

# 3. War – Danzig

1939 - 1945

At 4.47 a.m. in the morning of the 1st of September 1939, the German Battle Cruiser *Schleswig-Holstein* fired the first shots of World War 2 and the invasion of Poland started, a war that subsequently engulfed most of the world. No one could have anticipated the tragedies that overtook tens of millions of people and unleashed so much cruelty and slaughter.

Later that morning, my father took me outside and we could hear thunder in the distance. We climbed to the top of the factory roof, but could not see anything, the sky was clear. But what we heard were the first shots of World War 2 being fired against the Polish fortifications on the Westerplatte, a part of the Polish Corridor, four kilometres away.

The war front moved towards the east and Poland was defeated within a few short



*Left: The German Battle Cruiser 'Schleswig Holstein' arriving on a 'goodwill' visit in late August, 1939. Seen turning in the harbor basin near the lighthouse in Neufahrwasser, (as yet without the walkway). Arrow points to our future flat.*

*Below: 1st of September seen firing against the Polish positions on the Westerplatte at point blank range. The first shots of WW2. One of the photos shows a German Propaganda unit filming the action. We moved into this area 18 months later.*

*Note: One can find the sequences filmed below on the Internet – YouTube (a remarkable facility).*



weeks. Danzig was incorporated within the German Reich (Empire) and its citizens now became German nationals.

At first nothing changed in our family life, nor in our living conditions. Adolf Hitler visited to inspect his latest acquisition and we saw his passing parade. My father took me, sitting on his shoulders, to the boulevard as Adolf Hitler drove along in his cavalcade on the way to the City of Danzig (also see photos SP 13).



*Victory parade on Hitler's arrival 19th September, 1939.*

*The banner reads 'Danzig greets its Leader'.*

*Right: Hitler addressing the 'liberated' Danzig population.*



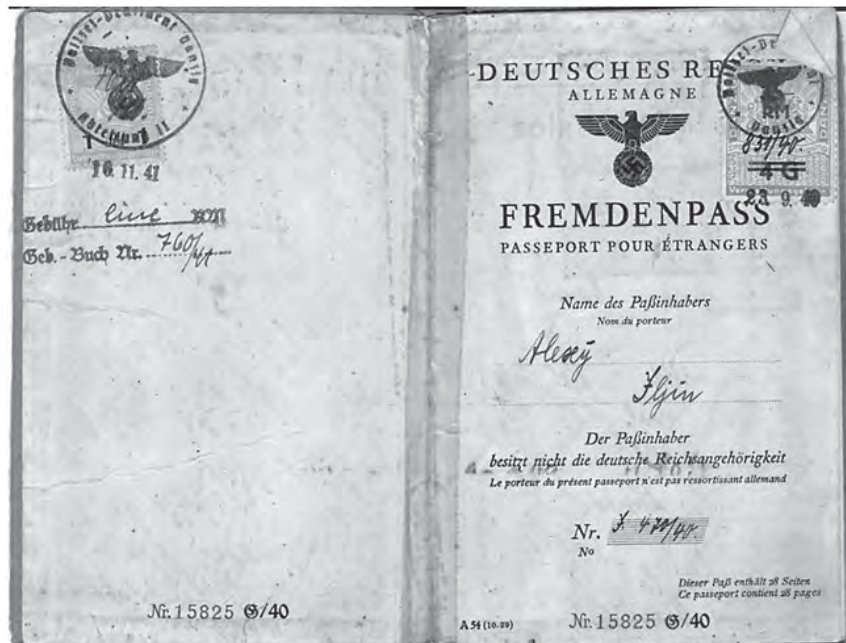
It is ironic that Hitler visited Danzig and eventually invaded Russia, with disastrous consequences. It is interesting to note that in June 1812, Emperor Napoleon also visited Danzig to inspect his supply depots prior to his invasion of Russia – with an equally disastrous outcome.

Germany recognized the stateless status that our family had lived under in the Free City of Danzig, and in all subsequent documents and passports, we were designated as Stateless. The *Nansen Pass* was replaced and my parents were now issued by the German Government with the *Fremdenpass*, (Foreigners Passport). We were not interned and were issued with the same ration cards as the German citizens. The structure of my father's factory essentially remained the same, but the new government appointed a German director to the management. Generally, we still conversed at home in Russian.

Early in 1940 notice was given that the whole complex of factory and accommodation buildings in Langfuhr were to be acquired for the German war effort. An alternative building was provided for the factory and a flat for us nearby. The new location was part of the suburb of Neufahrwasser at Lotsenweg (Pilotsway) No.1a, a small enclave right beside the harbour exit into the Danzig Bay (see maps pp 31, 32). Our flat was situated approximately 150 metres from the firm's new factory building. It was part

of two blocks of three-storey flats forming an L-shape and enclosing a residential park area on two sides. We occupied a corner flat on the second floor with views across to the bay. My father was now issued with a Foreigner's Residence Pass by the German authorities, but still classed as a Stateless (Staatenlos) person.<sup>9 10</sup>

***My father, Alex's Foreigners Passport.  
Valid across all German Territories.***



9 See App. 13/1-3. My father's Foreigners' Residence Pass, that had to be validated every year. Probably issued in November, 1940 and lists the new address in Neufahrwasser.

10 See App. 14. My mother's Registration Card, as being registered with the Russian Trust Office. Dated 12.12.1940 and still shows the old address.



*Life in Lotsenweg 1a, Neufahrwasser. 1940 – 1945.*



*The happy couple in our lounge.*



*My parents at home with a friend.*



*Nik in the snow outside our apartment building.*

Instead of our own seemingly private enclave in Langfuhr, we now lived in an apartment building, occupied by German families and were the only Russians in the area, whom most Germans generally considered to be subhuman, according to the Nazi propaganda. Suddenly our predictable future and living environment had changed somewhat and my parents, I am sure, would have felt a sense of unease.

All the other buildings surrounding us were warehouses and rail sidings, servicing the harbour and the war effort. One of the main attractions for me, within 100 metres from our flat, was the lighthouse, which stood on a slight promontory overlooking the river and the bay, and was next to the pilot station (see photos SP 14). The lighthouse was manned by German navy, *Kriegsmarine*, sailors and quite frequently I would climb the spiral staircase to the top, offer some of my parents' cigarettes around and spend time with the sailors looking across the harbour and the bay through their huge and powerful binoculars mounted on the narrow catwalk. For a young boy there were plenty of new experiences and occasional excitement. Once, two or three years later, I saw the distress rockets of a ship in the bay that had struck a mine, but during that sudden emergency I had to clear off quickly. The nearby naval depot also organized an annual lunch for the locals. The highlight was the *Eintopfsuppe*, 'everything-into-one-pot' soup. This consisted of a thick pea soup with lots of bacon in it, delicious. On the other side of our apartment building an army detachment was housed, charged with guarding the military stores kept in the warehouses around the harbor. I also visited them, but the naval presence was my favourite.

In the early 1940s, I started at the *Volksschule – Jungen. Danzig – Neufahrwasser*, Boys Primary State School, Danzig – Neufahrwasser. I cannot remember much of this aspect of my early years. Possibly it was forgettable. Why? I was the only non-German, of Russian descent, and did not hide the fact. The only thing that I adamantly proclaimed to all was that I was a 'White Russian' in order to distance myself from all the anti-Red communist hatred. I was probably pleased to be different. However, Germany was fighting a bitter war in Russia and German propaganda was proclaiming the Red Russians as subhuman beings, *Untermenschen*, so I might have been confronted, intimidated and possibly bullied at times by some of the boys. I do



*My Primary School in Neufahrwasser. Photo taken early 1900s*



*Neufahrwasser Primary School – 1941 or 1942. Nik in third row, from the front, second from the right of the boys. Note that a number of boys are barefoot. In summer it was not unusual for boys to be barefoot. But clothing shortages during these war years would have been the main reason. Fortunately these boys were too young to be called up to serve at the warfronts.*

remember occasions of trying to get out of class and away at the first opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

Living next to the harbour entrance, with many German Navy ships coming and going, the more interesting route to school was along the river (see photo SP 14), then across a long footbridge spanning the railway yards and into the township. Most mornings the footbridge was guarded by a flock of seemingly ferocious hissing geese, that were quite terrifying for me and frequently I would wait for adults I could follow past these creatures. The walk along the river was ever-changing with all the German naval activity going on. There were minesweepers and destroyers tied up along the river docks. One could look in through the portholes and observe all the sailors' activities on board. There was never a dull moment. Submarines could be seen arriving or leaving along the river, as upstream there was one of Germany's (*Schichau*) submarine shipyards. Also building and trialling a new generation of submarines. These were faster underwater and could recharge their batteries submerged through a *Schmorchel* innovation, via a periscope-like breathing device, that could be raised and lowered. Danzig was also the home base for a submarine training flotilla. (See photo p 33 and SP 15. Upper left-hand side photo)

<sup>11</sup> See App. 15. School Report for Religious Instructions – 31.1.1942

In early May 1941, some major units of the German fleet assembled in Danzig and Hitler visited Danzig for the second time on the 5th and 6th of May to review the fleet and inspect the U-Boat construction facilities. On the second day he farewelled the battleship *Bismarck*. The *Bismarck* then completed her preparations in the Bay of Danzig for an Atlantic sortie, after her recent commissioning and then left for her first and only mission on the 19th of May, 1941. She was subsequently pursued, torpedoed and finally sunk a few weeks later by units of the Royal Navy in the Atlantic Ocean. There were very few survivors. At that time I had not been aware of this visit, nor of the historic consequences, but the sinking was a major morale booster for the allies (see photos SP 15).

By this time, of course, no tea was being imported and the production was switched to making tea from carrots. This was called *Ersatz Tee*, or substitute tea. I believe it was a successful brew and dispatched to many parts of Germany. My father was involved in the design and construction of the carrot processing machinery. I remember truckloads of carrots arriving daily, being washed and shredded and then spread out by women workers onto large sieve-type frames, which were moving along on a conveyor system to be stacked on kiln cars for drying and subsequent roasting and processing. Quite frequently I helped spread the shredded carrots on the trays. There were many *ersatz* items appearing at this stage of the war, which replaced scarce commodities or materials. During these years a barter economy, or black market, had established itself and, as I mentioned before, with my father having the use of the company van, meant that he could drive to farms or other destinations for trading. I am sure that some of these journeys would also have been on behalf of the directors.

The factory was like another playground for me, and I had a free run. An aroma of roasting permeated the whole building, particularly the first floor where the roasting process took place. Next to the factory we had what seemed to me at the time a large garden area where we grew vegetables and quite a number of berry bushes and strawberries. Also in this garden was the entrance to the factory cellar, which had been strengthened and equipped as an air raid shelter for us. At some stage my father built a one-room hut that could be used for storage and overnight sleeping accommodation. In the early stages of Germany's



'General Steuben' in Danzig. The ship I visited.



invasion of Russia, quite a number of Russian émigrés had joined the German army voluntarily to fight against the Communists, mainly in the role of interpreters and trying to help Russian civilians in the occupied territories. In 1943-4, when some of them were on leave in Danzig, they stayed with us and used to sleep in this hut. Seeing their pistols and sub-machine guns was intriguing to a boy of my age.

One of these soldiers was staying on the former passenger liner *General Steuben*, (see previous page) then moored in Danzig and used as accommodation for German forces on leave. He took me aboard this huge ship (which in 1945 was used for refugee evacuations and was sunk in February 1945, with the loss of 3000-4000 lives). One of these soldiers actually taught me a Russian ditty that they had made up and it really represented their belief in the defeat of Soviet Russia. It does not make much sense in the translation:

‘Boom, boom the guns are firing,  
quack, quack the frogs are crying  
and into the mouths of the Reds,  
fly our sandwiches of bread’. (probably meaning: ‘we will defeat them’)



*Inna early 1942 in her first months.*



*With our German ‘domestic helper’. She was allocated through a government scheme to help with and learn about domestic skills and duties. Even though we were Stateless, not Germans.*



*Left: My sister Inna and an ‘early snow’ experience.*



I had been pestering my parents for a baby sister and used to put sugar on our window sill to attract a stork, a German traditional custom, and finally in 1942 I was successful with my temptations and a little baby sister, Inna, arrived. She was actually delivered in a hospital in Danzig and my father and I made the trip to collect her and my mother.

In 1942 our family set off by train for a summer holiday sojourn to Jurata. This was located on the Hela Peninsula (see SP 21 and 24), just west of Hela. It was a lovely area. The peninsula formed the northern arc around the Bay of Danzig. Its northern shore of beautiful sandy beaches faced the Baltic Sea. My sister Inna experienced here her first encounter with the beach. The Jurata area was set amongst pine trees, with the buildings spaciouly spread out amongst them, even the railway station was just a platform that virtually disappeared amongst the pine trees.

*Our annual summer holidays. At Jurata in 1942.*



*Various memories. At the entrance to the flat we rented, on the lovely beach and Nik with some wildlife.*

The war seemed to be far away. It is hard to imagine that less than three years later Danzig and all of north eastern Germany would be captured by the Red Army and this part of the peninsula would become a battleground and the last refuge for more than 250,000 refugees who had managed to cross the bay from the mainland. The evacuations from Hela, across the sea to the west, continued right up to the 8th of May 1945, the day that Germany surrendered. (Also refer map on SP 24).

My parents befriended the local hospital doctor who one day took my father and me into the basement of his hospital, switched on the lights to display his pride and joy, a model railway installation taking up most of this large room. I had never seen the like. He started up various locomotives, attached carriages and ran them through tunnels, across varied landscapes and stopping precisely at stations. It was an incredible spectacle of intricate rail activity.

Next year in 1943, we stayed at Heisternest for our summer holidays, just to the west of Jurata, in rented accommodation provided by one of the fishermen. It was here I first tasted salmon, which was served from glass preserving jars filled, I presume, with an oil marinade. It was delicious – and I still enjoy the delicacy to this day.

In the 1980s my brother-in-law Bob showed me a war-time British Forces publication, called 'Evidence in Camera'. Several of the aerial photos were taken by an R.A.F. bomber plane during a raid in 1942-3 and showed the harbour and shipyard facilities in Danzig, including the area where we lived. In the photo, one can clearly see our apartment building, my father's factory and my immediate world at that time. The wharves along the river, the lighthouse, my path to school, the spot where I caught the tram, all were captured. Fortunately, our area was not the target. I have always wondered whether I might have been playing, walking or running somewhere in that area whilst the photo was being taken. Could I have been outside and actually be in the photo? It is a possibility.

Looking at the aerial photo, the apartment block is L-shaped and just to the left of the centre. Our apartment was in the northwest corner facing the Free Basin. My father's factory is shown as a small square, 150 metres south on the bend of the road that leads to the river (see photo and map following pages).

The suburb of Neufahrwasser is situated in the right of centre, represented by the cluster of buildings. That is where I attended the primary school in the early 1940s. To get there I walked along the river and then crossed the railway lines by way of a footbridge, which can be seen on the photo and parts of the walk can be followed on the photo along the left bank. The lighthouse is situated between the end of the apartment block and the river.



*R.A.F. Aerial Photo of Neufahrwasser, where we lived at the time  
this photo was taken.*



*Aerial photo of Neufahrwasser taken during the war by British reconnaissance plane.  
Possibly in 1943. See markers and descriptions on map next page – covering the same area.*