

A Wartime Memoir

by Karolina
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*Publisher's report by Antonia
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This report includes a summary, a synopsis and an assessment.

1. Summary

Karolina Lanckorońska was a Polish aristocrat and art historian, born into a highly respected noble family. After gaining an excellent education, mainly in Vienna, she became a professor of art history at Lwow University in what was then eastern Poland. This book is an autobiographical account of her experiences during the Second World War. Written in Polish and published in 2001 (by Znak, Krakow), it is roughly 100,000 words long. In eight chapters divided according to her location at different periods of the war, the author gives a detailed and fascinating account of “her war”.

The narrative starts with the Soviet occupation of Lwow, where (aged 41) she taught at the university, then moves to German-occupied Krakow where – able to speak perfect German - she set about charitable work providing food for political prisoners throughout south-eastern Poland, while also secretly conducting intelligence work for the Polish resistance. This continued until a particularly sadistic Nazi was enraged by her defiant attitude and found an excuse to arrest her. From then on until the end of the war she was a prisoner, in three cities and finally in Ravensbruck concentration camp. Thanks to some amazing luck - the intervention at the highest level of influential friends, and the action of an honourable Nazi - she was saved from death on several occasions.

Throughout this ordeal, Lanckorońska was subjected to varying treatment, left to starve to death at worst, and given extra food, comfort and medical care at best, according to the fluctuating concerns of the top authorities in Berlin. Her own response to her experiences was to remain defiantly resilient and loyal to Poland, and even in the most extreme circumstances she made every possible effort to help others, especially her fellow Polish political prisoners. Among many accounts of wartime suffering, this one is distinct for the author's unusual strength of character. Her magnetic personality and superb story-telling make this a powerful narrative and sustain our interest through some harrowing reading. Her ability to view her situation objectively also gives insight into the motives and behaviour of the Soviets and especially the Germans, not only as oppressors, but as human beings. A true survivor, she spent the rest of her life in Italy where she used her family's wealth to establish a foundation supporting the research of Polish academics and giving them access to libraries abroad. She was active and lucid until her death in August 2002 aged 104. The Lanckoroński Foundation is ready to fund translation of this book.

2. Synopsis

The **introduction** (by two Polish academics) gives information on the Lanckoroński family background and the basic facts of the author's war biography.

A **foreword** by the author, written in 1998 when she was 100, confirms that this memoir is a faithful report (originally written in 1967).

Chapter One: Lwow (Sept 1939 - May 1940)

This chapter describes the Soviet occupation of Lwow and the gradual deterioration of normal life as the communists took over this part of independent Poland. Food became scarce as refugees crowded into the city from the countryside and landowners were ousted; the author's brother managed to escape from their family estate just in time. Meanwhile the Bolshevik occupiers avidly bought up everything in the local shops, betraying the truth about the Soviet Union, where despite propaganda to the contrary, there was clearly a great lack of goods. The university was gradually changed by the Soviets from a Polish into a Ukrainian establishment, with the obligatory use of the Ukrainian language and discrimination against those of noble birth, such as the author, among many absurd prejudices. She describes the primitive behaviour of a Soviet officer quartered at her apartment, who dubbed her Italian art books "fascist", and was ignorant of the function of the lavatory and other basic mod cons, which he smashed in his frustration.

Gradually, more and more officers and intelligentsia were deported eastwards, Polish property was confiscated and the shops emptied. The Polish zloty was suddenly invalidated, forcing Poles to buy roubles at extortionate black market rates. Intermittent news from outside was not encouraging, with the West apparently unaware of Poland's fate. Lanckoronska's defiant response was to buy up medical supplies while she could, to administer to Polish political prisoners, and to protest against unfair actions that made ordinary life ever harder. At immense personal risk she also joined the Polish underground resistance that continued to be active throughout the war.

Further Soviet oppression included collectivising the local farmland and deporting the Polish peasants, making local schools work in Ukrainian, and arresting and torturing their opponents. Inevitably, Lanckoronska was expelled from the university and narrowly escaped arrest. Now in hiding she decided to try to reach Rome to tell the West what was happening. She found a way to travel to Krakow in the German-occupied half of Poland. This was a lucky escape, as in the meantime her resistance activities had been betrayed to the Soviets.

Chapter Two: Krakow (May 1940 - June 1941)

Krakow seemed less altered than Lwow, with no seizure of Polish property and the zloty still valid. Lanckoronska contacted the local underground for permission to go as a courier to Rome, and collected information on events in Nazi-occupied Poland, including mass round-ups, arrests and transportation to labour camps. With the fall of Belgium and Holland, then France, and Italy's declaration of war, her trip was postponed. England became the last source of hope for Poland, as the only bastion of European civilisation left. Against the background of ever increasing Nazi oppression, Lanckoronska then chose to be useful by working for the Polish Red Cross, at first helping the families of officers deported to Central Asia by the Soviets, then nursing sick and dying prisoners of war returned from Germany. By now, the Germans had started to evict Poles from their homes, to impose apartheid and to herd the Jews into a ghetto, although what this would lead to was not yet apparent. People were arrested without charge, and news was rife of many deaths by shooting or illness in camps such as Auschwitz.

Meanwhile, the Poles hoped for a German-Russian conflict in which Germany would beat Russia and then in turn be beaten by the Allies. As German troops marched east this conflict looked imminent. During her activities for the Polish resistance, Lanckoronska ran very dangerous risks in this period and narrowly escaped arrest. Working for the resistance was frustrating, often involving long waits before the situation became clear and action could be taken. Her next Red Cross duty was to care for prisoners inside the local prisons, where she found people dying of hunger and decided to concentrate on action to help them, in particular the Polish political prisoners. Meanwhile the Germans took Lwow from the Soviets, and news came through that all the university professors had been arrested for no known reason.

Chapter Three: Tours of the General Government (July 1941 - March 1942)

As suspicion of her underground connection grew, Lanckoronska decided to cover her tracks by making bold, direct contact with the Gestapo, and succeeded in outwitting the Nazis, persuading them to give her access to the country's prisons in order to guarantee the prisoners regular food. She then set about visiting the individual prisons and gaining the assent of the local Nazi chief in each town to put her plans into action with the help of the local Polish charity network. Her determination overcoming every obstacle (mainly disagreeable Nazis and their bureaucracy), she achieved her aim in city after city, tirelessly travelling around the country by train. Meanwhile she secretly reported to General Komorowski, head of the resistance army, on prison conditions and the number of political prisoners held. Her travels produced some interesting anecdotes, such as the Germans' fear of the mystical power of the Black Madonna at Czestochowa, whose famous icon Goebbels had even saluted.

In September 1941 she reached Lwow, where she learned of continued mass deportations eastwards until the Soviets withdrew, and of the mass murder of prisoners as they left. Starvation was rising and spirits falling. The fate of the university professors was unknown; meanwhile their homes were looted. News came from Stanislawow that 250 of the town's leading citizens had been arrested by the savage local Nazi boss, Hans Kruger, who ran the local prison. In the winter of 1941 Lanckoronska's efforts took her to Stanislawow, where Kruger refused to allow her to provide food for the prisoners, only material items such as blankets. Soon after, Lanckoronska moved to Stanislawow to act as the Polish charitable organisation's temporary commissioner for the region.

Chapter Four: Stanislawow (March - July 1942)

Persisting in her efforts, Lanckoronska asked for an interview with Kruger, but when he summoned her it was in order to interrogate her for conducting illegal activities under the guise of charity. In a threatening manner he expressed his hatred for the Poles, subjecting her to nearly four hours of his diatribes and questioning, in which he tried to force her to admit to being in the underground. However, Lanckoronska managed to outwit him by phrasing her replies carefully and calmly, and was allowed to leave with a warning.

She continued her work to provide food for local children, but in May was suddenly arrested by the SS and taken to the prison run by Kruger. During subsequent interrogations, Lanckoronska remained calm and self-controlled while Kruger became ever more manic, clearly antagonised by her extraordinary resilience. He boasted to her of being responsible for the deaths of the missing Lwow professors, openly admitted that

it was her attitude that was her crime, and, while insisting that he had a sense of honour, tried to break her will by exposing her to ever worse conditions. Meanwhile, though afraid that knowing the truth about the Lwow professors might endanger her life, Lanckoronska's main regret was that her valuable work had been curtailed. The enraged Kruger had her moved to an isolation cell for a week; despite the lack of light and air she kept herself amused by imagining her way round Europe's art galleries. When Kruger came to see if her will were finally broken, she merely asked if he knew Beethoven's *Fidelio*, as he reminded her of its villain.

However, by now imprisonment was making Lanckoronska physically weaker. She was transferred to a cell where a large group of women – mostly criminals and prostitutes - were being kept in appalling conditions, close to starvation. Lanckoronska describes the good and bad individuals in the cell, and relations between the various nationalities and types, such as Katia, the “cell commandant”, a Ukrainian communist on good terms with the Nazis, who bullied the other prisoners and secured herself extra rations, or Mrs Kordyszowa, a kind, affectionate Pole who kept up the spirits of the rest. All lived in fear of the executions that they could hear being conducted outside, but their remaining energy was concentrated on trying to secure enough food to survive. The privileged Katia often supplied information about the prison, such as the fact that Kruger oversaw all executions personally and that he made tours of the region arresting people on trumped up charges, then robbing them. Lanckoronska's request for the potato peelings to be added to their thin soup was met with the dismissive reply that the peelings were for the pigs.

During their ordeal the women prisoners were aware of men dying of hunger in the next-door cell, and of beatings and executions as Kruger's tyranny raged. Meanwhile, Kruger was trying to gain evidence that Lanckoronska was involved in underground activities, but had failed to do so. One night she was summoned from the cell, and assumed that she was finally to be shot, but instead was taken to an office in Kruger's absence and asked to give details of her interrogations, then told she would be released. Next day she was taken away from the prison by car.

Chapter Five: On Lacki Street, Lwow (July - November 1942)

Lanckoronska's joy at being free was short-lived, as she was taken to another prison on Lacki Street in Lwow. However, her treatment there was very different; the local Nazi police chief, Kutschmann, was the antithesis to Kruger, treating her kindly and honourably. At this point she learned that a member of the Italian royal family – her relative by marriage – had spoken to Himmler about her, and on his orders she had been taken back to Lwow. Her case was to be thoroughly investigated, and Kutschmann would report to Berlin on her behalf before Kruger could influence the authorities against her.

Thus began a period of relatively mild imprisonment, during which Lanckoronska was allowed food parcels and books, and the chance to regain her strength in comparative comfort. She decided to trust Kutschmann, and told him all the details of Kruger's interrogations, including his admission about the Lwow professors. Kutschmann himself had disobeyed Kruger's orders to round up other intellectuals, saving them from the same fate. Kutschmann was now keen to expose Kruger, using Lanckoronska's testimony. Once she had (falsely) sworn to him that she was not involved in underground activity, they worked together to write a full report on Kruger's treatment of her.

In this prison Lanckoronska was allowed to work as a nurse, and was able to pass food from her own parcels to sick prisoners. Other prisoners were not so well off, in constant fear of regular executions, typhoid, filth, lice and hunger. Later, in the absence of Kutschmann, her treatment deteriorated: she was kept in isolation, but was still allowed to receive books and passed the days by reading Shakespeare and noting her reflections on literature. As in all the prisons, she found ways to make contact with other prisoners (to whom she sent her extra rations) and even to get news from the outside world. One go-between was a Ukrainian handyman who told her of Nazi atrocities; the liquidation of the Lwow ghetto and the fate of its Jews was all too apparent when she overheard them being brutally herded through the courtyard and loaded onto lorries.

By October her case appeared to have been forgotten and Kutschmann to have been removed from Lwow. She kept up her fading spirits by working on a book on Michelangelo and reading the classics. In November she was told she was being taken to the German Reich, where she again feared that she was to be shot. But at this point Kutschmann reappeared to say that he had been fighting hard for her, and that even Hitler had read their report; she was to go to Berlin to testify against Kruger, and perhaps to be interrogated by Himmler himself. Without the Italian royal support she would undoubtedly have been killed by now. Clearly, she knew too much about Kruger's activities, which explained why she could not be released; the excuse used for keeping her imprisoned was that under interrogation by Kruger she had been forced to state that as a Pole she was an enemy of Germany.

Before leaving, Lanckoronska made sure that a coded message would reach the resistance informing them of her fate and confirming that her arrest had nothing to do with her underground activities, which had not been discovered. As she was driven away from Lwow, she summoned her strength for the next ordeal, and wondered if she would ever see Poland again.

Chapter Six: Berlin (November 1942 - January 1943)

In Berlin, she was again imprisoned and then interrogated by Hertl, a senior judge, who said that Kruger had denied telling her about his part in the death of the Lwow professors. She realised that Kruger was only in trouble for telling her, not for the deed itself, and that her own fate would depend on how he was judged.

Here again Lanckoronska soon made contact with other prisoners, including German communists who believed that Russia would be Germany's salvation, and an admirable Polish woman, Mrs Bortnowska, who worked as relentlessly as Lanckoronska herself to help weaker prisoners undergoing horrific torture during interrogation. Physically, Lanckoronska was suffering from a bad skin complaint, clearly a psychosomatic condition. Still allowed books, she read *Mein Kampf* and realised that any follower of Hitler who had read it was fully aware of what they were condoning. To her captors' amazement, she asked for the works of Goethe and Schiller, but found her perception of the German language now too polluted to read them. Not knowing what had happened to her case, in January 1943 she was loaded into a crowded lorry and transported to Ravensbruck.

Chapter Seven: Ravensbruck (January 1943-April 1945)

This long chapter gives a detailed description of Lanckoronska's experiences in the concentration camp.

On first arriving among the dismal wooden barracks and striped uniforms, she was reassured by a Polish inmate that it wasn't too bad there. Despite appalling hardship, it was – compared with Stanislawow, for example – possible to survive. Gradually we learn how the camp operated and about the relations between different groups of prisoners.

Each block housed about 400 prisoners, where some worked as orderlies responsible for ensuring the discipline of the rest. Lanckoronska soon learned that political prisoners were by far the minority, and that the camp included a wide range of Polish, Russian, German and Ukrainian women imprisoned for all sort of reasons: for being Jews, communists, prostitutes, gypsies, fanatical Jehovah's witnesses, lesbians, occultists, sexually involved with German men, or just common criminals. Relations between the groups varied, with some fierce discrimination against the Poles. The Polish political prisoners had a reputation for dying bravely, always shouting "Long Live Poland!" as they were executed. Each prisoner wore a coloured star as an identification badge, which also denoted their work status within the camp. The worst off were made to go and work in German munitions factories, and thus to support the German war effort. But the pride of all the camp, respected by everyone for their suffering, were the "rabbits" - young Polish girls on whom a Nazi doctor conducted horrific orthopaedic experiments that killed them or left them crippled for life.

Many of the prisoners were sick or dying, and the daily roll calls were a cold and lengthy ordeal for the weaker inmates as the camp kept expanding. During nightly air raids the prisoners were left at risk of being bombed. The only brick cell block was a bunker reserved for punishment and interrogation. Lanckoronska learned that a comfortable separate cell had been put aside for her there, complete with sheets and flowers, but that the prison authorities had failed to identify her on arrival. Preferring not to be isolated from her fellow Poles, she did not disabuse them of this mistake.

Lanckoronska worked as assistant to the block orderly and also secretly gave art history lectures to the other Poles, but was at first very ill, incapacitated by her skin complaint. Her fellow Poles helped to protect her until the prison authorities finally realised who she was and insisted on moving her to the separate cell in the bunker; though better fed and in comparative comfort she suffered in isolation from the other Polish women. In this block, two tough German women supervised the prisoners, yet Lanckoronska managed to make contact with other isolation cells during daily walks in a garden area. Through Polish girls who worked as gardeners she kept in touch with the other Poles too. As ever, she continued to feed, encourage and give out strength to others. She befriended a young man from Silesia who did odd jobs in the camp and who helped her to pass food and messages to other prisoners. At a later point he even proposed helping her to escape from the camp.

Lanckoronska's case appeared to have come to a standstill. When a senior Gestapo man came from Berlin to interview her, she took the opportunity to complain that she had never had the promised interrogation at the top level in Berlin, and that she still hadn't been charged with any crime. Although she was periodically interrogated, the case never advanced, as she was always asked to repeat the same statements about Kruger's original interrogation. Realising that once Italy had been defeated she would be

defenceless and liable to execution, she decided to aim to be reunited with the other Polish prisoners, and to spend her final days with them. She went on hunger strike to try to get her way, and this did appear to concern the Nazis. Finally, after a firm protest, but despite the defeat of Italy, she was transferred back to the main camp. She realised that there must have been some other influential support from abroad, or the Germans would not have wanted to keep her alive. (Unbeknown to her, Carl Burckhardt, an old friend who was head of the Red Cross, had come to her defence, and it was this that helped her to survive for the rest of the war.)

In the main camp Lanckoronska was sent to assist the orderly in the Red Army block. The Russian women were respected by the many other communists in the camp, and disliked the Poles as non-communists. However, Lanckoronska won their respect, and describes how they used to ask her about her Christian faith. Meanwhile, she was actively helping the younger Polish prisoners, especially the “rabbits”, to whom she and others gave classes to advance their education. Next she was moved to a notoriously difficult block housing French women and Jewish women of various nationalities; the French (mainly prostitutes) were very undisciplined and brought punishments down on the whole block. Periodically moved to different blocks, she had to work with all the most difficult prisoners and was often kept apart from the other Poles.

Lanckoronska also helped in the sanitarium, where she admired the idealistically communist Czech doctor who treated everyone equally and did her best to protect the weakest. By this point, it was evident from the news that filtered through that the Germans had no hope of victory. More and more new arrivals were being brought to the camp, and after the failed Warsaw Uprising Poles arrived in huge numbers, in a state of shock, often parted from their children, deprived of all their belongings, then made to work like slaves. Other transports came from all over Europe; among the new arrivals Lanckoronska admired and befriended the Greek women, who shared the same resilient spirit as the Poles. But terrible overcrowding was leading to more disease, despair and death in the camp. Lanckoronska often found herself caring for the dying and delivering corpses to the morgue. Amid this horror, books provided comfort, and Lanckoronska continued to give classes on art and the ancient world, to “students” who were often due to be executed, but found solace in the normality provided by the lessons.

Learning of the Yalta treaty that handed Poland over to Soviet control, Lanckoronska felt that her motherland was lost, and disabused the younger Polish women of communist propaganda, though views among the Poles were divided. As the German position became more hopeless, conditions worsened. Gradually the camp was being emptied, with the unfortunate Jews transported to Belsen, and many others too taken to be murdered; Lanckoronska estimates that some 7,000 women were gassed in this period. A horrifying Nazi doctor inspected each block, deciding which women were strong enough to work and which were to die. Lanckoronska and her friends did what they could to protect the most vulnerable. Suddenly summoned to the camp commandant, Lanckoronska thought her own end had come, but was treated with concern, and told she was to be released. As on many previous occasions, she was incensed by the inequality between her “special” treatment and that of ordinary prisoners.

Soon she was ordered to join a large group of French women being exchanged for German prisoners from France. As she left the camp, she turned to bid her Polish friends farewell and walked out backwards, arms outstretched, as if taking them with her. Red

Cross lorries took the released prisoners to the Swiss border, where she was finally freed; in Geneva her brother and Carl Burckhardt were waiting to meet her.

Chapter Eight: Italy

Lanckoronska now had to adapt to her new life as a refugee, but was tormented by the thought of her friends still imprisoned in the camp, and made efforts to gain their release through the Red Cross; many of them were rescued and taken to Sweden. She went to Italy to join the Polish forces, and worked in the Education Division organising study courses for the soldiers. She was to spend the rest of her life in Italy.

Epilogue

The epilogue describes how in 1967 Lanckoronska learned that Kruger was being tried in Germany for the mass murder of Jews in Stanislawow, and wrote offering to appear as a witness. The offer was ignored until she proposed publishing her unanswered letters in the press. At the trial, the judge refused to accept evidence relating to the murder of the Lwow professors, stating that Kruger was not on trial for that offence. The trial revealed the ignorance of both the judge and the prosecutor on events in Poland during the war and since; the prosecutor seemed set on discrediting the witnesses in order to exonerate former Nazis. But Kruger was totally discredited and given a life sentence. Ironically, he had given Lanckoronska's name at the beginning of his trial as a person who could vouch for his good behaviour in Stanislawow – but who had sadly died in Ravensbruck, or so he thought! Despite Lanckoronska's efforts, he was never tried for the murder of the Lwow professors, which the Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal later wrongly assured her was the act of Kutschmann. Kutschmann had apparently escaped to Argentina, where he was arrested, but released, and later died of a heart attack.

The book ends with some family photographs of Karolina Lanckoronska as a child, as a young woman, on service in Italy, and after the war. Ranging from her portrait as a two-year-old with her father in 1898 to an informal picture of her and her brother taken in 1952, they show us her kind, intelligent and determined face. The book ends with several annexes: a list of the murdered Lwow professors, a letter in German (with a translation into Polish) from the Nazi authorities to Carl Burckhardt in response to his enquiries about Lanckoronska, a biographical list giving some details of many of the people mentioned in the text, and an index of names.

3. Assessment

There is no shortage of personal memoirs of the war written by the victims of atrocious suffering, and they are all upsetting to read; after reading one or two books on this subject one may feel well enough educated. This book too includes some grim reading matter. But what makes it distinct and spiritually uplifting is that the author is not a victim at all and never once complains of her fate. Her strength of character, courage and refusal to lose faith in God, in life, and in people, whatever she witnesses, are astounding and fascinating. Her moral certainty, unwavering sense of duty, and ability to put others first are also astonishing. As well as being a reassuring companion for the reader through her ordeal, she is a good narrator, and brings her tale alive with vivid anecdotes, never losing touch with the human side of her story. She also provides intelligent analysis of the Nazi

mentality, stopping now and then to consider why the Germans behaved as they did. But she never preaches or feeds us with opinions – instead, she treats her reader as an objective, thinking person.

The book is written in a clear style, not without irony and humour. Lanckoronska tells her story in a straightforward, chronological order, which in a few places results in a string of descriptive facts rather than a concise narrative, mainly in the detailed chapter about Ravensbruck. However, the variety of her experiences and her constant efforts to make contact with people keep the story lively and interesting. She takes an interest in everybody, and thus presents a huge cast of characters, none of whom is stereotypical. The book also gives insight into how human beings respond to extreme conditions, retaining a strong will to survive and carry on with normal life, including all the petty chauvinisms and possessive instincts of everyday existence.

The insanely sadistic Nazi, Kruger, and his antithesis, the noble Kutschmann, provide intriguing portraits of the range of Nazi personalities. Both talk of a soldier's honour, but their understanding of what it means could not be more different – as reflected in their diverse treatment of Lanckoronska. Few prisoners of the Nazis can have had conversations with their captors that reached such psychological depths as Lanckoronska's. These encounters are perhaps the most engaging in the entire book, and Kruger and Kutschmann are certainly the most memorable characters, apart from the heroine herself.

Another unusual element in the book is the strength of Polish resilience during occupation and war. Poland had only been independent for just over 20 years when the war began, but the nation's long fight for freedom had left it with a strong spirit, as illustrated by the activities of the resistance army, the charitable networks and the courageous political prisoners, as well as the defiant response of ordinary people to Nazi and Soviet abuses of power.

This book could have a wide readership, including anyone interested in the Second World War, in the Nazis, in Polish or European history, or simply in human psychology. It would translate fluently into English. The text may need occasional minor additions to explain Polish contexts, but will not need footnotes. It would be a good idea for any foreign edition to include a map of wartime Poland.