

# MY MEMORIES OF POLAND "ON THE BRINK," 1939

G. ADAMKIEWICZ

*I fear the Tyrant's soul,  
Sudden in action, fertile in resources,  
And rising awful mid impending ruins.*

Coleridge.

IN the heart of the Tatra mountains, where they flank, towards the South, the chain of the Carpathians separating Poland from Slovakia, lies the small, glacier-fed lake known as the "Eye of the Sea."

Its clear motionless waters mirror, like a crystal, every changing aspect of the skies, every quivering blade of grass protruding from its brink, and the towering heights that close the scene.

On a cloudless day, when the sun is high, a striking phenomenon can be observed. The mountains, reflected in the lake, seem to descend, in a perpendicular line, far below water level into fathomless depths. Together with their image in the lake, they appear to form a compact mass of inverted pinnacles and jagged walls, a fantastic structure, apparently suspended in space. An imposing and, at the same time, awe-inspiring sight! Nature herself appears to have set up boundaries, assigning to the peoples on either side their proper dwelling-place, and only by transgressing her laws can this order be reversed.

Such and similar thoughts crossed my mind when, in the late summer of 1938, I beheld, for the first time in my life, the "Eye of the Sea."

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It was a time fraught with anxiety. Forebodings of evil which, for the last few years, had been hanging like a cloud over this part of Europe, were now assuming a more distinct and definite form. People were beginning to realize the nature of Hitler's true intentions towards Poland, despite his assertions of friendship, reiterated but a short while before, at the great Nazi Party Rally at Nuremberg. In the North his stranglehold on Danzig and the adjacent districts of Polish Pomerania was tightening from day to day. I had been observing these developments from Gdynia where, for the last two years, I had been a Deputy Director of the Chamber of Commerce. The Free City

had been transformed into a strategic outpost of the new German mass army. Local police had been militarized and provided with up to date equipment. The Nazi storm troops were organized in battalions and regiments. "Hitler Youth" paraded the streets, beating up Poles, Jews and refractory Germans. Reconnoitring parties from the Reich—they were later followed by regular detachments of the *Wehrmacht*—were oozing into the city by the sea route or through East Prussia. All opposition to the Nazi regime had been stamped out amongst the local German inhabitants. Every German wore a badge or armband with the sign of the Swastika. Nazi celebrations were held at regular intervals in Danzig and the adjoining country. The colours of the Third Reich were displayed everywhere, a rolling sea of red banners adorned with black swastikas. Goebbels and other Party bosses harangued the masses. Restaurants and cafés, hotels and casinos were marked with signboards warning Jews off the premises. Laws and decrees, issued in the Reich, were simultaneously promulgated by the Senate of the Free City and thus made binding on the entire local population. The official organ of the National Socialist Party in Danzig, the *Danziger Vorposten*, bore the ominous motto: *Back to the Reich (Zurueck zum Reich)*

The tentacles of Nazi propoganda were pushed forward far into the haart of the area misnamed the "Polish Corridor." Towns and villages were riddled with an ever increasing number of cells organized by Nazi diversionist centres. Whilst staying at an inn in the lakeland south of Gdynia, called "Kashubian Switzerland," I noticed one day that the innkeeper—he had a Polish name—was really the ringleader of a widespread band of German secret agents who held their meetings in his house, posing as ordinary "guests." They came from far and near, mostly in their own motorcars, from the adjoining districts and from Germany. I reported on the matter at the time, but nothing was done. The fact that all this was going on under the very noses of the Polish authorities excited great indignation amongst the Polish population. It was not generally known, at the time, that Hitler and Goering, who were endeavouring to impress upon the Polish Government the necessity of co-operating with Germany against Soviet Russia, were doing everything to make the Danzig question appear quite insignificant as compared with the broad issue involved in the proposed readjustment of German-Polish policies. In the course of these conversations Goering had declared quite openly that

he did not understand why Poland was uneasy about Danzig, since her real interests pointed in quite a different direction, namely towards territorial expansion at the cost of Soviet Russia. When it turned out, finally, that Colonel Beck had actually offered to sign a bilateral agreement with the Reich, doing away with the authority of the League of Nations and establishing a joint Polish-German control over the Free City in its stead, this step met with scathing criticism on the part of liberal public opinion in Poland, despite the fact that the proposal had been rejected by Hitler. It was felt that if Germany were to gain a permanent foothold in Danzig, she would then be able to strike a fatal blow at Gdynia and put an end to Poland's access to the sea.

Now Hitler was preparing his attack on Czechoslovakia, and enlightened Polish circles were well aware that the German pincers, which had been driven forward towards Danzig and Gdynia in the North, might also close on Poland in the South. These circles had always been distrustful of the Polish-German non-aggression pact which had facilitated the Austrian *Anschluss* in the previous March, thus providing Germany with a spring-board for further expansion towards the Balkans and the East. Nor was the Polish Government's disposition to foster a policy of grievances with regard to Czechoslovakia approved by independent public opinion in Poland. It was realized that only Germany would profit by these dissensions, and that her gain would, in the long run, be Poland's loss. When, in the spring of 1938, a group of anti-Czech Slovak politicians arrived from the United States at Gdynia to be received there with open arms by the Polish authorities and the local pro-government organizations, these official manifestations of ill-will towards Czechoslovakia were severely criticised by all who understood that any weakening of the Czechoslovak State would run counter to Poland's interests.

The gravity of the situation was fully impressed on me during my trip to the Tatra mountains, on the eve of the Sudeten crisis. Here, amongst those scenes of majestic beauty, those rugged heights rising aloft amid their setting of evergreen forests, those smiling valleys dotted with the fretted roofs of the mountaineers' huts, those headlong streams, the evil effects of the strained relations between the two neighbouring countries were visible at every step. What should have been a natural park, open to the visitor whether he came from the

North or the South, was now divided by artificial barriers, no less formidable than mountain cleft or rushing stream.

Branching off the main road which leads from the well-known mountain resort of Zakopane to the Eye of the Sea, a carriage drive, not more than a mile in length, runs through the forest to what was then the Czechoslovak border. The white walls of the customs-house with its turnpike and signboard could be easily discerned through the surrounding trees. But hardly ever were any of the holiday makers who at that time of the year thronged the main thoroughfare, seen to turn off into this drive. Not only passport and currency restrictions, but also other restraints, born of the uncertainty of the situation, acted as a hindrance to traffic.

I had motored with my family from our home, a country estate situated in the foothills of the Carpathians, to Zakopane. Finding the place crowded to overflowing, with no accommodation available, we were forced to put up at a small wayside inn, distant only a few miles from the crossroads near the Czechoslovak frontier. It was run by a stout, middle-aged woman, whose peculiar dialect immediately proclaimed her to be of Ruthenian descent. She prided herself on her initiative and resource in business. She had embarked on many enterprises, starting again from the beginning each time some previous venture had failed. This inn, she said, could serve as a proof that she had not given up her money-making projects. She had opened it only a few days earlier. Despite the fact that she had not been able to furnish it so far, and that we were the first visitors to spend the night there, she was determined to make the place a success. She tackled this task with extraordinary vigour, labouring from morning to night and performing the duties of a landlady, housekeeper, cook and chambermaid all in one. She never interrupted her work, not even on Sundays, when everybody had gone to church.

My wife, an active supporter of the Catholic Action movement, was somewhat shocked at this attitude. She mildly expressed her disapproval within the hearing of the landlady. The effect was instantaneous. The woman flew into a passion, and pointing a monitory finger at the nearby range of mountains, against which the pass leading to Slovakia stood out like a vista of light, she exclaimed in a loud voice: "Mark my words, Hitler will be coming here over these mountains next year! He knows that it is better to work than to pray. He understands how to gain the sympathy of the common people. He talks to

them, he shakes hands with them. Here in Poland anyone who holds an official position, from the President of the Republic downwards, stands aloof and considers it far below his dignity to mix with ordinary folk." I recalled these words a few months later—in March, 1939—when Hitler, after having overrun Bohemia and Moravia, set up the puppet state of Slovakia as a jumping-off ground against Poland. Again that prophecy came back to me in September of the same year, for it was through the very pass which the landlady—evidently a Fifth Columnist—had pointed out that Hitler's columns, operating from their bases in Slovakia, came pouring into Southern Poland, smashing the inadequate defences, overrunning the feeble forces with which this part of the country was garrisoned, spreading westwards and eastwards and, finally, joined with the German armies pushing south from East Prussia in order to cut off the main body of Polish troops from the capital, Warsaw.

The mass of the Polish people, thanks to its intuition, proved to be a better judge of the seriousness of the situation than the ruling class, which strove to conceal the danger looming ahead behind a smoke-screen of false statements and spectacular political manoeuvres. The ineffectiveness of recent arrangements with Germany for the mutual protection of minorities was clearly realized. Rumours, intentionally spread abroad by official circles, that the German-Polish Non-aggression Pact would be reaffirmed and even prolonged for an indefinite term, found no credence amongst the general public. We were able to observe these developments closely from our home in a district where feeling ran high against the dictatorial methods employed by the Warsaw Government. Here we lived surrounded by peasants who, partly from tradition—the sanguinary peasant rising against the gentry in 1848 under the notorious Szela had actually broken out in the neighbourhood—and partly on account of their party allegiance—they were all ardent adherents of the peasant leader V. Witos then living in exile—were extremely class-conscious and very independent in their political outlook. They were flatly opposed to the Government's policy of *rapprochement* with Germany, and desired that it be abandoned for one of close friendship with France, England and Czechoslovakia, regarding them as Poland's natural allies. They insisted on Colonel Beck's withdrawal from office. They demanded, furthermore, that Parliament be dissolved, since it did not represent the nation as a whole, and that a general election be held with a view to substituting a

to Poland on March 31st, 1939, which was followed, on August 25th, by the Polish-British Treaty of mutual assistance, was hailed as an unprecedented act of recognition of the nation's resolve to resist German pressure at any cost.

On August 8th, 1939, a general rally of legionaries who had fought in Pilsudski's battles for Poland's independence was held in Cracow. A vast multitude thronged the vast meadow of Blonie, stretching southward from the city. Spires and gables, patina-covered cupolas and ancient battlements, found a fitting background against which the lofty edifice of the Wawel Castle, the Marshal's last resting-place, stood out in bold relief. Distinctions of class, social standing and official rank had been set aside for this occasion. The people had assembled from all parts of Poland to listen to an address to be delivered by Pilsudski's successor, Marshal Smigly Rydz, to the whole nation. Expectations ran high. It was hoped that more light would be thrown on the political situation which, according to reports from Danzig, where Polish customs officials were being prevented from fulfilling their duties, and in view of provocative measures applied against the Polish minority in the Reich, was becoming more and more alarming. Marshal Smigly Rydz was at the height of his popularity. He had, by an ultimatum addressed to Lithuania, put an end to the state of virtual warfare which, for twenty years, had existed between that country and Poland. He had conducted the military operations in connection with Poland's occupation of Cieszyn Silesia which had coincided with the invasion of Czechoslovakia by German troops. Subsequently, by his official visit to France, he had revived the Polish-French Alliance which had been gradually falling into abeyance. He was also credited with having vetoed further concessions to Germany which might have landed Poland amongst the Axis-ridden satellite states of Europe. Standing at the saluting point decked with the Polish colours, his hands grasping the railing as if he were clutching a sword, he delivered a short allocution which was made audible to the masses by loud speakers placed all over the field. It contained very little that had not been already known from the speech delivered by the Foreign Minister in the Diet on the 5th of the previous May. After a short reference to the wholehearted support the Polish cause was receiving in Western Europe, the speaker declared that Poland would repel any attack on the part of Germany by force of arms.

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The German-Soviet Pact of August 23rd came as a complete surprise. It was now clear that Russia had given Hitler



a free hand in Poland. As a matter of fact, it has been revealed, in the course of the Nuremberg Trial, that negotiations between Germany and Russia for the purpose of ensuring Russian neutrality in the event of a German-Polish war, already then decided on by Hitler, had been in progress ever since May, 1939. They were taken up only a month after the grant of a British guarantee to Poland had become known. Furthermore, it is now certain that a secret Protocol was attached to the above mentioned German-Soviet Pact, on the strength of which the Soviet Union, as a reward for her neutrality, was to acquire Finland, the eastern halves of the Baltic States and all Polish territories east of the Vistula. Late in September, 1939, when German armies, marching eastward, had occupied a strip of Polish territory lying to the east of the Vistula line, this scheme was modified, Russia receiving the whole of Lithuania as compensation. The Polish nation, however, was not discouraged. The delaying action assigned to the Polish forces might, it was feared, be more difficult to accomplish than hitherto expected, but this would not save Germany from ultimate defeat the moment the Allied offensive from the West began to materialize in earnest. In order to avoid everything that might be construed as "provocation" by hostile propaganda—the need for caution in this respect had been emphasized jointly by British and French Ambassadors in Warsaw—general mobilization in Poland was postponed to the very last minute, i. e. until August 31st. It did not comprise all categories of conscripts liable to military service, and was not enforced with the necessary swiftness and precision. Numerous reservists who reported to their units were told that they would be called up later. Others found the road to their units already blocked by enemy troops. The disorganizing effects of certain tactics regularly used by the Nazis before launching an attack were already making themselves felt.

A few days earlier a most untimely accident had occurred in my family. My eldest son had wounded himself very seriously in the ankle whilst handling a loaded fowling piece. We had to take him post haste to Tarnów, a distance of 25 miles, to be operated on. He was in hospital when, in the early hours of September 1st, we heard the ominous drone of motors which we first thought must belong to some heavy lorries passing quite near to our house. Rushing outside, we saw a squadron of German bombers circling low over our heads and then making off in a south-westerly direction. We knew that their message was war!