overgrown with vines, on the first or second floor, a married couple was hidden. She was a daughter of the best Jewish dentist, he a lawyer from Sosnowiec, who escaped from Germany, came to Vilnius, met Hana and married her. They were living on the balcony, were scared. They had some papers, I do not even know how it was with those papers, some documents they had. Their last name was real, the good type. Hana was a blue-eyed blonde, nobody could really say she was a Jew, Arnold also did not look like a Jew. And they were definitely willed to leave Vilnius, so as not to live on that balcony.

I went to Orwidów and said to this married couple they had to be very careful as the more shady people live in here, the bigger danger it was somebody could say something, betray. I told them that there is a situation like that and if they or rather we can decide to help. I brought the Minkowski family. There was a huge problem with them as they were very scared. In Niemenczyn – that was a little town with a ghetto. So the Minkowski's were really scared to know that seven kilometres from us there was a ghetto, they would prefer not to be in Orwidów, they thought being in Orwidów was at a big risk. And the Minkowski family was really scared. After the ghetto in Niemenczyn was closed down they were very scared and wanted to go to the home farm to those people where they had been hidden in Vilnius. It was Belarus then as the province was divided into the Lithuanian and the Belarus part. The Belarus part was in the south, it seemed to be safer. Lithuanians were said to be unpredictable, that there were more of them and they could talk too much. But I have to say that one more time, in Vilnius there were areas with almost no Lithuanians.

CLIP 06

It was 1941. The German-Soviet war broke out in June 1941 and it was still this year. So I tried hard to rent a wagon, which could take us to Belarus. Hana had some clothes, Arnold did not have any, but she had some stuff, maybe she got something from her father, from home, I do not know what, but we had something which could be sold. I did not have money, I had little money, but enough to buy food. There was one man, who bought some small land from Orwidów. He was called Dzanuk as he was always dreaming about going to America, that is why he was called like that, but his real last name was Mackiewicz, Janek Mackiewicz. Janek Mackiewicz decided that he could take them by horse about 100 kilometres to Belarus to the Fedeki family. They died there by the way. So one family left that place. I went to Vilnius, I had a contact spot because I had to get documents for one person who was supposed to come to me in Orwidów, take those documents and go, I do not know exactly where, I guess to Warsaw. I went to a lady that I saw once in my life. It was my contact spot. She said to me: you can save a child. Additionally, I did not like children, they were horrible. Ok, how is that possible. So there is a story that her friend from Warsaw, not exactly from Warsaw, she was more from Vilnius, so they were going to some course before the First War broke out, before the Second World War they took part in some first-aid course. So she had parents in Vilnius and her child, it was a girl who was 3 years old then and she left that girl at her parents. She was living in Grodno as her husband was chemistry engineer and worked in Grodno in some chemical

factory for the Soviet Union and when the war with Germans broke out, then Mr. Józef was deported into the Soviet Union to set up some factories there, and his wife with the second child, the younger one, was sent somewhere into Russia. The child had very good papers as my college, who as I said before I saw for the first time, was Aryan and decided to give her last name and exactly the last name of her husband – it caused other problems that she gave that last name. And the priest, in Vilnius there were 2 priests, so the priest Kretowicz, Chlebowicz, priest Chlebowicz gave this child a birth certificate saying that she is a child of Irena and Jan Nowicki.

And again the same story happens. I go to Orwidów and say – there is a story like this and that, are we taking it or not? All take responsibility for that. Ok, but how to explain the presence of this child so I created the story because Irena was a white-pink blonde, the child had also fair hair and blue eyes so we could say it was Irena's daughter, but the child could not say even a word in Polish, she could speak only Russian because the grandma's husband was not a father of this relative, he was not a grandfather of this child. Mrs. Melezyniuk became a widow and then for the second time got married with a Jew, they both escaped from the Soviet Union and they spoke Russian, especially at home in Vilnius. The next thing was the child talked about her grandma and grandpa so again we created a story that Irena was my cousin and escaped from Warsaw. She was not my cousin, but she escaped from Warsaw. It was true she worked in a hospital, was a nurse and had night shifts – it all was true. And that she lived in Vilnius at with white Russians- well here we only changed aunts into grandma and grandpa, who spoke Russian at home all the time, the child could see her mother very seldom and that is why she cannot speak Polish and that is the reason why Irena wants to have this child in a different place. And the child came, little, angry, crying, three year old, almost three year old as it was November, and she was born in December, Miriam, her name was Miriam but she was called Maryśka. I do not know if people believed this story or not. But after a while Maryśka was liked by most people, especially by Melania. Melania liked her very much and used to walk with her to the village.

CLIP 07

People stopped thinking about the origin of this child and where she came from, a child who could not speak Polish. This child learnt Polish very fast, Natka took care of her and there were many funny jokes with Maryśka. But it was very dangerous. I remember one day, there was one of our workers, she was a cook, drinking a lot, so she lived in the village for a while and had a tiny farmhouse, and she used to run drunk and scream: there is a big Jew who feeds cows and that child must be Jewish, too. Of course, only a fool is not scared in a situation like this. Well, it is a human being, if you take a risk you need to decide to the end, be consistent.

CLIP 08

In Vilnius before the war, there was a group of young people supporting the Left wing. Sztachelski was one of them, who here after the war went into the Health Ministry – straight away, Jędrychowki the ex-leader of the planning board, śeromska, Mucha śeromska, who married Kazik Namysłowski, Muta Dziewicka, Irena Dziewicka, that was the group of six or seven young people. I did not stay in touch with those people mostly because they were older than me. By the way, I was at school for a very short time, it was maybe like 4 years only, so I did not know a typical school life. I did not know anybody and did not have any contacts. The very interesting fact was that they all were the alumnus of the Nazareth Sisters School or a Jesuit School, boys were from the Jesuits, girls from the Sisters of Nazareth. And that is how it looked like. So when the Germans came, Mucha śeromska, Namysłowska, Namysłowski and some other people, there are some other names, but the ones which I gave were the most famous ones, they were against the Germans, they were plotting against the Germans and those contact spots were exactly at their place. Sometimes they were seriously at risk, the Namysłowki family asked us to let Zbyszek live at my place together with his grandma – Mucha's mother. Poles, as Poles, had nothing to do with Jews. It was a new danger. The fact is the Namysłowki family lived by themselves about fifteen kilometres from us, in the farm house in Lipówka which belonged to the lawyer Mr. Zagórski.

But they were scared about the child and Mrs. Julia śeromska and asked to let them live at my place. So it was additional couple sitting at my place, very unpredictable especially due to the Germans.

CLIP 09

One beautiful day Jadzia came to me and said: well young lady, Nitson is asking if you would mind taking his niece to your place, Sonia, as they live in the forest in the shelter and Sonia cannot stand this place any more, she gets angry and would prefer to live among people. But Mrs Jadzia, who is that Sonia? Well, Sonia is fifteen years old, is a daughter of a rich sales man in the town called Niemenczyn and his Mr. Rubin Nitson's sister – he also was a rich sales man, she could not speak Polish very well. Does she have papers?

No, she does not. They managed somehow to leave the ghetto in Niemenczyn, they were hiding a few kilometres from us next to Drzwiniany.

But what Sonia is going to do? Well, Sonia and Janusz can pasture cows. I think it was my idea. And Janusz, he was my mum's cousin's son, who was sent by his aunt in summer to Orwidów because she also was worrying about this boy, that maybe he could start doing something dangerous in Vilnius. So Sonia, Sonia and Janusz will wake up early in the morning and hike to the forests to those grazing lands and come back late in the evening. It doesn't matter how hot it is going to be, but cows cannot be brought home at noon so Sonia needs to hide far away. And everything was ok for two, three weeks. Natka conceived the idea that next to the entry to Orwidów there was a cross, this cross was between the park and the orchard. Everyone who came to Orwidów had to pass this cross. So she wanted the kids, Marysia and Sonia to decorate the cross for the May religious holiday. It was not the best idea, but it was done like that – Marysia even did not know what her religion was and what her nationality was.

Marysia was from Mrs. Melania, from Mrs. Mela.

One day, it was a very hot day in June, I went together with Stefan to the mill in Hamernia, it was three kilometres from us. It was a water mill, we spent a lot of time there as it took to grind the grains. We came back home and everyone was in a horrible mood. What happened? We found out that during my absence we had a visit of

Lithuanians and Germans and they did not search through the whole house but questioned all residents. They divided all of them into two groups, by the one oak, in a second I will explain why by the oak, so by the one oak the adults were, and by the other one the children.

The house was twenty, thirty meters from the embankment, behind that was a river. At the bank of the river there were four oaks, in front of the house two and further the next two. And we used to have benches by those oaks. It was a wonderful place and those Lithuanians and Germans divided them into two groups. All adults were staying by the one oak, and the children by the second one. Sonia was also there as it was a very hot day and the cows did not want to stay at the grazing lands so were taken home. Natka who was very caring and hospitable invited both kids to the dining room, took them by the table, gave them bread, milk from fridge, and while children were eating, the Lithuanians and Germans came.

All of them, except Sonia, had documents and Sonia was scared. She recognized one Lithuanian who used to come to her parents' shop to do shopping and look after her. Did he recognize her? We do not know. Nobody knows that but Sonia was scared and in the evening Jadzia Pluchocianka came to me, because I think that night Sonia was staying at Pluchocianka, and said that Sonia begs to take her back to her uncle, she prefers sitting in that shelter in the forests to staying in this nice accommodation as she is extremely scared. What could we do? We had to take Sonia back to her uncle. They survived, and after the Russian army came they could leave the forest. Mr. Nitson wrote a card to me saying he wants to thank me, that he , his brother and Sonia are alive.

CLIP 10

There were people who helped during those German-Lithuanian times. Now I would like to talk about this too. If I am saying bad things about Lithuanians, because they were very cruel to the Poles, but there were two very good people in Niemenczyn. It was the village leader Mr. Baučius who was sent

from Lithuania, I guess he could speak Polish, even though it was not good, but he was sent from Lithuania.

The second one was Mr. Żemaitis who had nothing to do with the next minister in here, who was by the way a person of Jewish descent, not a Jew or a Lithuanian. Żemaitis had a big farm house and he was the vice-village leader. Mr. Jankowski, Henryk as I well remember – the district secretary, was also helping. But there were some people who were against Jankowski in spite of the fact he had never done any dirty things. At Jankowski's place lived an organist, it was not his profession, but he was the musician and later professor at our Music Academy- Witold Rudziński. The Rudziński family lived at Jankowski's. We had stayed in touch with the Rudziński family, I mean me and the Świeśewski family used to go there, all of them later knew about Maryśka coming, maybe some documents were needed to give to Maryśka so the church was also a good place. Those two men, these village leaders, did not let Gestapo get to Orwidów two or three times. When Gestapo came and started investigating the inhabitants, Mr. Żemaitis went to his farm house, bringing rotgut from there, some meat - they organized a big party and informed me.

CLIP 11

I need to add that as I said earlier there were two priests in Vilnius, priest Chlebowicz, who gave Maryśka the birth certificate and priest Kretowicz, and the brother of Kretowicz, Onufry Kretowicz- the old man, who used to sit in upper Orwidów, he also gave two false birth certificates. In the upper Orwidów also was a lady, who escaped from the train going to Treblinka and the priest Kretowicz sent his brother's wife just to help her at the farm house. Her name was Helena Strumińska, something like that, well, I am not sure what her surname was. Mrs. Helena, well, I felt that something was wrong with her. Mrs. Helena was a surgeon, the daughter of a doctor from Vilnius, a Jew.

What happened? Well, her story was this. She escaped from Warsaw with her husband, he also was a doctor. They were in Vilnius, living at her parents place. At first there was no ghetto, but then the Germans took her husband to the ghetto, I do not remember the maiden name of Helena, her father- doctor and her husband Abraham Wajnryb, but in general he was called Stanisław. Staś and her father were taken to Estonia to work in a quarry. There, mica was extracted, it was hard work. Plenty of people were deported there to work and extract that mica. Helena stayed at home alone with her mother who was ill, it was cancer. When the Germans reached her house, Helena gave her an injection, anaesthetized her as she knew that when Germans came they would kill her in bed, those were their ways of dealing with people. Finally she was taken to the train. And in the last moment she tore out the wooden board from the floor and lowered herself onto the railway track, she did it, she was lucky they did not shoot her as at the end of the train always a German was who was supposed to shoot if somebody left the train. Helena did it, she rolled onto the railway embankment, went through some fields and reached Vilnius, where the priest Kretowicz gave her papers.

Well, everybody knew that she worked as a maid with the Kretowicz family in Upper Orwidów, and then the Konarzewski family came, they moved there, and she moved to my place.

CLIP 12

Right after the Soviet army came, Helena went to Vilnius straight away and as a doctor she was mobilized, but at the beginning in Vilnius there were Germans. Then only Russians, they occupied all Vilnius and lists of Poles were made who could and would like to work in the offices of PKWN in Lublin. And people who were in that list – I did not want to be in this list, I was proposed to be in this list, nobody offered me that. But in fact people in that list were me, the Świeśewskis, there was Helena...

Finally, when we left the van which took us from the Lublin airport to Lublin, we reached Spokojna Street, it was a street in which before the war there was a province building and after the war too, but not from the beginning, presently there is a province building, to that time there was the office of PKWN.

Listen, it was totally unbelievable when in some moment while we were going in this van from the airport to Lublin we saw stores and everywhere Polish names, notices, army in

Polish uniforms, even now when I am thinking about this I have shivers on my back. It was extremely impressive after this all the mess, after the war. The Warsaw Uprising was continuing, we knew about the Warsaw Uprising, we knew about everything. Here were Polish words and the Polish army.

CLIP 13

I guess two men were interested in me. One of them was an economist, his last name was very strange - by the way he was Armenian and not Russian - Jekatow, the husband of Muta Dziejwicka, who offered me to work in the offices, in the economics office in PKWN. And just after a moment professor Syngalewicz came to me, he was the professor of forensic medicine and offered me to work with him in the Majdanek committee.

I took this offer. We were travelling, watching and making notes, all things which were important enough we made notes about, for example a story like this – we are going through the field, there was supposed to be cabbage but were only dried stalks, the ground was creaking and giving way under our feet. Those were human bones, it was the rest from the crematorium, everything from there was emptied out there and dug up and then they planted cabbage there. Then we came closer to the crematorium. There were parts of bodies, some of them prepared to be taken to the chamber. People were put in a row, bodies were brown. They did not look horrible, they were brown, the smell was disgusting, it was such a hot day, August, in the middle of August in 1944. We always had a scarf on our head to cover our hair and protect it from the smell, the smell which was in Majdanek. After coming back from Majdanek we put our clothes onto the balcony. We lived in barracks, men together with women. Then we saw loads of shoes taken from the people who were going to die. Little children's shoes, male and female shoes, some clothes, and we had to write down everything. Then we finished going to Majdanek and two or three times went to some forest, I do not remember the name of it, but we went to a forest where people were murdered. They were thrown down into a big ditch and were buried in the way they had fallen down. When one of those ditches were dug up, we saw a mother holding her child, or a couple. All documents were taken from their clothes and we were trying to check who was who.

CLIP 14

What happened with our people? Helena, Staś came back, the husband came back, the father died, the husband of Helena Snarska called Lusja Wajnryb, he also was taken to the army but they moved to France later on, and then to Australia. They used to write from Australia but Stefan lost their address, the last letter from Australia, I couldn't write a letter. I wrote to some Polish magazine, I wanted to find out how they were doing, and I got a very nice letter, they wrote to me right after they came to Australia, I remember Helena wrote in a very funny way – with me it is like that – when only a man looks at me, just a second and I am having a baby, I have three sons. And with them, I do not know what happened; I could not find any contact with them. And Sonia and her family, this Sonia who was grazing the cows, they survived, Maryśka is in Israel, I stay in touch with her younger sister Ruth Lewin, also I call sometimes, sometimes we write to each other, she has difficulty writing in Polish, she was a little girl when her parents left Poland. Who else, I have already said, the Minkowski family died, Natka died because of cancer, we were together with Stefan, I had a paper, it was not so important to me, but it was good to have it. He died long ago. Who else? Others spread, I stay in touch with Maryśka's family, her uncle was at that time in Warsaw, he married a Polish woman.

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