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# My First Border

**Editor's Note:** As we were preparing this issue for publication, we received the following letter:

"I have found and translated an excerpt from a diary written sixty-five years ago. The woman to whom it belongs lives in Edmonton now, and although she is old and her retirement consists of looking after a sick husband, she has lost none of the spirit with which she crossed her first border at the age of fifteen. What makes her particularly interesting to me is the fact that, although an outsider throughout her whole life — first as a Pole in Russia, then as an immigrant in Poland, then an internal refugee after World War II, as a result of anti-Soviet as well as anti-Nazi underground work, and then once more an immigrant, this time in Canada — she is a woman with firmly-planted roots.

Renia's life has been and still is full of struggle. She has had and still has moments of deep depression when the burden becomes too heavy and there is no one with whom to share it, but she always manages to find a way out. In love with learning, she graduated from university with a Master of Arts and a teaching certificate at a time when education was expensive and her parents could not help her. She calls that degree her "iron crown," something no one can take away from her. That thought kept her from despair during her last ten years before retirement, which she spent at WhiteStag, over a sewing machine. She mentioned once that, because the work left her mind free to wander, she often reformed the education system! A pity her thoughts are lost.

Although she has found no wealth and no professional satisfaction here, Renia is one of Canada's most patriotic citizens. Just as she was one of Poland's. An intelligent, strong, caring woman. A tree that, continuously uprooted by history, has learned to take its nourishment from the sky. My mother."

I had just turned fifteen that spring when mother decided to try and send us across the border once more. Our lives had been in danger ever since the Revolution had started. Father, a property owner and therefore an enemy of the Revolution, had gone from hiding place to hiding place at first, then left Russia with the remains of the Polish army. There was an independent Poland now, and all the Poles who had stayed loyal to their origins and who wanted to leave Russia had a place to go.

The border, however, was closed and well-guarded on the Russian side. Once in Poland, father had sent a message that everything was ready for us, that we should try to get across. That had been three years ago. In the meantime, mother barricaded doors at night against marauding soldiers who were looking for food, alcohol and hidden treasures. The caves underneath our old house were dug up repeatedly by "official" search parties who arrived during the day because someone had reported either a barrel of non-existent plum brandy or other delicacies.

We did have a treasure of sorts. It was a stack of good leather harness. Father had always loved and kept horses; this was all that was left now. Harness was hard to come by during the Revolution and farmers were prepared to pay with food for it. Mother

sold it little by little. There was a trap door in the kitchen, covered with a small rug, and whenever anyone knocked at the door, the bags with the harness were thrown into the root cellar. When danger passed, they were hauled up again. Leather needs fresh air or it will rot.

One day, just after I had stacked the messy-looking bags neatly against the wall, in the shape of a couch, and covered them with a large spread, there was pounding at the door. No time to dispose of the bags. A group of soldiers pushed their way in and, while their commanding officer sprawled out on my new couch, searched the house from top to bottom. And found nothing.

My two brothers who in the absence of their father, spent their days as they pleased, came home in the evenings with stories of massacres, keeping us up-to-date as to who was killing whom now. Mother's chief concern was finding food. I remember as she wrapped her too-large dresses around her skinny body, tying them around the waist with a belt. I also remember the feasts we had, of bones left over from the soups that she was ordered to cook for the soldiers who had stopped for the night in our town.

My brothers finally succeeded in getting over to the other side. Mother then tried sending me and Jadzia, my five-year old sister,

BY RENIA WOJNO (Translated by A. Wojno)

but our first attempt had been a failure; the smugglers who were to take us were arrested. It was time to try again.

Mother gave me her silver watch, a ring, some money and a few gold coins, sewn into the hem of my skirt. I was to carry the five-year old Jadzia in my arms and our excuse for travelling was her lame leg: officially we were on our way to a healer.

We joined Mrs. Z., an old neighbour into whose care mother had entrusted us, and two other people, all carrying bags full of their most valuable possessions. One woman had a baby with her. After travelling both by train and by horse-drawn carts, we arrived in a village close to the border. A farmer was expecting us and we spent the night at his house.

We were awakened by his urgent voice in the morning, "the police!" Our group had no time to panic. The farmer threw Mrs. Z.'s parcel full of documents and paper money onto the manure pile in the yard. Women put all the gold dollars into a large scarf and wrapped it around the baby. I took Jadzia outside, were we sat down quietly on a bench.

The police came, asked us some questions, looked carefully through the house and ordered the whole group to the station. Once there, a woman in uniform asked me to strip and carefully searched the seams of my clothes. She found the coins and demanded an explanation.

"We're going to see a healer," I told her. "The money is for her. They're in my hem so that nobody steals them." She believed me. The next day I got the money back, but was told to search for a healer at least twenty-five kilometres away from the border.

Our farmer loaded the whole group into a straw-filled cart and took us to the next village. He told us that the smugglers were already waiting for us there.

In the village we spent another night, and the next morning, at dawn, Mrs. Z. woke me up and told us to follow her. We were not to make any noise. Because it was still April, the mornings were cold, the ground frozen. We had to walk barefoot, like other villagers, not to attract attention. I followed her down narrow paths, through fields of stubble. My feet hurt terrible, but there was nothing to be done. My back was serving temporarily as a laundry line. Mother gave me gold coins; it never crossed her distracted mind

that I would need clean rags much more. My period had started during the night and I had no change of clothing. Seeing the sun rise over the horizon, it struck me that I could dry my underwear by spreading it on my back. Walking carefully so that Mrs. Z. would not see what I was up to, I had a hard time containing the constantly-threatening waves of laughter. I will never forget this painful and funny march.

Finally we got to a village where Mrs. Z. made the necessary arrangements. In the evening the rest of the group joined us. The smugglers lined us up along a road, spacing us in such a way that if the border guards came upon one, the rest would have time to disperse.

Walking thus, single file, we arrived in a forest. At a clearing, the smugglers stopped, ordering us to sit down. Soon the only sounds heard in the darkness were those made by the owls and the psst..., psst... of the smugglers. They communicated with one another by imitating forest creatures. There was no moon; the night was pitch black. I heard horses. Or rather one slow horse, its hooves hitting the ground sharply. Border patrol. Jadzia slept in my arms.

A dog barked, then another. We moved forward. Like so many ghosts, the smugglers guided us to the edge of the forest. Only a narrow field separated us from the river Zbrucz. Beyond Zbrucz lay Poland.

We heard horses again. There were several of them, grazing by the river, while the guards sat by. The smugglers stopped us and went ahead to investigate. "It's not a good night for crossing," they told us upon returning. "We must go back."

The thought that the whole effort had been for nothing took away the rest of my strength. Clutching the sleeping Jadzia to my chest, I stumbled after the others through gullies, certain that if I fell I would not be able to get up again. We entered a forest with thick undergrowth. We were to spend the rest of the night here, our guides told us, and left, taking the woman with the baby with them.

I spread my coat on the ground and placed the still sleeping Jadzia on it. Leaning back against a tree I closed my eyes, but I was too tired and my teeth chattered too hard for sleep.

At dawn, Jadzia woke up asking for food and water. We had no supplies with us. I looked around desperately, knowing

that I would find nothing. In the morning light, filtered through the forest, leaves glistened with fresh dew. Of course. I shook the moisture into the palm of my hand and Jadzia licked happily, enjoying the new game. Her thirst gone, she sat quietly until the smugglers returned to take us to the neighbouring village.

A handsome young Cossack, who told us that he had married a girl from this village and settled here, took the two of us to his home. The small house stood at the edge of the village, and the beautiful young woman who welcomed us at the door with a kind smile, directed us immediately to the ladder leading to the attic. Burying ourselves in the straw, we slept.

The same woman woke us up a few hours later and I gazed with disbelief at the huge platter of fresh, steaming dumplings dotted with big dollops of sour cream. I have never tasted better dumplings in my whole life.

In the evening, our group was assembled again. The woman with the baby was not coming. We were to take a different route. Again, we crossed the forest, but this time we turned into a field of wheat. The wheat reached only up to our shoulders; we had to bend down while walking. Jadzia lay heavily in my arms, asleep again.

There were shots in the distance. Beyond the field lay a strip of land thickly covered with musk thistles. We ran across it and then slid down to the river. One of the smugglers pointed to a large log sticking out of the water and told us that the river was shallow enough there to cross. "You're on your own from now on," he said, and both of them disappeared.

We followed Mrs. Z. and Mr. Wisniewski, all that was left of our group, to the log. The night was dangerously bright but the sound of the shots had moved farther away. The round Mrs. Z. rolled into the river with a loud splash. Mr. Wisniewski, who took Jadzia onto his shoulders, followed quietly. I came last, laughing all the way across the river and up the steep slope on the other side. I was still laughing, uncontrollably now, when the Polish border guards pointed their guns at us, shouting "Hands up!" and Mrs. Z. screamed hysterically. Maybe that's why she did not give us the chocolate bar that the commanding officer handed to her later, "for the children," before going to contact father.