

Helena's Story

The early years...

Helena was born in 1901 in the village of Kornatka by Dobczyce, about 25 km south of Cracow.

In the late 1920s she married Pawel, a musician, who had just returned from 16 years in America and wanted to start a family. About that time he bought a one-story house in the growing district of Podgórze, where you are now staying in this apartment. He built an upper story onto the house with the help of his brother Antoni, who stayed in Chicago.

Helena and Pawel moved into an apartment on the upper floor, where they raised their son Jozef, born in 1931. Their second child, Tosia, died young of scarlet fever. The family were on good terms with tenants and neighbors; they had lifelong friendships with some. Helena was cheerful and gregarious by nature and a good housekeeper. Pawel was something of a wandering spirit, and contributed to the family's income by playing in Cracow's music venues.

War times...

In 1940, during the Second World War and the German occupation, Pawel had a conflict with a tenant over unpaid rent. The tenant went to the local Gestapo and reported that his neighbors in the house secretly listened to the prohibited BBC radio broadcasts. In July, Pawel and eleven other residents of the house were arrested, loaded on a truck, and taken to a prison in Tarnow. At first Helena was able to send him packages of food and clothes. Then Pawel was transferred to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where he died of typhus in December 1940.

Before his death Pawel was able to send Helena a message telling her not to heat the tiled stove. He had hidden his small savings in it. Helena lived for some time from this money and from the sale of personal belongings.

In 1941, all the residents of the house were relocated by the authorities. A wall was built surrounding the district, which became the ghetto, the only place Cracow's Jewish inhabitants were allowed to reside. The ghetto was liquidated in March 1943. A little boy who escaped from the Cracow ghetto later became the filmmaker Roman Polanski. Nearby, across the railway tracks, was the enamel factory where the people worked whose story is told in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*.

During this period, Helena lived with her 11-year-old son Jozef in Ulica Celna. She had a pass to enter the ghetto and occasionally visited her house. In January 1945, in the cellar in Ulica Celna, she felt the explosion as the retreating Germans demolished the bridge over the Vistula. Cracow celebrated the end of the war.

Back in Dabrowki...

Helena returned to her home. The house was soon placed under state administration and the rent income ceased. Helena opened a small grocery shop, an enterprise which was prohibited in the late 1940s.

Not giving up, Helena earned her living as a dressmaker. She had friends, family and many clients. She remained cheerful and gregarious, enjoyed celebrations, cooking and baking, reading and storytelling.